Cape Otway Road Development Advisory Committee

Cape Otway Road Australia (CORA) at Modewarre
Strategic Justification

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose

I have been asked to undertake a high level and preliminary review of a major tourism / sports / accommodation and environmental enhancement proposal intended to be located at Modewarre, approximately 26 km west of Greater Geelong and Waurn Ponds (Figure 1).

In particular I have been asked to provide analysis and comment on whether the proposal can be strategically justified from a planning perspective and might result in a net benefit to the community.

In preparing the advice I have been provided with:

- The executive summary of a series of technical and specialist reports based principally on desk-top studies, that have been commissioned to provide an appreciation of the circumstances of the subject site and its setting and provide direction on how the key natural, environmental and infrastructure attributes of the project should be managed.
• A Town Planning Report prepared by Tract Consultants, describing the proposal, the setting of the site and placing them in their planning context.

• A copy of a revised concept Masterplan for the site (Figure 2).
In the time available to consider and prepare this review I have not inspected the site but know the locality and have studied recent aerial photography.

In addition I have reviewed a series of relevant strategic planning and tourism strategies and the provisions of the Surf Coast Planning Scheme as referenced through this report.

This advice is not intended to be a comprehensive and detailed planning assessment, but seeks to establish if the proposal has sufficient strategic merit to justify a more detailed and forensic examination.

I have been provided with the terms of reference for the Cape Otway Road Development Advisory Committee and noted that it seeks advice upon the strategic justification of the proposal.

1.2 The proposal

The proposal would comprise the following range of uses, developments and features.

1.2.1 ATTRACTIONS

- Retail Village – Cluster of buildings comprising:
  - Design Studio;
  - Art Gallery – Modern & Indigenous;
  - Shop – Makers and Food market;
  - Food and drink – restaurants and take-way food premises.
  - Childcare facility (90 children);
  - Micro-brewery & food hall.
- A sculpture garden.

1.2.2 LANDSCAPING / ENVIRONMENTAL FEATURES

- Flood plain rehabilitation and revegetation;
- Extensive landscaping throughout the site; and
- Water quality treatment and storage.

1.2.3 ELITE SPORTS FACILITIES

- Sports Science Hub;
- Media centre;
- Range of playing fields/ courts;
• Swimming pool;
• Gymnasium;
• Wellness Centre;

1.2.4 ACCOMMODATION

• Hotel
• 37 woodland eco-lodges (37) plus 24 homestead lodges located on lots that range from 4,000sqm – 9,300sqm and including 1 lot that is 3.01 ha.
• A manager’s residence; and
• Staff accommodation

1.2.5 INFRASTRUCTURE

• Depot
• Waste treatment and recycling;
• Bus and car parking areas.

9 In so far as the proposal provides for an elite sports training facility which I understand is intended to be associated with an AFL Club, I bring to this evaluation recent experience in securing approval for the Hawthorn Football Club to establish a similar grade and quality of facility within the Kingston Green Wedge. From that experience I have come to appreciate the features and investment that are entailed in establishing a facility of the highest calibre.

10 While the proposal is advanced as an integrated and holistic concept and master plan I find it useful to ‘deconstruct’ it for the purpose of this review into a series of components including, an investment in regional tourism; an investment in regional elite sports and training facilities; an investment in land and environmental improvement, and, finally services and facilities to support the primary uses.
2 PRIORITISING REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

11 Regional investment, jobs and development are a priority of National and State governments.

12 The capacity and ability to sustainably absorb continuing high rates of population growth (natural and migrant) in established metropolitan areas and provide associated employment and necessary infrastructure is appropriately being questioned and challenged.

13 Recently the Federal government has moved to require that new migrants to Australia must in the first instance establish in regional centres, rather than contribute to the growth and infrastructure problems confronting metropolitan areas such as Melbourne.

14 The counter balance of regional development strategies to metropolitan centric development has been a feature of Victorian planning strategies over a series of decades as a concerted effort has been made to take the pressure off the metropolis in favour of further developing regional cities, towns and regions.

15 Melbourne’s 2050 vision is driven by 9 principles including ‘a city of centres linked to regional Victoria’. Those principles are linked to 7 primary outcomes one of which is that “Regional Victoria is productive, sustainable and supports jobs and economic growth.” This will be realised by investment in regional Victoria to support housing and economic growth.

16 The preparation of regional growth plans was a major step towards strategically and systematically identifying and further developing the strengths of each of Victoria’s regions.

17 In the context of this proposal it is necessary to have regard to the Greater Geelong - G21 Regional Growth Plan, in so far as it applies to Modewarre and also the Great Southern Coast Regional Growth Plan which takes in the broader Greater Ocean Road experience and strategy and links any tourism role for Modewarre with the tourism strategies for South West Victoria.
3 TOURISM

3.1 Overarching expectations

18 Tourism and visitation projects hold a special place in Victorian planning legislation and policy.

19 The objectives of planning in Victoria not only seek to secure a pleasant, efficient and safe working, living and recreation environment for all Victorian’s but also for visitors to Victoria.

20 Considerable weight is given to the encouragement and facilitation of tourism development in planning policy, with maximising the economic, social and cultural benefits of developing the State as a competitive domestic and international tourist destination.

3.2 Tourism, growth and the south west

21 South West Victoria offers some of the State’s most recognised and visited natural and ecological attractions including the Great Ocean Road, the Shipwreck Coast, the Twelve Apostles and the Otway Ranges as well as the coastal towns of the Surf Coast. These are supplemented by a series of smaller but nonetheless valued centres and tourism facilities.

22 Despite this legacy of tourism attractions there is encouragement to offer further, different and innovative attractions particularly if they can be located inland from the coast and can ‘show case’ some of the regional strengths in food, drink, pre and post settlement culture and the arts.

23 There is a genuine policy commitment to prolong the length of stays and increase the tourism spend within the region.

24 The expectation is that tourism developments will be well designed, integrated facilities offering a diverse range of accommodation suited to a range of expectations, experiences and affordability.

25 A series of regional land use planning and tourism strategies inform the place for additional tourism attractions and facilities.

1 Section 4 Planning and Environment Act 1987
26 The Regional Growth Plans provide direction upon where to direct growth in terms population, housing and jobs.

27 While urban centres are the prime focus to which growth is directed tourism and the rural sector remain important opportunities to further develop jobs and employment outside of the settlements of the respective regions.

28 Sectors where regional advantage and opportunity is perceived include health and wellbeing, and food processing and tourism.

3.3 Strategies associated with the Great Ocean Road

29 The Great Ocean Road Strategy (2004) is most instructive, seeking to encourage sustainable tourism by directing significant tourism facilities to both key towns and strategic locations.

30 The meaning of strategic locations takes on greater meaning when it is read in conjunction with those Access strategies that:

- Seek to enhance the Great Ocean Road as a world class travelling experience;
- Develop and promote the inland routes; and
- Provide more travel choices to and within the region.

31 The delivery of the above outcomes is seen in part as being delivered by the improved safety and use of north-south roads that link the Cape Otway Road (among other routes) with the Great Ocean Road and the Princes Highway. A major tourism and sporting centre located on Cape Otway Road would strongly and positively contribute to that outcome.
3.4 Tourism and the landscapes of the south west

Sustainable tourism outcomes will also be achieved by:

- Identifying and protecting significant landscapes;
- Effectively protecting catchments and coast lines; and
- Promoting the environmental and cultural heritage values.

The subject site forms part of ‘Western Plains, Cones and Lakes’ landscape character precinct the strategic significance of which is enhanced by the site abutting the edge of Lake Modewarre.
The proposal entails improved environmental outcomes including removal of flood obstructions, wetland rehabilitation and revegetation, improved water quality and reinstatement of the pre-European landscape, through extensive landscaping.

3.5 Tourism and the Surf Coast hinterland

The broad direction of the Great Ocean Road Strategy has been more recently informed by a Rural Hinterland Strategy, prepared by Surf Coast Shire as a Final Draft in February 2019. That document which has been in preparation over two years seeks to provide economic activation and vitalization to the rural hinterland areas of the Shire.

The Strategy recognises that the rural landscapes of the hinterland are highly valued by the community and visitors and an important element in its economic future. They are also an important cultural landscape for Aboriginal people.

The Strategy seeks to develop agri-food, agri-tourism and tourism opportunities in the hinterland that are complementary to the rural landscape and environmental values.
Like the Great Ocean Road Strategy the objective is to draw tourism into the hinterland to new destinations, to the point where the hinterland is seen as a key contributor to the Surf Coast economy and a ‘renowned’ visitor destination.

The Strategy acknowledges that visitors are seeking experiences such as outdoor recreation, culture, food and wine and events.

The locality of the site to the south of Lake Modewarre is identified specifically as an area for agri-business and commercial farming overlaid by recognition that it is well suited to tourism activity.

Having regard to the above there is intrinsic strategic merit in developing a new tourism attraction that seeks to showcase the food, wine, arts and culture of the region in a location that is on a major arterial road through the south west region and that is adjacent to one of the iconic lakes that distinguish the landscape.

The strength and attraction of such an initiative would be enhanced if it was housed in a ‘village’ that not only showcased the produce of the region but also exemplifies excellence in architecture and buildings grounded in the rural landscapes of the south west.

The provision of quality overnight accommodation not only provides a complement to the tourism offer but aligns strongly with the desirability of retaining visitors longer and overnight in the region.
4 REGIONALLY SIGNIFICANT SPORTS AND WELLBEING FACILITIES

44 The second key component the project is a Vision to establish one of Australia’s leading centres of sports-based health and well-being with a target market that is said to span from elite sports persons and teams to a facility accessible to the broader community.

45 The complex of proposed facilities would integrate a hub of sports-based research and development alongside courts, ovals, tracks and other spaces upon which training and skills development can occur.

46 The scope of facilities and sports addressed by the proposal might include soccer, Australian Rules, netball, basketball tennis, swimming, rugby and athletics.

47 The Australian Institute of Sports in Canberra offers a similar national model of an institute and body seeking to serve as a hub for understanding and developing the potential of elite athletes.

48 The strategic planning policy driver in this context is to be found at Clause 19.02-4S of the Surf Coast Planning Scheme as it seeks to provide for a fairer distribution of, and access to, social and cultural infrastructure with a need to address gaps and deficiencies in regionally significant sports facilities.

49 I am not aware of any recent research at a regional level that has assessed the gaps in sports facilities, but I am mindful that the scope quality and synergies of sports-based activities advanced in this proposal would be without parallel in South West Victoria and arguably nationally.

50 The State planning policy framework explicitly encourages and supports innovation as a way of maintaining equitable service delivery to settlements that have limited or no potential for growth.

51 A feature of the subject site is how it sits centrally between a series of significant and low growth centres including South Geelong / Armstrong Creek, Moriac, Winchelsea, Inverleigh, Colac and the Bellarine Peninsula. It is also accessible to the established Surf Coast towns of Lorne, Anglesea, Fairhaven, Torquay and to a lesser extent Apollo Bay.
While the facility is advanced and presumably would be pitched at a national and potentially international body of elite sports individuals and teams, the location and the concept can be appropriately characterised as also benefit the regional population that would otherwise struggle to engage and participate in the calibre of facilities and services proposed to be delivered.
5 BIODIVERSITY, ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENT, WATER MANAGEMENT AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

The application of the Rural Conservation Zone to a large portion of the site and the presence of Lake Modewarre and its degraded flood plain creates a need to be reasonably satisfied about the protection and enhancement of the:

- Biodiversity, flora and fauna found on the site;
- Cultural heritage artefacts and values;
- Floodplains; and
- Enhancement of water quality.

My review of the technical studies that accompany the application indicate that there will be a series of matters that will require detailed and fuller consideration of strategies and management plans before the layout, detail and composition of the concept Masterplan can be confirmed.

The advice so far received does not appear to present a strategic planning impediment and provides a sufficient assessment of key matters to be considered in greater detail in the subsequent planning process steps.
6 AGRICULTURE

56 The *Rural Hinterland Strategy* has in a generalised manner confirmed a commercial farming role for the general locality of the site while also recognising that this might be overlaid or supplanted on occasions by tourism-based uses.

57 The agricultural assessment that has been undertaken has drawn attention to how the size of the small holdings that make up the site compromise the commercial farming role of the land.

58 The soils of the subject site range from poor to average quality. The subject site is not farmland of strategic significance and as such it has the potential to serve a stronger economic and social role serving tourism and sports sectors.

59 The displacement of a broiler farm in proximity to established residences will reduce land use conflict.
7 SETTLEMENT, ACCOMMODATION AND RURAL LIVING

60 Modewarre is a village, an agglomeration of scattered rural holdings.

61 It is not identified as an urban growth centre.

62 However the scale, scope and complexity of the proposed tourism and sports-based facilities and the direction of tourism policy to direct and offer accommodation to visitors to the region provides strategic justification to use the project as a base to build and offer a choice and diversity of accommodation that would suit visitors to the region, those using the sports facilities and provide accommodation for some of the management and staff that would support the range of services on offer.

63 Given that the site is separated from existing and established settlements its sustainability can be justified if it is able to offer a sufficient range of services and facilities to meet daily and overnight needs. The nature and choice of accommodation offered, and the range of retail services, food and drink premises and restaurants would offer that level of service without threatening the well-being of other proximate centres.

64 It is to be expected that by retaining a sizable transient population in the locality overnight or for short periods this would serve to support the retail and hospitality services offered in a range of urban centres with some proximate to and surrounding Modewarre.

65 The composition and scale of the proposal would have a significant presence and influence upon the current character, experience and appearance of Modewarre.

66 A conversation has opened, and discussions have already been undertaken within the local community about the merits and implications of establishing this proposal. I conclude from the report on those meetings that a preponderance of stakeholders and local residents are generally supportive of the proposal but understandably some are concerned about the impact on their community and lifestyle.

67 It is beyond the scope of this preliminary advice to advance an objective review and commentary on whether the project’s impacts would be inappropriate or excessive in this regard.
If as I conclude this would be a substantial and important project for the economic benefit and wellbeing of the region then the challenge will be how to further develop the detail of the proposal so that the landscape character and environmental setting of the development is appropriately protected and enhanced and the impacts of greater population, built form and transport movement are all addressed to minimise detriment.
8 ACCESSIBILITY

69 A challenge presented by the subject site as a centre of tourism and sport is accessibility. The strategic planning context prefers to place new tourism and sports facilities close to or at the edge established centres.

70 The subject site is not located proximate to an urban centre although it is close to the Warrnambool Rail line, but there is no operating station at Moriac. I am instructed that there are initiatives in play which may change this.

71 It can be reasonably expected that visitors to the region and certainly the Surf Coast hinterland are in all probability going to be reliant upon private vehicles and tour coaches in order to engage with a range of regional attractions and features.

72 Similarly a high proportion of users of the sports facilities are likely to have access to private vehicles or buses.

73 However despite this there will be a range of sports participants, visitors and staff working at the premises who might not have access to regular private transport.

74 Is the remoteness of the proposal to an established urban centre and public transport a serious or fatal shortcoming of the proposal?

75 Having regard to the substantial and critical mass of the proposal I am of the view the appropriate response would be to consider the development of a transport and access strategy and private shuttle service that will enable connections to be regularly made with local proximate towns, Waurn Ponds and rail and airport services in Geelong and Avalon.
9 CONCLUSION

76 The strategic planning policy framework as it applies to regional growth and development in South West Victoria seeks and supports new tourism development such as this proposal that are grounded in the landscapes, produce and craft of the region and which have the capability to integrate with and extend the broader Great Ocean Road experience.

77 The sports science and elite training component is appropriately characterised as both a significant regional sports investment but also an extension of a unique visitation experience where the opportunities are presented to observe, participate and engage with leaders in their specialist disciplines.

78 The principal target market, of elite sports persons, from across the nation and internationally will bring another, different and special group of visitors to the region.

79 The setting for the proposal at Modewarre is remote from established towns and transportation and to that extent does not align with those themes of planning policy that would prefer growth in tourism facilities and sports services at the edge of an established centre.

80 However, this policy tension needs to be weighed against the special opportunity and attraction to create a regionally significant ‘retreat’ that seeks to celebrate and engage the visitor in the distinctive landscapes and produce of the rural hinterland of Surf Coast.

81 The proposal presents the opportunity for a major investment and enhancement of the landscape and environmental attributes of the lakeside location and the attributes of its flood plain.

82 Some agriculture land will be removed but its quality is marginal, and its productive potential and economic value would be significantly outweighed by the economic and social benefits of the proposal.

83 The proposal appears well rounded offering the accommodation and services that visitors to the region will need for their short stays.

84 For these reasons I am satisfied that there is high level and considerable support for the further development and encouragement of this proposal.