

SUBMISSION TO PLANNING PANEL - 275 BARHAM RIVER ROAD MEGA HOTEL APOLLO BAY

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I have lived in Apollo bay for over 40 years. I currently manage my own indigenous plant nursery and also work in the tourist industry. I maintain the grounds and gardens at a medium size accommodation complex at Marengo and also shuttle walkers along the Great Ocean Walk.

I have been Secretary of Otway Forum for the last eight years. The Forum has had consecutive meetings, once a month for the last 28 years. It was formed in response to the first Apollo Bay harbour redevelopment plan in 1990. The Forum is open to anyone in this community to attend, to be informed and discuss all issues at a local, state and federal level that affect our community. Councillors often attend the regular meetings. I have also represented Otway Forum at a state parliamentary inquiry into funding and planning issues in small rural shires. The transcript of my presentation has been sent to the panel and many of the issues i will raise today were included in that presentation.

The Forum also facilitates public meetings and candidate forums for the local council elections. Our convenor, Mr. Tony Webber also acts as a scrutineer at all elections, local, state and federal. Two large public meetings were held over the last 12 months to discuss the merits of the current proposal. The meetings were broadcast live on 3abr 87.6 FM, the local community radio station. These meetings can now be listened to by podcast - if the panel is interested in hearing the depth of community concern over this proposal. Otway forum also has its own website that can be found at forum.apollobay.org.au

I have been involved in many campaigns over the last 40 years and they have made Apollo Bay the town it is today – a beautiful, low key, authentic, seaside village. Myself and many other residents have campaigned on many issues - to stop the wood chipping of our public forests, to create the greater Otway National Park, to create marine national parks, to stop a sewerage treatment plant being built on the coastline, to have a sensible sympathetic redevelopment of the harbour precinct, to have defined town boundaries, to have sympathetic Neighbourhood Character policies, to have coherent strategic planning, etc. etc.

Perhaps the greatest challenge this community has faced was the Great Ocean Green proposal. I have tabled the book Great Ocean Gulf by the late John Spencer. This is now the text book on how not to do planning in Apollo Bay and the Colac Otway Shire. We were all hoping lessons had been learnt from that fiasco. Perhaps not!

I note there is a Chronology of Events in the Appendix to COS Submission to the Panel - Part A. I would now like to fill in a few relevant gaps in this chronology for the enlightenment of this Panel. This will help the Panel understand how we have got to the current proposal.

1990 – The first Apollo Bay harbour redevelopment plan was released for public comment. Produced by COS and the various Departments of Planning, Environment, Tourism and Development. Its primary focus was to explore the potential for redeveloping Pt Bunbury and the harbour precinct. Also the golf

club lease, of the public land, was coming up for renewal. The report proposed a large redevelopment that would have inevitably led to a resort being built on Pt Bunbury. But with no public golf course. With widespread community opposition and a lack of interest from developers the plans were shelved and the golf club received a new 20 year lease in 1995. Four more harbour plans have been released over the last 20 years as the government departments attempt to get community and private support.

2000 – The Great Ocean Green proposal surfaces. This company offered to build a private 18 hole golf course on the Barham River flood plain, thus freeing up Pt. Bunbury for redevelopment. However they were only prepared to do this if they could also have a 500 lot housing subdivision on the flood plain as well. Sort of like Queensland in the 1980s. After widespread community opposition, two panel hearings that supported the proposal and 9 years of indecision, the Planning Minister finally rejected the proposal. He cited sea level rise and flooding concerns as the two main reasons. We all knew these were the two major problems - we live here, we are the expert witnesses. Why weren't these concerns impressed on the developer way back at his first meetings with the various government departments involved? This will begin to sound familiar.

2004 – 275 Barham River Road changes ownership for \$1m. The property is renowned as the best dairy farm in the district. The new owner will soon become head of the Apollo Bay Chamber of Commerce and later is elected to COS council and eventually becomes the mayor.

2008 – 275 Barham River Road and two adjoining properties are quietly rezoned as a Rural Activity Zone. Thus substantially adding to each properties value. A function centre is then built at 275.

2009 – The Great Ocean Green proposal is rejected. Common sense finally prevailed.

2011 – With help from Tourism Victoria and COS, a Tourism Investment Opportunity document is produced for 275 Barham River Road. It shows several options including a 200 bed resort, 200 cabins, a caravan park, an 18 hole golf course and other associated facilities. I enquired at the time and was told \$3m would seal the deal for just the property alone! Unsurprisingly the property remains on the market to this day.

2015 – After a panel hearing, much debate within the community and division within COS, a Planning Scheme Amendment is passed for the harbour precinct. It rules out a resort on Point Bunbury and the golf club receives another 20 year lease. Common sense prevails again.

2017 – The current proposal for the mega resort at 275 begins with support from Tourism Victoria and Regional Development Victoria. COS Planning Department appears to support the proposal and hires a consultant to help it progress through the planning process. Rate payers contribute to this consultants fees.

2018 – Numerous planning problems and a lack of credible information come to light thru the public submission process. Does that sound familiar? COS councillors then voted unanimously to oppose the application. Common sense prevails again!

This is a short version of what has actually taken place. I can assure you there were many more bizarre twists and turns getting to this point. John Spencers book lists many but not all of these strange occurrences. Another book could quite easily be written and it would also show that fact is stranger than fiction.

But why do these planning issues take so long? Cause so much stress in the Apollo Bay community? And cost so much money? Perhaps there is a better way.

Perhaps this panel should recommend to the Planning Minister that he declare Apollo Bay and the Barham Valley catchment a “ Distinctive Area and Landscape” under the Planning and Environment Act 1987. He has recently promised this level of protection for the Surf Coast and Bellarine Peninsula. That declaration would trigger a Statement of Planning Policy, which will set permanent controls to protect the environment, landscape and importantly the lifestyle of the current residents. Any changes would then have to be agreed by state parliament.

Apollo Bay is surrounded by national park and is the most southerly town on the Australian mainland. You have to drive thru the National Park on each of three access roads. The natural environment of tall forests, rolling farmlands and the wild Bass Strait is what brings tourists here. I work shuttling walkers along the Great Ocean Walk. They come from all round Australia and overseas. They love it and stay for days at a time. Recreational tourism, including hiking, is one of the biggest tourist growth trends at the moment. The Great Ocean Walk has only been completed in the last 6 years and is gaining a worldwide reputation. This is the future for our town. Not some 1980s Queensland style mega resort in the Barham Valley. That is not needed or acceptable. Tourism Victoria, Regional Development Victoria and Great Ocean Road Regional Tourism need to get with the program and move in to the new millennium now!

These planners think the bus loads of Chinese tourists that descend on Apollo Bay every day at lunch time are going to stay for days at this mega hotel. Wrong! It will not happen. They are on a one week tour of Australia. Yesterday the penguins at Phillip island, tomorrow Uluru. They book their tours in China, fly on a Chinese airline, stay in a Chinese hotel, hop on a Chinese bus tour and eat at one of the 5 Chinese restaurants in Apollo Bay. There not much in it for us.

Except a continually degrading Great Ocean Road and all its attendant infrastructure – bridges, car parks, toilets, etc. 70% of tourists do the GOR in one day. That’s always been the case and always will. As in other tourism hot spots around the world, they are ruining what they have come to enjoy. Something has to give. Hopefully the Great Ocean Road Task Force will address these many issues.

Or perhaps the Chinese economy will falter with Donald Trump’s trade wars? Or perhaps worse – a military incident in the South China Sea or Korea? These are indeed strange times. This leads me to my next point.

I presume the panel is knowledgeable about the science of climate change. The Barham Valley flood plain is separated from the sea by the Great Ocean Road. The road is built on the primary sand dune, which sits upon the bed rock 5 metres below at sea level. The increasing sea level rise, storm surge strength, duration and frequency are already having a dramatic impact on this coastline. As this

continues to accelerate the flood plain will eventually be inundated. As the rate of fossil fuel burning continues to accelerate, access to the resort site will be cut off. Climate change science must be taken seriously now!

I have sent the panel copies of the Victorian Coastal Councils June 2018 Report - Victoria's Coast – Preparing for the Future. I hope the panel reads this report and understands its implications for the current proposal. Also just this week the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has released its summary of over 6000 scientific reference documents. It leads to the conclusion that the 1.5 degree Celsius threshold will be reached by 2040 and possibly 3-4 degrees Celsius by 2100, well above the targets set by the Paris agreement in 2015. If we continue on this trajectory it will be catastrophic for the environment, the economy and all of us. With our current leaders in Canberra and Washington, common sense is not prevailing.

At this point on behalf of Otway Forum i would like to completely refute the statement on page 8 of the Planning Report Revision Document 26th June 2018. It states that Otway Forums “in principle support for the proposed development was provided”. I kept notes at that meeting and nowhere was that stated to the developer's representative. In fact i gave him a number of reasons why i thought this proposal would be difficult to proceed. The proposal was discussed at the next Forum meeting and more issues of concern were raised. These were published in the next issue of the Apollo Bay newsheet.

Our concerns are as follows –

1. Complete failure of this proposal to comply with the intent of the Rural Activity Zone as set out in the Schedule. Why this was not explained to the developer, at the very first meeting with the Departments involved, beggar's belief. Does that sound familiar? Maybe they were new to their jobs, maybe they don't care, or maybe they just don't understand the issues of this very unique environment in Apollo Bay? I presume they live and work in Melbourne or Geelong. I suggest the panel make some recommendations to the Minister as to how this farcical situation can be avoided in the future. We are sick and tired of having to waste our time and money and stress levels fighting these absurd proposals.
2. Inadequate and incomplete technical reports provided with the application. Particularly soil erosion and land slip, heritage, business case, social impact, flooding, run off, night lighting, traffic, staffing, design, etc. etc. I am not going to critique in detail any of these reports as i am sure the Objectors group and other submitters can do a better and more comprehensive job than myself.
3. Existing public infrastructure that is insufficient for a proposal of this size. For example we already have water restrictions each summer - after we were assured by Barwon Water the new reservoir would drought proof Apollo Bay for the next 20 years. As for electricity and sewerage, that is another huge question mark. Infrastructure planning for Apollo Bay has been based on 20 new houses a year which are usually holiday houses that are empty most of the time.
4. The business case for a mega resort is weak. Apollo Bay always goes thru a quiet period each winter due to it very inclement weather and this won't change. There is already an oversupply of accommodation at this time of the year. However it gives the owners a chance for a holiday

and to do maintenance on their properties. Also there are already a number of business's catering to the top end of the market by renting high quality houses. As well as the thriving airb'n'b market.

5. There is already a shortage of staff, in Apollo Bay, for the low paid hospitality service industry. This is covered in the short term by back packers who often live in their vans. There is also a shortage of long term accommodation for these workers. These issues are not adequately addressed by the current proposal. However this could lead to low paid foreign visa workers being employed with possibly unforeseen impacts on the Apollo Bay community.
6. The Great Ocean Road is already struggling with numerous traffic related issues and this proposal will only increase these problems. Large tour coaches are continually damaging the road surface and base. Thus creating dangerous driving conditions. The road wasn't built for this level and weight of traffic. The large coaches should be banned. The tourists can come in smaller buses. Inadequate licensing and policing of foreign rental car drivers is another long term problem that has to be addressed. It has already had fatal consequences. More issues for the Great Ocean Road Task Force.
7. Traffic across the Barham floodplain and thru the quiet back streets of Apollo Bay will increase dramatically. These issues are yet to be addressed satisfactorily. Why should the long term residents of these streets have to put up with this constant disturbance?
8. The loss of this prime agricultural land is unacceptable. Before the current land owner took over this farm was renowned as the best in the district. The Watson family owned and sustainably farmed this property for many years. They made a comfortable living and only sold it so they could retire. Foreign ownership of prime agricultural land is unwise now and into the future. The legislation should be reinforced so that it cannot happen. I believe this developer/speculator is only hoping to sell on this proposal to a gullible foreign investor. This land can easily be bought back into full production, instead of a doubtful tourist attraction.
9. If permission for this proposal was granted it will create a precedent in this zone and the two adjoining properties could also be over developed on this scale. If this was to occur it would be an even worse scenario for the visual amenity of the Barham Valley. Particularly the night lighting amenity.
10. The statements from the proponent relating to sponsorships of various community groups and businesses are viewed by this community as simply bribery to gain support. They can never be guaranteed and are unlikely to ever occur. This is not Queensland circa 1985
11. The issue of runoff from the site also concerns me. The site is too close to the take up point for our water reservoir.
12. The whole concept of this proposal contradicts the image we have projected in our marketing of this area – a quiet, authentic, safe, seaside village. Apollo Bay is not Queensland circa 1985.

I will now like to quote from the excellent article by Nicola Philp published by the Age newspaper earlier this year.

Our community "is not against growth, but it has to be sustainable, steady and considered. And it has to be locally owned, so that the money stays here and doesn't disappear overseas. Locals understand the vagaries of the tourist tide and therefore what will work.

We are not blinded by dollar signs and the get rich quick mentality of the landowners. All Australians have seen how unchecked spending and grandiose plans can end up. Remember Skase and Bond?"

"Here's an idea. Instead of always catering to the masses, let's be creative, sustainable and considered in our approach to growth. Many other tourists travel for the beauty of our relatively spacious landscape. They actively avoid crowds and mass-produced experiences, so let's focus on that type of tourism."

"Other famous tourist attractions around the world are now limiting numbers of visitors per day to protect them. Maybe we should consider this for the Great Ocean Road, and encourage tourists to visit some of the other beautiful parts of Victoria – share the love, the income and the impact."

I believe the current proposal, as required, has no net gain for our community.

Therefore this application should be rejected at the earliest possible opportunity.

Let common sense prevail !!

Yours sincerely Pete Fillmore Secretary Otway Forum