

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Tourism and Events Sectors

Melbourne—Wednesday, 2 June 2021

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Mr Enver Erdogan—Chair

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Tim Quilty

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Lee Tarlamis

Mr Mark Gepp

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Dr Matthew Bach

Mr David Limbrick

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Andy Meddick

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr David Davis

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

WITNESS

Ms Jamie Lea, Director, JL Productions & Hire.

The CHAIR: The Economy and Infrastructure Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Tourism and Events Sectors continues. Please ensure that mobile phones are switched to silent and that any background noise is minimised.

I wish to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. I wish to welcome any members of the public that are watching via the live broadcast.

My name is Enver Erdogan, and I am Chair of the committee. I would like to introduce my fellow committee members that are present here with us today: Mr Andy Meddick, Mrs Beverley McArthur, Mr Rod Barton, Mr Mark Gepp, Ms Wendy Lovell, Mr Tim Quilty, Dr Catherine Cumming, Mr Lee Tarlamis and Mr David Davis.

All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law; however, any comment repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Ultimately all transcripts will be made available on the committee's website.

We welcome your opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion and questions. Could you please begin by stating your name for the Hansard team and then start your presentation. Over to you, Jamie.

Ms LEA: Thank you so much. I am Jamie Lea. Good afternoon. Thank you for having me. Before I begin I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land I am speaking from today, the Yorta Yorta people, and the clans whose lands cover the area now called Greater Shepparton. I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging, and I acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded.

I would also like to publicly thank Save Victorian Events for getting us to this point. I appreciate the huge work that has been done to get us here and make sure our industry does not die a silent death. Even from Shepparton I felt quite comforted knowing that they were out there pushing forward when things felt hopeless, and I certainly did not feel so alone. So thank you to them.

I am quite conflicted sitting here today. I do not just wish to talk about myself, because this is a community and a village that I certainly live in and work in, but after consulting with many in the region it was even more obvious that we have mostly had similar experiences. I will speak mostly about the GV or Shepparton and from an artistic and creative point of view.

I myself, Jamie Lea, wear many hats: I am the creative director of the Shepparton Festival; I own my own events, production and styling business, JL Productions; I am a musician; I am the mother of two very young children; and I sit on many community organisations' committees and boards. On any one day I may be an emcee at an event. The next day I might be styling, using the props I have here in my warehouse. I could be working on another festival, stage managing or coordinating the artists. I might be up early on ABC radio, talking about what is happening all over the region. For another festival I am the box office manager and volunteer coordinator. On the weekend I could be singing with my band. Back at work, I may travel to consult community groups on their grassroots festivals, or I could be running a food festival in the Shepparton CBD for 15 000 people. Many in the industry are the same. You can hopefully understand that we are multitalented because we have to be but also because we can be. That is the beauty of this industry.

Personally I have come to you as a committee member of the Goulburn regional partnership, a paying member of the Kaiela gallery. I am a member of the SAM, a paying member of Tourism Greater Shepparton and the Shepp chamber of commerce plus Music Victoria. I was young Australian of the year for the Goulburn Valley

for my volunteer work. As I said, I have got two children under six and a husband from Scotland, who is also a musician.

To start I would like to paint you a picture. March 2020, as many have said, was a day of absolute decimation and is incredibly triggering for me. So apologies if I do get emotional, because this is my life, this is all that I do. March 2020—the Shepparton Festival. It was the 24th Shepparton Festival, one of the longest running consecutive arts festivals in the state. As a not-for-profit festival, we are partially funded by our local council, Regional Arts Victoria and our sponsors. Our team works part-time on this specific festival, as do many in the industry, as we have other projects, and I run my own events company. The festival was 12 months in the making but 24 years of momentum, energy and countless volunteer hours. It was meant to be 21 days, 70 events, 200 artists and 40 venues. Dig a little deeper, that is over 200 volunteers and stakeholders in the thousands, from the funders through to the business owners, contractors and our anticipated 25 000 attendees and audience.

Besides the obvious social benefits, we know for a fact that the festival brings jobs and money to our town. The festival recently commissioned an external group to conduct an economic impact assessment, and their report indicated that the festival brought \$1.6 million to the town and contributed 11 full-time equivalent jobs. This equals just one festival in regional Victoria—all of this.

We make our own fun and entertainment in the country. We do not have the same options the big city has, but I would argue we appreciate and value what we do have so much more. We often travel to our neighbouring towns, like Echuca, Benalla, Cobram or Euroa, because we all offer something unique and individual due to the huge difference in the population, attractions and community spirit. In the GV our events calendar is overflowing—anything from huge sporting tournaments to equestrian shows to thousands coming to town for live music events, or even to the Spring car nats.

It takes a special kind of human to work in the events industry. Many give it a try, and then they go down another career path. That is okay—if you can't handle the heat, get out of the kitchen. We are a different bunch. We thrive on late nights or no sleep at all. Pressure and stress are very, very normal. We battle with the weather gods, we take financial risks, we work every weekend and public holiday. We never switch off. We volunteer or work for next to nothing because, well, I say we are selfish, or maybe that is just me. I know that myself and many others in this industry love what we do. We enjoy what we do. We are proud of what we do. We are good at it. I guess that is my selfish part—I do not want to do anything else because it makes me happy.

To make others happy, to be part of creating a sense of pride and belonging, to make our town an exciting place to visit, to give others a voice and a platform, that is what gets me out of bed every day—then COVID. After 15 years of working in the industry, from picking up rubbish at my local battle of the bands to cleaning toilets at a little bush doof just down the road in Tocumwal, to working in the mud and rain at Splendour in the Grass, to working with hundreds of volunteers at Meredith Music Festival, vomiting more often than not due to morning sickness, to serving thousands in the box office at Riverboats Music Festival in Echuca, breastfeeding my newborn, to working side of stage as artist liaison at Tassie Falls with that newborn being one, to right here at home, where I live, where I bring up my family as creative director of the Shepparton Festival, my dream job, to nothing—to 12 months of nothing.

It is an empty, hopeless, constant feeling of sadness. It is more than distressing to watch your life's work burn. My team, who I have trained up for years, move on and find other work. The attendees, who I have connected with, who have become family, become friends, become the community and the village I love, disconnect and invest their support, their time and money into something else. We spend years on marketing, engagement and brand awareness, getting our info out to punters so they believe in us and what we do and, poof, gone. I wish I could truly explain to you what that feels like. Sitting here, it is like giving my own eulogy, talking at my own funeral. But it is not just mine; it is my entire industry. Fifteen years, half of my life—for what? Seriously, for what? For it to happen all over again this week.

The Shepparton Festival moved for the first time in 25 years to June so we could miss COVID. We took an educated guess, a bet if you wish, and moved to June in the hope that the majority of humans would be vaccinated and we could deliver the 25th Shepparton Festival to thousands. So again here we are in 2021 and I am holding in my hands the 25th Shepparton Festival program: 17 days, 50-plus events, 250-plus artists, 25-plus venues. We are meant to open in 10 days. What are we going to do? Yes, we may have worked towards an anticipated some kind of COVID issue. We have to now; that is a part of our life—just like power outages

and weather and rain and all the other risks that we have to factor into this high-pressure, intense job. But now COVID. This is something I cannot control, my team cannot control, you cannot control. I can pray to the weather gods, I can put up a marquee, I can put on more security, but I cannot do anything about this when you shut me down and shut down another year's worth of work. Resilience, determination, effort, energy gone down the drain. Now, I am not personally blaming anybody, I am not personally attacking anybody, but you can understand my frustration.

So to finish up, the three points I would really like to push to you and everybody watching today are: education and understanding for our sector and COVID, and awareness from the powers that be. I will give you a couple of examples. JL Productions was one of the first events to come out of the gates in January. We were so proud—we were terrified, but we were proud to be able to do it. That is another positive of living regionally: we could do it. I had the police, the senior sergeant here locally, call me four times in one week to tell me to shut down: 'Stop', 'Enough', 'Done', 'You're not running this event'. And I, as a female, a young female in this industry living in regional Victoria running my own business, had to politely and in a very professional but terrified manner explain to somebody in a position of power who I respect, 'No, your information is incorrect. I do not have to shut down. I have my permits and everything else in place to deliver an event. I am allowed to do this'—four times. That is pressure, stress, anxiety, sleepless nights. I then paid for a COVID marshal to attend multiple days and times and extra than what I had needed to do because I was so scared. I then employed more security. That comes out of my pocket. He still gets paid every day; he still gets his job done. I lose money out of my pocket because I am scared he is going to walk into my event, with hundreds and hundreds of people, and shut us down. I do not need that. Nobody needs that. And that is only because I understand the pressure and intensity of his work—he may not have known the rules that day, that week, that month—I do not blame that person. Again, it is a part of his job, but unnecessary on my behalf.

The second point is the communication and guidance from the government for our industry. It is like mud. Now, I work for myself. Yes, I have team members—they are all contractors—but really I am the one here making the decisions, and especially on the JL Productions side of things. Without Save Victorian Events and without the people in the industry, who are now close friends and people that I hardly knew 12 months ago, I would have had no idea and no capacity—staying at home with my children during a pandemic and juggling those responsibilities—to then get through to the other side. That communication and guidance from the government comes in many different forms and I am sure that has all been suggested to you. I have watched people today and read transcripts previously, and I am really grateful for their input and their guidance and advice.

My third one would be awareness and value for events. We have a huge, huge impact on the mental health and wellbeing of our communities. You know this—I am sure you know this and you are all very aware of this. We give humans something to look forward to, to aspire to. We ignite their wish and want to engage and contribute and communicate and connect. We give them a reason to get out of bed or leave the house. I know that as humans on this planet we were not born to work and die. Events gather people together and they create joy. My life's work is about bringing people together, creating joy and comfort and connection that I value more than anything.

I would like to thank everyone who has spoken before me and who is speaking after me. I would really like to acknowledge that together we are stronger, and I am really proud of all of you for your resilience and your determination. I am sad for those who have shut down, I am sad for those who have left the industry. To the few of us who can push on and will push on, I am sure that together we can do great things after all of this. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Jamie, and thank you for explaining the journey of your company, JL Productions & Hire, throughout the pandemic and more broadly the sector. I might just pass on, because I am acutely aware of the time. I might start with Ms Lovell, then Mr Quilty and Mr Tarlamis. If we do not get a chance to go through the whole 10 members of the committee, we might have to send you some questions and if you have time and could respond that would be helpful. Ms Lovell, Mr Quilty and then Mr Tarlamis.

Ms LOVELL: Thanks, Jamie, and thank you for your presentation this morning. Thank you for everything you do for our community to make it a much better and much more enjoyable place to be. You mentioned the Shep festival, due to open on Friday, 11 June. We have just had an announcement from the government that although regional Victoria will open up to travel, subject to further cases coming online, next week, metropolitan Melbourne people will not be able to travel into regional Victoria on the long weekend. I am just wondering what that will do to your festival, what the visitation numbers from metropolitan Melbourne usually

are to the Shep festival and whether you have any insurance or whether anyone underwrites the festival for the losses that you may incur?

Ms LEA: Sure. Some of those I can answer and some of them I cannot, but I am happy to get that information back through to you as always, Wendy. Look, yes, a substantial part of this program is made up of people from interstate; we have artists travelling from all over the country to attend, engage and participate in the festival. We also have a large majority of people who travel regionally and from Melbourne. About a third of our guide is coming from interstate or Melbourne to participate in this festival and produce this festival. As I mentioned to those who may have forgotten, there are 17 days. So when I say 'festival', there are 50-plus events inside of this one big festival. There are many umbrella events so, for example, the Affinity Quartet are coming down from Melbourne. We have a projection artist coming down from Melbourne.

There are skills here and there are creatives here who are very much involved in this, but a point of my job as creative director is to bring in something different, something thought-provoking, something that will move you and inspire here locally. A part of our job is to facilitate locals' development and their opportunities, so to bring people from all over the state and all over the country is really important to this guide. Now, we will go on regardless, Wendy. We have anticipated some sort of COVID, so to the best of our ability we will produce a festival this year, unlike last year when we launched the festival and two days later we were shut down. That was out of our hands and we had no idea what COVID was at that point in time.

We have a huge visitation, Wendy, as I mentioned—25 000-plus attendees over that 17-day period. Post most festivals we certainly get survey results and then we share those with our stakeholders and our funding bodies. But I would say at least a third of those 25 000 people would come from the big city, another third would come from all over the region—we advertise in Yarrowonga and Benalla and further towards Bendigo and whatnot. I mean, for me, a huge part of my job is to engage here locally. We have a 65 000 population in this municipality, and every year we are engaging more and more here locally, but you can understand that that out-of-town money and that travel and that buzz and the excitement of a festival is a huge part of people coming to the region.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Quilty.

Mr QUILTY: In previous hearings we have been talking about what the government would do if there was another lockdown, but obviously we are in the lockdown now. What can the government do immediately to help your industry—the events industry—and your festival, and what steps should the government take to do things differently next time we get locked down?

Ms LEA: Sure. Thank you. Gosh, I mean, we have been through this before, haven't we? This is not our first rodeo. I wonder how important we are—how important that community engagement and that connection and the economic impact and the mental health impact truly is—because I do feel like as events and as an events company we were forgotten about. I always try to be very positive, so I do not wish to be negative, but when the cricket is on, when the footy is on, when the tennis is on, that is a real kick in the teeth. That is a huge kick in the teeth because arts and culture is the thing that keeps us alive, especially during lockdown. Most of you would have watched Netflix, most of you would have listened to music, most of you would have read books. That is my world and my life. Though I can respect the importance of sport and what that does for our economy, I would argue that we are the same.

So I would say an equal playing field. I would say better communication and awareness for our community. The amount of times there has been inconsistent messaging about, 'You can have a farmers market in Yarrowonga with 1000 people', but I cannot put on an event, I cannot have a show. I have a warehouse here in Shepparton but I cannot run events here; that is not how it works. All of my events, whether it is the secret garden gigs, where we tour to people's backyards all over regional Victoria, or we go to the Dookie quarry, where we have around 1000 people attend over multiple days, they are unique and boutique and special. That is the point of events. I do not have my own venue. I make venues; that is how it works. So when you have got thousands of people at the MCG because there is a venue, I can do that, I can do something, but when my hands are tied and I am left to feel like my contribution and my work and the effect that I am having on our community and our region is null and void, it is disheartening and you wonder what the point is, truly.

The government could do better with its support. I will acknowledge that I did receive a \$10 000 grant as JL Productions & Hire, and I also got JobKeeper. And I promise you if neither of them had happened, I would

definitely be shut. Without a doubt I would be shut, because I am not in this industry to make money, and it has never been about money for me. We live completely off my husband's wage, and all of my money that I make goes back into the business.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. I might pass over to Mr Tarlamis.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you, Jamie, for your very, very comprehensive presentation; it was very thorough. And thank you for your suggested solutions to some of the issues. It was very passionate; your passion clearly comes through in your presentation today. You have articulated it very well in terms of the issues that impact on you and some of the solutions that you have proposed. I do not have a question as such, but I just wanted to thank you.

The CHAIR: No problem. We might have time for one final question before the lunch break. I might pass over to Dr Cumming, and then on that point I know, Mr Barton, Mr Davis, Mrs McArthur, Mr Meddick and Mr Gepp, we are not going to get an opportunity to get to all of you, so we will put the other questions on notice. Dr Cumming to ask the final question. And me, I also have a question, but I will put it on notice.

Dr CUMMING: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Jamie Lea, for your very heartfelt presentation. I felt for you, and obviously we do understand what it must be like for you at this time. My question to you, Jamie Lea, is: do you believe your event could have actually still gone ahead with great COVID-safe plans and guidelines that could have kept your staff and the public safe, and do you believe that more people could have actually been trained and the community also in aseptic techniques and other ways of making sure that they understand the COVID-safe way ahead in keeping themselves safe and others? Is there more that the government can do in the way of their medical messaging that is clear and consistent? And I also acknowledge Save Victorian Events. I think they have done a wonderful job in connecting you guys. And I feel for you—Shepparton, 25 years, it must be just heartbreaking for you.

Ms LEA: Thank you so much. I thought I would make it all the way to the end without getting too emotional, but—

Dr CUMMING: Jamie, it is all right. You know, it is okay to feel like that. You gave an extremely passionate contribution, and we are all here for you, Jamie.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Jamie. On that point I just want to say I think your honesty and candour about your own experience has shown through, and we understand that it is not just the financial toll but also the emotion and the effort. And I was amazed at the diverse range of roles undertaken, the multitalented people at not only your business but across the sector. So I just want to say thank you again for contributing and for showing the courage to come and appear before today's hearing. I will be in contact with you and the committee secretariat will. I know a number of committee members do have questions—I can see they are nodding. And, yes, we just want to share our thoughts with you.

Mrs McARTHUR: Chair?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Mrs McARTHUR: I just wonder if we could help Jamie by suggesting that we might be able to ask the chief health officer or whoever to give her some surety for those performers that need to come from Melbourne or technical assistance: if they had perhaps two negative tests, would they be able to come into the area to work for her? If we might be able to make some representation on her behalf.

The CHAIR: Look, there have been a whole bunch of announcements. I have obviously not been able to follow them because we are online here. I guess we will take that offline, and if you do have any queries, we are obviously always happy to follow up and try to seek guidance. We do that as members of Parliament anyway in our role, so I am happy to follow that up. But on that point, I think I might conclude the hearing for now and take our lunch break now, but thank you again for your contribution. It has been very helpful and given us a great insight into the personal impact as well as the financial impact that this pandemic has had. On that point, the committee will now take a short break.

Witness withdrew.