

Balnarring, Merricks Beach, Pt Leo and Shoreham
Foreshore Committees of Management
C/- Pt Leo Foreshore Committee
1 Pt Leo Rd, Pt Leo Vic 3916

11 July 2016

The Hon Lily D'Ambrosio
Minister for the Environment
Level 36, 121 Exhibition St
Melbourne Vic 3000

Dear Minister

RE: Future Management of the Western Port Foreshore Reserves Somers to Shoreham

I am writing to you on behalf of the Western Port Foreshore Reserve Committees of Management of Balnarring, Merricks Beach, Point Leo and Shoreham, in regard to a concept presented to us by the Department of Environment Land Water and Planning (DELWP), through its representative Chris Padovani, to consolidate the management of the five Foreshore Reserves from Somers to Shoreham.

This concept has since been shifted from the Department into the auspice of the Expert Panel established to develop a Marine and Coastal Act.

DELWP approached the respective foreshore committees in late February 2016 asking for feedback on proposed Committee amalgamation. At that stage we understood we were being asked to comment and provide input on the idea before the DELWP representatives were to present a proposal to the Minister. Each of our committees responded with a request, seeking a brief or outline of the proposal, including a cost benefit analysis and responses to a basic list of questions we considered necessary before any of our COM's could form any constructive opinion.

The primary rationale presented by the Department was along the lines of "form a single Committee, it will solve the Department's problems with how to manage the Somers Reserve (Parks Victoria being the interim Manager) and will assist in addressing the department's manpower and funding constraints". Secondary considerations were sharing the income base with Somers and Merricks Committees and freeing resources for specialist staff support.

Subsequently we have been informed the proposed amalgamation of Foreshore Committees will be included as a proposal in the (soon to be released) discussion paper on the new Marine and Coastal Act. We note this new Act is an election commitment of the Government, and we agree the current legislation needs to be updated to better reflect current needs and to help better protect and meet the demands being placed upon our coastal regions on so many different fronts.

The Committees however have serious concerns that the proposed amalgamation of our foreshores (a small part of the new Act) will have a destructive effect on the Reserves we manage.

We appreciate that there are issues surrounding the equitable funding of our reserves, particularly affecting those that do not have the infrastructure to generate an income. We also recognise there are budget constraints regarding DELWP funding, not only in relation to funding the direct costs of managing coastal reserves, but also in relation to funding Departmental positions that enable DELWP to dedicate time and resources to help us manage our reserves. However, we do not believe, given the limited information we have to date, that an amalgamation of the Reserves, to be managed by a single Committee, is the answer.

At the moment dedicated local people volunteer their time to oversee the management of each reserve. Through their dedication with on the ground, hands on work, these people are uniquely positioned to not only be aware and manage the day to day issues and needs in their parks, but also have invaluable site specific knowledge to input when planning for the future. This local input and ability to work (unpaid) at a grass roots level is what builds and strengthens our communities. It empowers the population and fosters a sense of pride, place, belonging and ownership which only further enhances and protects our reserves.

If the plan to amalgamate the Foreshores Committees (Four volunteer Category 2 Committees, plus Somers into one Category 1 Committee with paid members) were to go ahead it will disempower our local communities and alienate them from the decision making process. This in turn will only cause loss of engagement in the care and upkeep of our parks and animosity in the community towards the Department and political powers who will be seen to have taken from communities who have successfully managed these lands for many years. We ask that you recognise not only the importance and value that small communities make in managing these reserves, but also the importance of these reserves in helping foster and sustain small communities.

We are yet to see any financial modelling to show how the proposed amalgamation could work and if it would provide net benefit to the broader community. No cost benefit analysis has been completed or provided to substantiate the worth of the proposal. As part of any analysis projections need to be incorporated on the likely impact on volunteers. Anecdotal evidence from previous transitions from Category 2 to Category 1 Committees is that volunteer involvement declines.

Good management of public land has far greater benefits (such as environmental and biodiversity) than just its enjoyment by or amenity for human visitors. The most precious areas of the Western Port Reserves are those remnant areas of indigenous bushland, which do not generate an income, but protect a range of locally and regionally significant species and contribute to broader Government objectives in these areas. This means that a 'user pays' approach based on distributing income from local camping fees, is flawed – equitable funding should mean funding according to need. A model is required that enables us to reach agreement with the Department on how the Government and other sources will contribute to the long term funding of the needs in each area. This could be on the basis of agreed priority outcomes and associated funding streams. Reliance on an already stretched camping income, or a hit or miss grants program is not a sustainable way to manage public land for ongoing quality outcomes.

Alternative operating models warrant consideration. The Western Port Committees offer their support in exploring and implementing initiatives that would preserve the best of the current operating model and implement new initiatives including cost/resource/revenue sharing and consistent environmental planning and regulation enforcement regimes.

Our Committees strongly oppose the Category 1 model which effectively would replace a volunteer based model with professionals. Our Committees have successfully maintained, improved and managed the Reserves for more than 70 years using the goodwill and input of dedicated volunteers. The idea that we would take money out of on the ground works to pay people for unneeded management/ advisory positions is irresponsible.

We note the recently released State Government Biodiversity strategy which has a focus on 'connecting Victorians with nature', with the vision being *Victoria's biodiversity is healthy, valued and actively cared for* (emphasis added). Changing the management structure of coastal reserves away from community involvement would seem to be contrary to this.

To date the Committees have had limited discussion with our local communities and camping community while we wait to see a formal proposal or gain a better knowledge of what is to be proposed.

Information about the DELWP proposal has already begun to get out and we are taking a lot of calls and concerns from a wide range of people who really appreciate how our parks are managed and what we have achieved. The vast majority of people are concerned and beginning to look for ways to object and fight this proposal.

Our Committees would welcome the opportunity to explore with the Department how to modify the existing operating model to keep the best of what we currently have but with modification to attain the longer term objectives we all seek.

We would very much like to meet with you at the earliest possible opportunity to discuss our concerns and ways that we can work together on this issue, which has wide ranging implications for the local communities and the thousands of members of the general public who regularly visit this fabulous section of coastline each year. If possible it would be most beneficial Minister if you could allocate the time to visit the area. We would be more than happy to provide an informative tour and briefing.

We look forward to receiving your response and welcoming you to our area.

Your sincerely,

Chairperson, Pt Leo Foreshore Committee
on behalf of the Balnarring, Merricks Beach, Pt Leo and Shoreham
Committees of Management.