

1 January 2015

TCT Response to the Surf Coast Shire's

“The Future of Surf Life Saving in Surf Coast Shire” Issues and Opportunities Paper November 2014

Introduction

Torquay Commerce and Tourism (TCT) are pleased to provide comment on the future of surf lifesaving in the Shire where our members primarily live and operate their businesses. While this submission contains some detailed feedback on the issues in the above paper we would like to commence with some general statements about the value of surf lifesaving to our community.

The Torquay to Lorne stretch of beaches contains some potentially dangerous stretches of water on any given day of any week. They are also some of the most beautiful and enjoyable stretches of water in the country. The fact that they can be enjoyed safely over peak periods is a key element of Torquay's "brand" as a place that is safe to bring up kids, visit on holiday or live full time – the social utility of our beaches feeds into the economic health of our townships and region. Consider for instance the effect on holiday rentals, retail sales etc., if a sustained series of drownings changed widespread perceptions of Torquay as a safe place to visit and live. Such a series of calamities would have subtle yet certain effects on everything from local surfshops and cafes to property prices and even shire rates. It is for this reason that TCT says that there is a real economic benefit to the Shire and the townships in it, as well as all the social, health, community and wellbeing benefits that come with surf clubs operating in our Shire. TCT also makes the following comments as a group of businesses who have sponsored or participated in surf clubs as volunteers over many years.

Issues and Opportunities

Legislation and Policy

Without going into unnecessary detail TCT makes the following points:

1. The overwhelming majority of the community accept that sites currently occupied by surf lifesaving clubs will continue to be so- in that context there ought not be unwieldy management or planning measures applied to modification or use of those sites where the use or modification is consistent with the purposes of surf life saving; and
2. TCT has a long-standing position that the land interface between towns like Torquay and Jan Juc and their beaches should not be managed by unelected committees accountable to government departments in Melbourne. It is TCT's view that all the foreshore land should be returned to the control of the Shire rather than the Great Ocean Road Coast Committee – TCT would also hold that in such amalgamation there should be better outcomes such as better car park planning or weed management as well as efficiencies to be gained through the removal of duplication. Such an arrangement would also have councillors accountable to their local communities overseeing our local foreshores.

Demographic and Social

Torquay and Jan Juc will clearly have increased demand on their lifesaving services as the population swells in our local area and to our north. Our members know that a significant amount of our retail, hospitality and accommodation customers are from Melbourne's west and we can expect that the growth in all these areas will also place demand on our lifesaving services. However this population growth should also drive the recruitment of new volunteer lifesavers if the local clubs are well supported and able to adapt. In some of the online comments around this issue in recent times there appears to be a mistaken view that we can manage growth in beach goers by shrinking the geographic footprint of life saving clubs and replacing them with professional life guards operating from an off site base. This approach would be ultimately self-defeating as the majority of paid lifeguards are in fact club members who are young adults on summer breaks. There are neither the career options, nor the remuneration benefits available to make these jobs anything but a casual summer job for people who would otherwise be volunteers and in any case a 4 person lifeguard crew is not capable of covering 10,000 people on a crowded beach and so for the short, medium and long term the only realistic option is to rely heavily on volunteers. This reliance needs to be recognised by the Shire and the wider community. It means that when considering surf lifesaving clubs we need to think of them as a vital, necessary part of community life not a service that we simply pay for.

At the end of the day our population is growing, and the footprint of our sporting clubs and our emergency service organisations are also growing, even our Shire Council footprint is growing and we need to make sensible accommodation of that growth in our life saving clubs as well. This accommodation needs to happen near existing sites not away from the beach as that would be like building Shire offices in another Shire.

Surf Club Facilities and the Community

The discussion paper and some of the media coverage has focussed on community use of life saving clubs, TCT makes the following points in this regard:

1. There are no bars to community use of local surf clubs – they have been used for everything from State Government community cabinets to weddings and wakes. Indeed TCT has used these facilities
2. There are no bars on individual members of the community joining surf clubs to make use of the facilities- as many do;
3. Many sporting clubs such as football or bowling clubs enjoy primary use of a council facility – this is sensible as in most cases the funds for the creation of the facility or the labour to build them has come from the members themselves – giving security of tenure to volunteer organisations encourages them to contribute toward the facilities;
4. Ultimately this an emergency service organisation – it has valuable equipment that needs to be secure and close to the beach and facilities are needed to save lives– there will always be areas of a surf club or sometimes an entire club that cannot be turned over to any other use except emergency services. There is no suggestion that CFA or SES facilities are not offering up enough community use and nor should there be about our local surf clubs.

Environmental Impacts

As indicated earlier in this submission TCT believes local, elected bodies should manage our town/beach interfaces. We also accept that our emergency services need to grow with our population. The areas around our existing surf clubs are substantially modified in an environmental sense and there should not be barriers to sensible expansion of our existing surf clubs.

Economic Impacts including Employment

As outlined above TCT supports the view that safe beaches are critical to our local economy and a vibrant local surf lifesaving movement is critical to safe beaches. In respect to surf carnivals these events contribute to our local economy on an intermittent basis but they are also part of developing a supply chain of fit, capable, trained athletes who are able to save people's lives in dangerous conditions – on a paid or unpaid basis – good pool swimmers do not necessarily make good surf lifesavers and surf carnivals are an important part of growing the next generation of life savers.

Funding and Facilities

TCT would make the following comments in regard to funding and facilities:

1. The Jan Juc and Torquay facilities are in need of significant upgrade, particularly Jan Juc.
2. The majority of funding for surf lifesaving in the Shire comes from non-government supporters and sponsors – this may change if there was a move to more professional lifeguards as the volunteer element is a key part of the attraction for non-government supporters.
3. Notwithstanding the point 2 above, governments do occasionally support surf life saving. The decision by Surf Coast Shire to give \$240,000 to Fairhaven Surf Life Saving Club would be inequitable unless equivalent amounts are also to given to Jan Juc and Torquay Life Saving Clubs in the near future. Given the local demand for lifesaving services and the amount of rates paid by Torquay and Jan Juc residents TCT would suggest that roughly twice that amount should be paid to each of our local clubs in Torquay/Jan Juc.

In conclusion TCT would like to reiterate that surf life saving is an important social and economic part of our community- we are grateful that for the last 70 years thousands of volunteers have saved at least that many lives contributing to Torquay being a highly desirable place to live or visit.

Yours Faithfully

Barrie Sutherland
President