

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO THE ARTS IN REGIONAL WESTERN AUSTRALIA

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT BUNBURY
ON THURSDAY, 19 FEBRUARY 2004**

SESSION 2

Members

**Mr D.A. Templeman (Chairman)
Mr L. Graham (Deputy Chairman)
Mr J.N. Hyde
Mr A.P. O’Gorman
Ms S.E. Walker**

[11.20 am]

MR BLEE, MR ANTHONY PHILIP

Executive Manager, City Life,

City of Bunbury,

4 Stephen Street,

Bunbury, examined:

The CHAIRMAN: On behalf of the committee I welcome Mr Anthony Mr Blee from the City of Bunbury. This committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings in the House itself demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Unless otherwise directed by the committee, witnesses' evidence is public and may be published, including on the parliamentary web site immediately after correction. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

Mr Blee:: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes attached to that?

Mr Blee:: Yes, I do.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read an "Information for Witnesses" briefing sheet regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

Mr Blee:: Yes, I did.

The CHAIRMAN: We are conducting an inquiry into the arts in regional Western Australia and we have framed a set of terms of reference. You may have had an opportunity to view those. We are very interested in ascertaining from witnesses the cultural, social and economic impacts of the arts on regional areas in the State. We have framed five key areas to which we are paying particular attention. In your capacity as the executive manager, can you outline your role and how that role influences or has an impact on arts development in particular?

Mr Blee:: I think that the role I play at the city is probably one of the most exciting roles in local government in that it is not regulatory and statutory but is very much in the area of economic, community and social development, and they are the main focuses of my portfolio. The arts comes into all those areas without a doubt. I specifically have responsibility for the city's involvement in the Bunbury Regional Art Galleries. I am a member of the Bunbury Regional Art Galleries' board of management. I oversee our contribution and liaison with the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre. My area within the city also has direct liaison with small community-based arts organisations such as the Stirling Street Art Centre and individual artists.

The CHAIRMAN: Your scope is across the arts in all its forms?

Mr Blee:: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Because you are employed by the City of Bunbury, obviously you report to the City of Bunbury?

Mr Blee:: That is correct, yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you tell us a little about how the city values the arts from both a local government and, indeed, a community perspective?

Mr Blee: There is certainly the financial aspect, which is fairly important. The city makes a contribution to the Bunbury Regional Art Galleries of about \$160 000 each year in operating funding. We provide the facility - the Bunbury Regional Art Galleries' building - which is a historic heritage building, and we maintain that building on behalf of the art galleries. We provide to the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre operating funding in the order of \$250 000 a year. On top of that we provide, at our discretion and in discussions and negotiation with the centre, capital funding to maintain that building at a high standard, in addition to ongoing maintenance. As you would appreciate, we also own that building. We also provide about \$27 000 a year to the Stirling Street Art Centre, which is a community-based arts organisation and is an outlet and a workshopping organisation for people coming in at the bottom end of the arts. In addition, we fund the regional arts development officer position, which operates out of the Bunbury Regional Art Galleries under the auspice of the Bunbury Arts Management Board. We provide cultural development opportunities for individual artists through workshopping, and we sponsor arts projects on a merit basis. We also oversee the City of Bunbury art collection, which is a \$1.3 million art collection housed in the Bunbury Regional Art Galleries. We provide funding in the order of \$23 000 a year to a committee that looks after that on our behalf. We employ a part-time curator for that collection, and we provide the facilities to house that collection.

The CHAIRMAN: What is your total city budget?

Mr Blee: About \$15 million.

The CHAIRMAN: It is very -

Mr Blee: It is significant.

The CHAIRMAN: In my estimation, you are getting towards \$1 million in contributions. It is a significant contribution by the local government.

Mr Blee: I feel it is. Obviously there are always calls for us to provide more funding and we attempt to do that, as I said, on an as-needs basis and a merit-based situation. One of my objectives in the City Life program is that things like economic development, community development and cultural development do not sit in silos. We are trying to integrate all those things into a holistic program, which is called City Life, for obvious reasons. In all our economic development activities, for example, there is an arts input, and we see the arts as an important part of our tourism. Out of that there are tremendous community development opportunities.

The CHAIRMAN: Has the City Life program been developed recently? Is it a relatively new approach?

Mr Blee: It is. Approximately four years ago the City Life program came about through a restructuring of the organisation. Over the four years since then it has changed and evolved. Four years ago it was a relatively adventurous and ambitious way to structure an element of the organisation that has its own budget, staff and director or executive manager, as we are called, to oversee all those sorts of non-traditional local government roles. It is fair to say that it probably went further than we had the capacity to absorb at the time and included statutory planning and a whole lot of other things like that. However, we have changed it slightly over the four years to focus more on the economic, community, and social and cultural development aspects.

Mr A.P. O'GORMAN: You mentioned that you have an arts development manager. What is that person's job?

Mr Blee: There is a regional arts development officer position, which is not funded totally by us. It receives state and federal government funding and we are a contributor to that, along with two or three other local authorities within the south west region. It is not a Bunbury-focused organisation, but it sits underneath the Bunbury Regional Arts Management Board, of which we are members, so we have a role in that sense, but we provide both operational and program-based funding. We try to do things in partnership and facilitate other groups to do things, rather than try to resource ourselves

within the City Life program to deliver a lot of programs. We prefer to have ideas and initiatives that we can sell to others to take on board, and we provide seed funding for them to do that. For example, we work with the regional arts development officer to provide workshops for artists across a whole range of issues such as marketing, sponsorship and all those sorts of things that artists tend not to know about, understand or have the capacity to do themselves. We are working with the RADO to provide those sorts of opportunities for artists not just here in Bunbury but on a regional basis,.

Mr A.P. O'GORMAN: Is your regional art gallery totally funded through the City of Bunbury?

Mr Blee: No, it is not. We are the major funder, but the Western Australian Art Gallery also is a significant funder of that facility. Until six months ago, the director of the art gallery was funded totally by the Western Australian Art Gallery. In other words, that person was one of its employees but was located at the regional art gallery. That has since changed. Now the Western Australian Art Gallery provides, as we do, an amount of money to the Bunbury Regional Arts Management Board each year and it employs all staff, including the director. There are some small amounts from other local authorities, but not many and not much. There is obviously some corporate sponsorship to that organisation.

The CHAIRMAN: The City Life program sounds pretty innovative. One of our terms of reference is the benefits of the arts to regional communities. You have already mentioned that arts has an input into economic aspects. Is it true to say that you believe that encouraging and nurturing the arts is a huge benefit to the community?

Mr Blee: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: In terms of what the arts can provide economically, what do you see the City of Bunbury doing in the community at the moment? Is it still nurturing that arts economy?

Mr Blee: In recent years - let us say in the past 10 years - we have been treading water to a large extent in terms of developing the arts into an industry that can demonstrate major economic benefits. I think it is difficult to quantify anyway, because not a lot of research has been done into the economic or other benefits of the arts, and a lot of it is anecdotal and perceived and is just what we feel about it. There needs to be some research in that regard to get a handle on how much it does mean or what it is worth and the benefits. I do not think it has come as far as it should have in 10 years. I think it is still seen as a bit of a backyard industry; it is a pastime or a hobby. The number of professional artists, certainly in Bunbury, is not as great as it should be. We need to do a lot more to encourage artists into a professional environment, and we are attempting to do that, but I think we need to do more. There is no question about that. In an economic development sense, the arts is underestimated. It is seen as a bit wishy-washy and it is not hard and fast figures; it is not dollars.

[11.35 am]

The CHAIRMAN: Given the significant investment that the City of Bunbury makes in arts-related infrastructure and human resources, do you find it difficult to sell to the wider community, which may question the City of Bunbury spending \$1 million, for example? The sporting bodies, for example, might say that they need more fields and infrastructure. Do you see your role as manager and the role of the City Life program as a way of also marketing the benefits and importance of the arts?

Mr Blee: Absolutely. The comparison with sporting groups is interesting, because in Bunbury, as in a lot of country communities, sport is a very strong pastime. Historically it has played a significant role, and proportionately it has received a lot of funding. We provide lots of sporting fields. Providing and maintaining them involves a major input from the city. If you were to equate what that means to the arts, I think the numbers are very much less. We spend probably millions of

dollars on maintaining our sporting facilities. The amount for maintaining our cultural facilities would not be anywhere near that. There is no question about that.

The CHAIRMAN: Bunbury is a growing community with, I assume, a significant number of young people and children. Have any local government sponsored or supported programs used the arts as a means by which to address youth-related social problems?

Mr Blee: As part of the holistic approach to everything we do, rather than treat things in isolation and see them as separate, we have developed some programs, such as Summer in the Shell. We have a music shell, which is another investment the city has made. That \$200 000 investment is on the foreshore. It is an under-utilised facility. We have tried to create opportunities for young people and others who have an artistic performing arts bent to use that facility for free. We have developed a program called Summer in the Shell, which means that we provide the sound equipment and the lighting, and we do all the marketing and promotion, and we provide them with a stage that they can perform on, which they would not normally get. That has a double benefit. Our facility is used - people understand what it is there for - and it is a platform for emerging artists to show their wares. There is no question about that.

The CHAIRMAN: Many councils throughout regional and metropolitan Western Australia have policies in their planning processes that incorporate the arts. I am thinking of spaces and places, sculpture etc, and the inclusion of the arts in new communities. Does the city have a position on that as well?

Mr Blee: We have a bit of a reputation for our public art and for our different types of public art as well. I think it happens in an ad hoc way; it is certainly not planned. We have this view that public art is important in the community, but we have not adequately planned for it. We have only recently taken steps towards that by accessioning our public art to the city art collection, which was not previously the case; it was just out there in the streets and no-one took any responsibility for it. We have taken that step to give it a home, if you like, and all the support that goes with the City of Bunbury art collection. Our next step is to develop a policy and then guidelines. One of the big issues for us is maintenance. We have hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of public art out there that is not maintained adequately. We need to address that issue. That will start in this coming budget. We are developing a proper maintenance plan for all our art work. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that public art is a bit of a novelty or catch phrase for developers and all sorts of people and not treat it in context; thinking that it is out there on its own. We have been through that. Our engineering department people, for example, decided that they needed to put public art on roundabouts. They thought that it would be great if they planned for that right at the start of a project. However, it was done from an engineering perspective, not from an arts perspective. It has taken a lot of time and effort for us to work with the engineers and to get them to understand that public art is not an engineering issue but something much broader than that. We now work in a project team with our engineering and construction people to ensure that public art is done appropriately in those situations. We are getting there, but it is certainly not perfect by any means. We do not have a policy at this stage, but we are working towards that.

The CHAIRMAN: Earlier you used the term “treading water” with regard to the arts community. I appreciate your comments. If I were a new resident in Bunbury or the outer greater Bunbury area and I were a professional or semiprofessional artist, or even a hobby artist, what would be available to me to connect to what goes on in Bunbury?

Mr Blee: The first thing I would do is go to the Bunbury Regional Art Galleries. They should be the hub of the visual arts in the region and in Bunbury itself - there is no question about that. All the information and all the resources that you need to make decisions about what you do and how you do it should be available there. The regional arts development officer position, which is currently under the auspices of the arts management board, has operated outside that cocoon, if you like. I believe that needs to change. We need to get an integration of all those things rather than

have things hang off the side that go nowhere. The regional art galleries should be a central resource in the first instance. If that means going to the Stirling Street Art Centre, for example, that is what should happen. People should be able to be directed to whatever suits them.

The CHAIRMAN: Has the Stirling Street Art Centre operated under the old Arts Council model?

Mr Blee: That is correct. I think it grew out of that. There has been an evolution over time. Originally it was part of the Bunbury Regional Art Galleries. For whatever historical reason, there was a parting of the ways and it moved to its own facility, which we provide in one of our buildings down the street. It is really grassroots. The concern I have - and we are working hard to change this - is that the professional arts and the hobby arts have been poles apart. There has not been an integration of them. They do not talk and have not talked. There has been a element of distrust. We are working hard to make sure that they start to come together. That also applies to the performing arts. They have operated independently of the visual arts. There needs to be a coming together of all those groups so that we are marketing the arts, not just the regional arts or the performing arts, and we are marketing professionals and giving opportunities to grassroots people within that environment, rather than something out there so that they feel they are excluded from the other stuff. Does that make sense?

The CHAIRMAN: Yes, it does. Similar comments have been made in other parts of WA that we have visited. One of our areas of interest is festivals. Can you give a quick outline of the scope of festivals in the city and their impact?

Mr Blee: We have a significant financial commitment to festivals. We have three major events during the year. We have a Christmas carnival and a turning on the lights ceremony at the start of December, which is a community-based event. We also have the Australia Day event, which I believe has developed a reputation for being the alternative to the Perth Skyshow. It is not just about the fireworks but is about celebrating the Australian culture. We make a lot of effort to make sure that it is not just about a fireworks display. We have a ceremony in the morning at which we present citizenship awards. We have a citizenship ceremony at lunchtime in the gardens. It is very public with some 200 people attending. Then at night we have the big fireworks. We have concerts, carnivals and lots of arts events as part of that. I think it is developing into something quite special for the city. I hesitate to say this, but we will probably have a lot of people travelling from Perth to Bunbury in the future for Australia Day. Given the problems that have occurred in Perth, I am not sure that we want that. We get 30 000 plus people. It was estimated that 40 000 people were in Bicentennial Square and around the foreshore on Australia Day night. That starts midafternoon and goes right through, so significant numbers of people are involved in that. We also have what we are attempting to turn into our flagship cultural festival, which we are calling the City of Three Waters Festival or the Three Waters Festival. That is really focused on our cultural aspects. We try to make it very creative based. We have a really interesting fire and water ceremony, which will be based on the inlet for this year's event on the coming long weekend.

The CHAIRMAN: In March?

Mr Blee: Yes. Our financial commitment to all of those is probably in the order of \$150 000, as well as significant resources. As you know, festival special events are human resource hungry things. That does not include staff time but is the direct financial commitment.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you employ a seasonal coordinator for that event?

Mr Blee: That is correct. We previously tried to run them from within the City Life team, but they are just so time consuming. We have never had a specific person to do that. It has always been the marketing officer, the cultural development officer or someone else. However, all those people have an input. We employ a coordinator, but we have a project team. They all come together and work together to deliver the festivals.

The CHAIRMAN: What is the history of that?

Mr Blee: It has a long history. It goes back to the very early 1990s when it was called the Aqua Spectacular. You may recall that. It was built around dragon boat racing on the inlet. For various reasons it did not take place for a number of years. We have brought it back on stream. We have tried to give it a water-based sporting aspect, but that is not really where it is heading. I think it is heading more towards a cultural event.

The CHAIRMAN: It will be a celebration of the culture of the city, environment and heritage, will it?

Mr Blee: Absolutely; all of those things. We have a very strong indigenous involvement in that festival and the involvement of young people, so it is across all our disciplines, if you like.

Mr A.P. O'GORMAN: Do you do anything to encourage the schools to participate in the festival? The City of Joondalup has its festival in March. It has a program under which it puts artists in residence into schools based on a grants scheme. Those schools build floats, and it culminates in a parade. Do you do anything similar to that?

[11.50 am]

Mr Blee: We certainly encourage the schools to be involved in our Christmas carnival, both in a performance sense and in our parade; the schools are encouraged to be part of that. We provide opportunities for school-based performers to be part of our festival. Therefore, we promote the festival, for example, to drama and music teachers and encourage them to be part of what we are doing, rather than do specific school-based things, although we do support and fund the combined schools' music festival, so even though we are not organisers of that, we actually support that financially and in other ways. That would be the specific school-based aspect, but because we are attempting to bring things together in an integrated sense, my preference is that we encourage different aspects of the community to be part of the events that we do. The three major events get the schools, indigenous people, the youth and the multicultural aspect of our community involved. Until this year we had a multicultural festival, but we did not believe that was successful because it did not do what we were trying to do with the City Life program, which was to bring everything together and celebrate the community in a holistic sense. Rather than have an event for this and an event for that, we would prefer everybody to be in the events that we do.

The CHAIRMAN: With regard to government funding, from what sorts of sources do you attempt to seek funding for partnerships? Does the city through City Life actively seek funding from Healthway and Lotterywest and all of that?

Mr Blee: Absolutely.

The CHAIRMAN: Has that been an effective partnership?

Mr Blee: It definitely has. We probably have not utilised it as much as we should have over the years but we are certainly doing that now. Lotterywest, Healthway and the old office of youth affairs - those sorts of government agencies - now have a financial stake in all of our festivals and events. We are very fortunate to have received funding from the proceeds of crime pool of funds to appoint a youth development officer. The role of that person is to provide opportunities for young people in a range of areas, but specifically the arts, which tends to be overlooked and neglected, I think, when it comes to youth development. There are a lot of kids out there who have artistic flair and have an interest in the arts but do not get opportunities to showcase that. Therefore, we see that as a great opportunity in terms of crime prevention and managing young people at risk. Two weeks ago we had a youth music festival, which started at two or three o'clock in the afternoon and finished at 10 o'clock. Youth bands that normally do not get to perform in public and in front of a large audience were able to do that. That was an initiative of our youth development officer. I cannot recall which government agency it was specifically funded by, but certainly there was additional funding for that.

The CHAIRMAN: So if we are looking at the impact and effectiveness of government funding from a state and federal government perspective on the partnerships that you have established, do you believe that money is well spent?

Mr Blee: I believe so, yes. I suppose one comment I would make is that although we are including arts initiatives as part of our events generally - for which we get small amounts of money - if there were to be arts-based events, say, outside of our major events, there would probably be an issue about the amount of money available to run them. It comes down to small grants means small budgets, which means small events that may not necessarily be effective. I think there is a balance there between providing a large amount of money to provide a big event as against a small amount of money that may not have long-term benefits.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much for your comprehensive contribution. Is there anything that you would like to bring to our attention or a point that you would like to make that you have not had an opportunity to highlight?

Mr Blee: I think we have probably covered most of the issues that I certainly had. The research issue is something we would like to have pursued vigorously, because I suppose it gets back to the recognition of the arts in the community, or cultural development generally. We have difficulty convincing our council, for example, that it needs to significantly increase the amount of money. Even though it is a significant amount now, it probably needs more investment than we are able to give it. I think that is a marketing issue, which you raised earlier. If we had that statistical support, I think we could probably do a better job of convincing council to increase its level of commitment.

Mr A.P. O'GORMAN: Do you have any idea about whether your festivals and your arts in Bunbury actually attract more tourists or visitors into the area, or is that the research that you are saying you need?

Mr Blee: I think that is a separate type of research, but certainly Australia Day does that. We have done research on the day, and there are a lot of visitors to the city. We do not at this stage promote those events in a regional sense or on a statewide basis in what we perceive as our tourism market in the Perth metropolitan area. What we do, though, when people are here is make sure that they know these events are on. There is no question that the Three Waters Festival could grow into an event that would attract tourists. That is what we are building towards. However, until we have a substantial event that I think is worthwhile promoting in our market, we would not do that. It is there, and when people want to access information about it they can, but we are not actively spending a lot of money to say to people, "Come to this because it's fantastic." I think we have a long way to go to make sure that at the end of the day people are not disappointed in their expectations of the event. Certainly we see the Three Waters Festival as being the event that could perform that role. We also have a number of smaller, boutique events during the down months of the year. In the wintertime, when people are travelling less and there are fewer people in hotels, we like to do some boutique-type events that attract people.

Mr A.P. O'GORMAN: That is what struck me about all your festivals - they are all in December, January and March, and there is nothing in the rest of the year.

Mr Blee: Absolutely. There is no question that is an issue we need to address. We are looking at moving the Three Waters Festival further into the year, because it is a problem. All we are doing is catering to people who are coming anyway. It is not drawing people here especially for it. Obviously our tourism operators would rather that be the case. People cannot get accommodation in Bunbury anyway at this time of the year.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much again for your contribution. We appreciate your time in appearing before us. The transcript of this morning's hearing will be available to you for your perusal. We expect to report to the Parliament, as is our requirement, on this inquiry in August this year. If you wish to make a written submission, you are welcome to do that. On behalf of the

committee, thank you very much for your time this morning, and we wish you and your City Life team the very best as you develop and evolve that process.

Mr Blee: Thank you for the opportunity.

Proceedings suspended from 11.58 am to 12.20 pm