

1 August 2005
Heritage Inquiry
Productivity Commission
PO Box 80
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By email to: heritage@pc.gov.au

Dear Commissioners

SUBMISSION BY SUSAN BALDERSTONE PSM LFRAIA

As a former government heritage architect involved in the conservation of heritage buildings in Victoria for the past twenty years I wish to address briefly two of the terms of reference.

My chief concern is with former State government historic buildings. Our visible identity as a democratic nation can be discerned from these historic government buildings, the work of the various State Public Works Departments throughout Australia. They were the public facilities provided by government for the people, funded by the tax-payer and they represent the visible face of government in the State. Their architecture, deriving from British and European colonial models, tells us about ourselves as a people and our history.

I submit that the importance of such buildings in the context of Australia's democratic nationhood justifies Federal government funding support for their conservation to the same extent as provided for Australia's other great national distinguishing features – its Aboriginal heritage and its natural heritage.

I also submit that there is ample environmental, social and economic benefit justification for government funding support, as set out below:

1 The main pressures on the conservation of historic heritage places

Redevelopment of established urban areas is arguably the greatest negative pressure on the conservation of historic heritage places such as shopping strips and residential precincts. This applies to inner urban areas, and desirable rural and coastal centres. Conversely, the abandonment of rural settlements in the face of declining population in those areas and consequent closure of public facilities is also a negative pressure.

In relation to this I submit that in considering the pros and cons of redevelopment it needs to be remembered that apart from the historic, social and architectural values that this built heritage holds for communities, there are major sustainability issues. These

relate to the large amount of embodied energy contained in the historic buildings and the amount of waste generated in new construction. Such factors place an obligation on us as a community to keep using historic buildings in a viable way if we are to contribute to the sustainability of the planet.

There are measurable environmental gains to be achieved through the maintenance and conservation of heritage building stock. These buildings represent a major investment in natural and human resources. Maintenance and conservation drastically reduces or eliminates demolition and new construction waste, and conserves the embodied energy in the existing buildings. It has been found that it takes about 30 years before energy savings will be realised by building new rather than renovating an older commercial or other large building*.

There are also measurable social and economic gains to be made through the conservation heritage buildings as outlined below.

2 The economic, social and environmental benefits and costs of the conservation of historic heritage places in Australia

Market failure exists in relation to the forced redundancy of historic government/public buildings such as schools, courts, mental hospitals, police stations, prisons, post offices, defence buildings etc. These usually become the responsibility of local government or community groups who have few means of financing their conservation. State and Federal government grants are necessary to initiate rehabilitation projects which may then attract funds from private and commercial sources.

In cases where considerable social benefits result from such conservation but economic benefit may be minimal, government grants are the only possible source of funds. Since these are public buildings, funded originally by the community through taxation, governments have an obligation to provide for those that the community wishes to keep. Listing on commonwealth, state or local heritage registers should be taken as evidence that the community does wish to keep these places.

Anecdotal evidence has supported a widely held view that the forced redundancy of government buildings and their abandonment to other (possibly hard to find) uses, which follows falling town/suburb populations is a major factor in the decline of communities. Once the school, court house, post office and town hall are abandoned the town or suburb has lost its core community facilities. The churches may hang on with tiny congregations but without the other services the local residents are forced to travel to other places to obtain services and cease to identify themselves as a community.

The reviews of Victoria's Government Heritage Restoration Program and its successors funded by the Victorian government since 1994 have shown that the conservation of

government/community heritage buildings goes some way towards addressing the problem, particularly if the injection of funds for capital works and catch-up maintenance has enabled the relevant government agency to keep operating their service in the building.

The reviews have also shown that the conservation of heritage places also contributes to social sustainability and community identity. The ongoing use and profile of such places contributes to community cohesion and social capital, through bringing people together for a shared purpose. The funded projects contributed in a major way to social capital in stimulating various community groups to participate and involve other community members. A key example was the conservation of Kow Plains Homestead at Cowangie in the far north-west of Victoria, where local people came from a 40 kilometre radius to help with the work, and new faces appeared at each working bee.

Another key factor that emerged from the reviews of the Victorian funding programs was that government support in the form of grants for the conservation of former government heritage buildings has leveraged funds from other sources to triple the total investment - providing a clear and measurable cost benefit from government intervention. Many of these projects were directed at increasing tourism to rural and regional centres. The economic contribution made by heritage tourism cannot be measured merely in terms of direct revenue income. There are flow-on effects via retail and catering sales, employment and other multiplier effects for local economies. These in turn affect the social sustainability of the relevant communities in terms of viability and community identity.

It is clear that the conservation of heritage buildings is not only an energy efficient option, but also a valuable contributor to social and economic sustainability.

I submit that the Federal government should consider support to the States in the form of funding for the conservation of former government historic buildings as a major imperative.

Yours sincerely

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* The source for this submission is my paper 'Built Heritage: A Major Contributor to Environmental, Social and Economic Sustainability' prepared in March 2004 while Assistant Director Strategic Support at Heritage Victoria.

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