

22 February 2021

The Hon Daniel Andrews MP
Premier of Victoria
1 Treasury Place
MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Premier

As peak bodies representing a significant number of businesses across regional Victoria, we write asking the Government to consider more directly the needs of regional Victoria in its future COVID-19 responses.

Our comments come in response to the recent five-day state-wide shutdown.

Our members come from regional Victoria which represents approximately 25% of the State's population and the regional economy which accounts for approximately 21% of the State's overall economy.

The COVID-19 pandemic will be with us for some time and we recognise the significant health threat it poses. We acknowledge the Victorian Government's efforts and the sacrifices all Victorians have made to beat the 'second wave' of the virus, an outcome rarely achieved in the world.

We also acknowledge the recent five-day state-wide 'Circuit Breaker' was imposed to prevent a third wave and the potential for further catastrophic health and economic impacts.

We now urge the Government to reflect deeply on the implementation of the 'Circuit Breaker' and prepare a comprehensive plan for any further 'shutdowns' that may be necessary in the months ahead of us.

As leaders in regional Victoria representing business, there are a number of key learnings we ask the government to consider:

- **A more nuanced approach when shutting down areas and regions**

A 'one-size-fits-all' approach may have been necessary given the presence of the uncertainty of the UK strain of the virus, but a total shutdown of the economy cannot be the only answer if we are to live with some levels of the virus in the community into the future.

Businesses and livelihoods suffer unnecessarily when a state-wide shutdown is imposed and the impact of this is disproportional when considering metropolitan, regional and rural areas.

We note and recognise the State Government's Roadmaps to Recovery through 2020 included one for Metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria. We believe a similar approach is warranted for 2021 and beyond as required.

- **Greater clarity and consistency must be provided on the restrictions** imposed at each stage.

This most recent shutdown saw different stage four restrictions apply than was previously the case in 2020. This caused confusion and added further stress to business and the community.

There are many examples of the lack of clarity and consistency and we urge the Government to define in detail the various stages of restrictions as part of their planning for any further outbreaks. Such a plan will give business greater confidence and enable them to prepare more fully.

- **Relevant departments must be better equipped to handle the enquiries of business and the community**

Formal channels for communication through various government agencies have not been able to provide answers to the questions business has had, both when the restrictions were announced and when they were eased.

The lack of timely information, incorrect and inaccurate information erodes confidence in Government, enhances uncertainty and adds yet another burden to businesses across the state.

- **Greater clarity for border communities**

In developing further plans for possible shutdowns, the unique nature of border communities must be considered fully.

Businesses in border regions have suffered and their capacity to remain competitive in their markets has been compromised.

We welcome the announcement of the State Government's Circuit Breaker Package providing an additional \$143 million to support those businesses most impacted by the shutdown.

The business communities we represent are very much a part of the entire Victorian community and want to ensure the health and the economic interests of Victoria can be assured as we face the on-going challenges of COVID-19.

We seek a constructive relationship with the Government in relation to the issues that are unique to regional Victoria.

Regional Victoria is a key contributor to the state's economy and its social fabric. We believe our voice can assist government as it leads the State's fight against the virus.

With greater clarity of the range of restriction levels, a more nuanced response to outbreaks and more consistent, accurate and timely communication, we can all continue to improve our management of and our fight against the impacts of this virus.

Your sincerely



Michael Poulton
Chief Executive Officer
Committee for Ballarat



Jodie Gillett
Chief Executive Officer
Commerce Ballarat



Iain Gunn
Chair
Ballarat Regional Tourism

on behalf of the following organisations

Committee for Echuca-Moama
Committee for Geelong
Committee for Greater Shepparton
Committee for Portland

Apollo Bay Chamber of Commerce and Tourism
Be Bendigo
Business Horsham
Business Wodonga
Colac & District Chamber of Commerce
Geelong Chamber of Commerce
Hamilton Regional Business Association
Lakes Entrance Business & Tourism Association
Port Fairy and Region Tourism

CC: The Hon Tim Pallas MP, Treasurer
The Hon Martin Pakula MP, Minister for Industry Support and Recovery
The Hon Jaala Pulford MP, Minister for Small Business

Supporting Organisations

