



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON ECONOMICS, INDUSTRY
AND RECREATION**

(Reference: [Inquiry into Annual and Financial Reports 2023-24](#))

Members:

**MR T WERNER-GIBBINGS (Chair)
MS F CARRICK (Deputy Chair)
MR J HANSON
MS D MORRIS
MR S RATTENBURY
MR T EMERSON**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

THURSDAY, 13 FEBRUARY 2025

**Secretary to the committee:
Ms S Milne (Ph: 620 50435)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

APPEARANCES

Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate 7

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 12.00 pm.

Appearances:

Barr, Mr Andrew, Chief Minister, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism and Trade

Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

Kobus, Mr Jonathan, Executive Branch Manager, Tourism and Investment, VisitCanberra

Triffitt, Mr Ross, Executive Branch Manager, Events ACT

THE CHAIR: I welcome the Minister for Tourism and Trade, Mr Andrew Barr MLA, and officials from the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate.

I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. When you first speak, please confirm that you understand the implications of the statement and that you will comply with it.

As we are not inviting opening statements, we will now proceed to questions. Chief Minister, I have two to start off with, one on tourism and one on trade. Tourism in Canberra has been discussed recently. What are the figures? How many tourists visited Canberra in 2024? How much did they spend?

Mr Barr: We have data for the first three quarters of 2024. This data reflects the year ending in September, so it is the last three months of 2023 and the first nine months of 2024. We will get the full calendar year 2024 data a little bit further into 2025. The numbers were around 5.2 million visitors, comprising 3.1 million domestic overnight visitors, just under 200,000 international visitors, and the balance being day visitors. The total visitor spend was \$3.65 billion.

THE CHAIR: Did you say \$3.65 billion?

Mr Barr: \$3.65 billion, which exceeded our target for the year as part of our tourism 2030 strategy, so we have revised our targets up. We are now targeting \$4 billion in tourism expenditure by 2026 and \$5 billion by 2030.

THE CHAIR: I might come back to that. You mentioned yesterday, in your economic development role, that there are uncertainties around international trade and our trading partners. Where will the government be focusing trade and international activity in 2025, in light of the developments?

Mr Barr: We have an international engagement strategy. That has been in operation for several years now, and it targets a number of important markets for us. There is a useful alignment between the trade markets and tourism markets. Often, when we are in market, either with our in-market representatives, who are often embedded either

with Tourism Australia or Austrade, when we lead missions from the ACT, when the Commissioner for International Engagement does, or Mr Kobus does, as head of VisitCanberra, there is a very strong alignment.

Those markets are perhaps not surprising, in that they constitute our biggest trading partners, countries where we have good aviation connections and where we have a reasonable flow of tourist trade or inbound investment. For this coming period, China, India, the United States, New Zealand and the Pacific, and South-East Asia will be our priority areas.

THE CHAIR: I realise that this may be less data driven, but what are the expectations for 2025? We are a month and a half into it.

Mr Barr: We want to get our tourist numbers from China back to where they were pre COVID. That would be a little over 50,000 Chinese tourists a year. We are not there yet. We want to continue to grow the Indian market and the US market. The US market has grown as a result of the connection through Fiji provided by Fiji Airways, together with improved competition and services through New Zealand and the major Australian ports of Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, particularly to the west coast of the US.

We are also looking at a couple of our emerging markets where we have seen some good return on investment. That has included Singapore and markets around there, including Malaysia. With Qatar Airways resuming services from Canberra later this year, the Middle East and European markets will have a daily flight into Canberra, so we will look to capitalise on that opportunity with that airline.

MS CASTLEY: Chief Minister, from what I understand, the only international destination where Canberra was promoted in the current and last financial year was India. Do I have that correct?

Mr Barr: Sorry, that was India?

MS CASTLEY: Was India the only international destination where Canberra was promoted in the current and last financial years? I am happy to be corrected.

Mr Kobus: I have read and understand the privilege statement. No, that is not correct. India is one of several priority international markets that we focus on. India is a significant one, and one that we are doing a lot of work on. We are working hard to grow inbound visitation. We have seen some positive responses from India in the last couple of years.

Our other priority international markets are the USA, China, Singapore and the UK. Those largely align with where Australia, as a whole, gets the most visitation from, and it provides us with significant opportunities to leverage off the activity of Tourism Australia in those markets as well. We have a full-time person based in Singapore that services Singapore and partly India for us. We do a range of activities in the US, primarily, given our connection with Fiji Airways through to the US; and, to a lesser extent, activity in China and the UK.

MS CASTLEY: Can you give me a breakdown of the spending on each of the markets?

Is that in the report?

Mr Kobus: I will have to take that on notice in terms of a per market breakdown, in terms of the spend. The activity that we undertake there is largely focused on letting Tourism Australia lead the wider Australian campaign and the overall promotion of Australia as a place to visit; then we come underneath that and support through PR activities, content partnerships, working with airlines, trade engagement and educating travel agents, which is a broad spectrum of activities that each has a cost associated with it.

MS CASTLEY: I note that \$231,000 was spent in 2022-23, but only \$143,000 in each of the subsequent years. How do you determine what the spend should be and why has it reduced?

Mr Kobus: It depends on opportunities. Occasionally, it would depend on the opportunities that are afforded to us through Tourism Australia's activities. Where we see a relevant opportunity to partner with them to do an activity in a market like India or the US, that would be what we spend in that market. It is very difficult for us to make an impression in large international markets by going alone, so we rely heavily on the activity of Tourism Australia to do that.

The other thing that would impact that spend would be activities like inbound Asian "famils" that we do, inbound media "famils" that we would do, where we host people on the ground in Canberra and help them to experience the city, and other partnerships that we would do with travel agents, distribution partners, and media and market as well.

MS CARRICK: My question is about community events. While I understand the importance of the big, centralised events, such as Floriade, Enlighten and the Multicultural Festival, and how important they are to the economic development of the community, there is also a need for community events. I note that Tuggeranong does very well, with SouthFest and Lakespeare. There is a balance between the big economic events and the local community-building type events. My question is: how do you balance the big, centralised tourist events and events at the local level which are good for community building?

Mr Barr: When you say how do we balance it, as in allocation of resources?

MS CARRICK: Yes, and staffing.

Mr Barr: Most of the community events are not run by the ACT government. The ones that are would be things that are generally territory wide, like New Year's Eve, Canberra Day and the Canberra Nara Candle Festival. Those sorts of things would be run by staff within Events ACT. The smaller events are largely grant funded by the government on application by event organisers and community organisations.

MS CARRICK: Would it be fair to say that most of the local community events are run by volunteers?

Mr Barr: Mostly, yes. There would be some professional event managers who would

run events in conjunction with a community organisation or on their behalf, and some would run events for profit. It would vary. Certainly, at a community event level of a small scale, generally it would be volunteer run, yes.

MS CARRICK: How does the directorate work with the community to build up a program of events in the districts? It is very hard to just have a one-off. It takes time to build up events and, if the community is not used to going to events, or they do not know about it, it is important to build up that program.

Mr Barr: There are annual grant programs and there is capability for multiyear funding to be provided under those programs. The criteria for the different funding rounds are publicly available, when they are put out. Generally speaking, the assessment process, which is conducted at arm's length, generates a diversity of event outcomes. Mr Triffitt might want to provide some further information.

Mr Triffitt: I have read and understood the privilege statement. The ACT Event Fund runs an annual grant process, a grant round. There is \$450,000 available to fund a range of events. Some of those events are community events. Some of them are what we call the event development category, which focus more on tourism outcomes rather than community events. There is a mix of event organisers that call on that program for the running of their events.

In addition to that, we provide sector development workshops. We work with the local industry in the sector to provide advice around managing events, and resources that are available through ACT events. On our website we have a range of tools and things available to community event organisers to assist them in managing their events.

MS CARRICK: The Warehouse Circus had a big event on Chifley Oval last year, but I understand they were not successful in the grant round this year. Can you say why that was not supported?

Mr Triffitt: Yes. It is a competitive round, and there is a big call on the grants that are available. We funded 32 different activities, and Warehouse Circus went through a process. It is an independent panel that we engage and work with that does the assessments. Through that competitive process, they were unsuccessful.

MS CARRICK: Can you provide where those 31 events, the community sector grants, went to? In what areas was community and economic development supported?

Mr Triffitt: All of the events that are funded are listed on our website. I am happy to take it on notice and provide the geographic detail, if that is helpful.

MR RATTENBURY: Chief Minister, in the administrative arrangements, the major events listed are Floriade and Enlighten. Uncharted Territory has disappeared, compared to what happened in the last Assembly. Can you fill me in on what has happened there?

Mr Barr: Yes, that was a trial event that we are not continuing with.

MR RATTENBURY: Why is it not being continued?

Mr Barr: It did not achieve its objectives, unfortunately, and the cost for the return was just not there. Some of the event partners are now not in a financial position to support it anymore; namely, the universities, so it just was not viable to proceed.

MR RATTENBURY: What were the objectives and what was the measure of why they were not achieved?

Mr Barr: We were looking to establish a wintertime event that would, over time, achieve an outcome not dissimilar to that of Enlighten. It just did not, unfortunately. The theme, content and programming just did not quite draw in the audience that we had hoped for. When our staging partners, our venue hosts, were not able to provide the sort of support that they did in year 1, it was clear that, although it was worth trying, it just did not work.

MR RATTENBURY: My second question is the long cherished question of the improved rail line in Sydney. Are you able to give us any updates on work that you might have been able to progress on better rail access to Sydney?

Mr Barr: Yes, sure. It is principally being led by Infrastructure Canberra, but I can take some further info on notice. But, in short, Transport for New South Wales, who obviously operate the trains, are procuring new ones, and some of those have finally arrived and are starting to be deployed initially on the Sydney-Newcastle route but, in time, on that line.

There is track and signalling work that can shave minutes off journey time and an open discussion about more express services—so some services not stopping at every single stop. Each stop adds a minute or two to the journey time. The expectation is that the combination of new trains, some slightly improved infrastructure and fewer stops could take 15 minutes to 30 minutes off the journey time, which would get it down to about 3½ hours, which would start to make it competitive with coaches and also, depending on where in Sydney you are going, with flights.

We are also keen to see more capacity. I think there are 285,000 passengers who utilise the service. It is very frequently fully booked. So we think there is a case for more—going from three to four services a day and some more seats on new trains with some better tracks and fewer stops. That is the summary. If there is anything more I can add, I—

MR RATTENBURY: No, thank you. That is a terrific update. What I take from that, though, is that we are looking at a situation of incremental improvement, rather than a stepped-change improvement. There have previously been discussions of shaving it down to 2½ hours, requiring more significant track investment.

Mr Barr: That would require about a billion dollars of investment in the track. Then you still encounter the difficulty of, once the train reaches the Sydney suburban network, its speed having to slow down or else it will run up the back of the suburban train. The main area of focus for the New South Wales government is the section of the track that is between Goulburn and Campbelltown, through the Southern Highlands, where, the kindest description would be, it meanders. There are times when you could

get out, hop off the train and run faster. It does take a very circuitous route, or circular route, through some parts of the Southern Highlands. That has been the area that has been identified. But, in the short term, the main thing—and this will not be without a degree of controversy—is not stopping at all stations, at least on perhaps a morning and evening express service and having the all-stop services be in the middle of the day, for example.

MS CASTLEY: Do we know what the total project cost looks like and what the ACT government's contribution will be?

Mr Barr: Our contribution would be close to zero, because there is only nine kilometres of track in the ACT, and that is not the problem; it is the—

MS CASTLEY: For the whole project?

Mr Barr: Yes, it is all New South Wales and federal.

MS CASTLEY: Do we have any idea of the timeframe?

Mr Barr: In terms of a billion dollar expenditure, there is no timeframe for that. But what I have just talked about is happening now.

MS CASTLEY: Okay.

Mr Barr: All of those conversations with Transport for New South Wales have been ongoing. They started a couple of years ago and they are ongoing. The trains that the former New South Wales government ordered had many difficulties—let's put it that way—and were delayed in their arrival.

MS CASTLEY: I would like to ask some questions about Floriade and the Rugby World Cup. In the last sitting week, Chief Minister, you said that missing out on the Rugby World Cup is not a problem, as Canberra will be at peak tourism because of Floriade. You stand by that remark, I assume.

Mr Barr: The question Mr Milligan asked me was what would we be doing for tourism in that time, and I did point out that Floriade is on at that time. It is our biggest tourism event and it does attract several hundred thousand tourists to the city, which would be, even on the most optimistic outcome for four Rugby World Cup games, is something like 10 to 20 times the level of visitors that you would get.

MS CASTLEY: So that is obviously the evidence that you have based your statement on. Given your view that we will not have hotel availability at the time that the matches would be on, why did you bid for the games in the first place?

Mr Barr: Because it largely would have been a local experience. The case for it was not strong for—

MS CASTLEY: To bring people.

Mr Barr: Even the organisers were suggesting that we might get a couple of thousand

international visitors per match and four or five thousand domestic visitors—that is it. So it was never going to be a big tourism event, because we were going to be seeing games between the 20th and 24th ranked teams in the world, rugby titans like Namibia and Georgia—teams that I do not think anyone here could even name a player from, to be frank. It was never going to be a big tourism outcome for us. It was not going to have no tourism, but it was not going to be a big outcome. So what we focused on was a game that we think will generate a tourism outcome, and that is the Brumbies versus the British and Irish Lions, where we think for that one game we will get more tourism than the four World Cup games combined.

MS CASTLEY: Do you know what our shortfall was on—

Mr Barr: No. That is obviously a commercial matter between World Rugby. The games we have secured have been with Rugby Australia. World Rugby was running this tournament, and all the profit would have gone to World Rugby. The way the contract works is that World Rugby makes a guaranteed \$100 million payment to Rugby Australia and everything that they earn on top of that goes to World Rugby. So they were seeking to maximise profit for World Rugby from the bidding process.

The Australian government tipped in—it is not absolutely clear—somewhere between \$120 million and \$150 million. So, basically, their money has been funnelled back to Rugby Australia, and all the money from the states and territories, all the ticket sales and all of the fee waivers and everything would have all gone as profit to World Rugby.

MR EMERSON: Often when we are talking about world cups, rugby or football or otherwise, people say, “Let’s not use the money on that; let’s instead use it for community sport or to develop facilities.” When it comes to attracting major events, is there one allocated bucket of money each year that we are drawing from? Does that “This would be better spent elsewhere” kind of apply for—

Mr Barr: We have a major event fund, a community event fund, and then anything that is beyond the scale of that effectively competes against every other area of public expenditure. The scale of Rugby World Cup would have meant our entire major event fund would have gone on that. Even that would not have covered the cost of four games; so we would have had to have undertaken effectively a special appropriation. It would have been a line item in the budget whenever we needed to make the payments—a transfer of ACT taxpayers’ money to World Rugby.

MR EMERSON: Okay. You mentioned before that the Australian government have tipped in quite a lot of money to get the World Cup here. Has consideration been given to having conversations with them about requirements before doing that to having events in the national capital? I understand this ship has sailed but, in the future, some consideration may be around doing that.

Mr Barr: They tend not to stipulate between states and territories. I do not think constitutionally they are able to favour one over the other in terms of allocation of their money. They might try to find a reason to do that for some sort of socio-economic or other reason. But, no; they are largely asked to, for world tournaments, pay half the cost. If they do not fork out, then the states and territories are not really in a position to cover the full cost of the global tournament. The Olympic Games are an example. I

think the commonwealth is about to be asked for a whole lot more money for a lot of sporting infrastructure in Brisbane. I guess the argument would be that Sydney has hosted it and Melbourne has hosted it and so it is Brisbane's turn.

MR EMERSON: Earlier, we touched on the Uncharted Territory event. When we are looking at major events, hosting them or attracting them, is it purely economic? You said that one did not stack up, so we are not continuing. Is that for economic reasons or we actually have some kind of evaluation framework for broader social benefits?

Mr Barr: Yes, there is, across not just the major events spectrum but also community events, particularly the category that Mr Triffitt mentioned that does not have a major event tourism or economic outcome but does have an economic outcome. That can cover things like the National Multicultural Festival, for example, which has its own appropriation that does generate a tourism benefit. But it is an event that is largely with a local community focus and obviously has a range of important community benefits.

We need to be conscious of diversity in an event type. We need to be conscious of time of year. Essentially, we have 7,861 available hotel rooms at the moment, with about 500 more in the pipeline. Federal parliamentary sitting weeks are often at a very high level of occupancy. In federal budget week, for example, it can be almost impossible to get a room in the Canberra region. So trying to stage a major event against that would not be useful. So we look at our event calendar in the context of traditional periods of parliamentary sittings, where it is quite busy, and then periods where parliament rarely sits and there is a need for event-driven tourism.

The reason we tried Uncharted Territory was that in midwinter parliament is generally always in recess and it is a time that we traditionally had difficulty getting hotel occupancy rates up. To be frank, we have had more success in participatory events in midwinter. Something like the Kanga Cup, where there are thousands of kids and their parents coming to play football, actually fills more rooms than trying to stage an event that is perhaps more niche and adult focused.

The other time of the year that we have difficulty is summer. That is why we have wanted to see more events and activities over the December-January period, in particular. It is why, we—

MR EMERSON: When Summernats are on.

Mr Barr: Indeed. I feel like I have had the Summernats debate 30 times in my career. But there is no doubt that it generates a significant economic return and brings tens of thousands of interstate visitors into Canberra at a time when there are no other events on.

MR EMERSON: To the question about social benefit, if you have a social evaluation framework, or something to that effect, for major events, it would be great to see it.

Mr Barr: Sure; we can provide some information.

MR EMERSON: Maybe you could take that on notice, if that is okay.

Mr Barr: Yes.

MR EMERSON: On the event calendar, are we tracking how many business events and other conferences we are missing out on because of the current state of the Convention Centre? I know it has been at capacity for many years. So we know there is greater demand out there even with the existing venue, but also it has got capacity constraints in terms of what could be hosted there. Are we tracking what we are missing out on?

Mr Barr: I do not mean to be pedantic, but the state of the centre is fine; the size of the centre is the pointed question. It is fully subscribed. So there is no problem attracting events to the centre. The standard and quality of the facilities are excellent, and people have staged magnificent and very successful business events at the Convention Centre. The problem is it is always booked; there is not enough space. That is the rationale for expansion.

But, of course, the Convention Centre is not the only business events venue in the city. Part of what we are endeavouring to do through our investment attraction and our new hotel offerings and land releases is to see more business event space developed. The new Garema Place Hotel, for example, I understand, will have that capability. There are a lot of events that Canberra can very successfully host that have between 200 and 600 delegates that can be comfortably accommodated in venues other than just the Convention Centre. The challenge the Convention Centre has is holding multiple such events or the much larger ones that need a much bigger amount of footprint.

But it is not just about convention centres; it is also about the other business events facilities. There are opportunities for the universities in this context as well, as they tend to be very attractive venues for particular types of business or association events. Often the drawback for a particular conference in Canberra is the ANU or University of Canberra professor who is the headline speaker, in certain contexts.

MR EMERSON: I had look at the Association of Australian Convention Bureau forward calendar which indicated 292 international business events were happening in Australian cities between 2023 and 2029, only two of which are being hosted in Canberra. The total events are forecast to be attended by 325,000 delegates, with a total visitor spend of \$950 million. Canberra expects to receive 50 delegates at each of those events for a total spend of \$120,000. They are tracking that data. I guess the question is whether we are monitoring that. I am not intending to make this a criticism, but it is a way to strengthen the case for more federal funding for a convention centre and so on. Are we tracking that data within government?

Mr Barr: We fund the Canberra Convention Bureau, certainly, across that and certainly in that market. It would be fair to observe that the main part of our market is national, not international, and one of the challenges for us will be direct flights. Once you are asking international delegates to get on a third or a fourth flight in order to get to a conference, it starts to get harder, and international event organisers get a little bit less enamoured with your destination. That is why, of course, we have a focus on more direct international flights. But in how all of these pieces of the puzzle fit together, there is no doubt that a bigger convention centre would increase demand for international events, which would support the business case to airlines for more international flights.

Also, it supports the business case for more hotel rooms, which is the virtuous circle for the precinct that we are talking about, and the land releases that we have recently undertaken are seeing more hotels within walking distance of the convention centre site.

MS CARRICK: When you have smaller events coming forward, do you ever consider locating them or pointing them towards what we have in the districts, which is very big clubs—that is what we have. Do you ever point people to the club sector in the districts to say, “This is an option for you”?

Mr Barr: The Convention Bureau, who undertake this work, paid by the ACT government for the territory, do indeed do that. They look across all of the available venues and endeavour, in partnership with those venues, to pitch those venues. Obviously, they have to be willing and to want the business, but generally they do. You are right, there are a couple of quite large venues, particularly in the Woden town centre, that do host events.

MS CASTLEY: My understanding is that the business case and the proposal began for the Convention Centre a decade ago, and it looks as though, if my information is correct, we are still a decade away. Is that correct?

Mr Barr: No. There have been various iterations of new Convention Centre proposals. The then Canberra Business Council, before they merged with the Chamber of Commerce and became the Business Chamber, put forward a proposal—I think it was referred to as the Australia forum. That is going back, I think, the 10 years at least, if not 15, that you are talking about; that was pitched to the federal government. It was one that, if I could paraphrase, had a very strong international focus. It was around the time that Australia was slated to host one of the, I think, G20 summits, or one of those large international-leader ones. I think it might have been the Howard government at the time. We are talking about going back a while now, when that proposal began, but it might have then been a crossover into the Rudd government as well.

I think the decision was made to go to Brisbane, so they decided not to rush the construction of a convention centre in Canberra for that particular event. One of the reasons was that Canberra did not have 20 presidential suites for all the world leaders, because at the time we had one at the Hyatt. I say this because I need to sort of temper expectations. To be in the game at that level, you have to, effectively, lock down a CBD; you have to have 20 five-star presidential-suite hotels as well. So that did not fly. The feds said, “We are just not going to pay for and do those sorts of events in Canberra.”

MS CASTLEY: Based on what you have just said, we did some work before the election on a proposal and found that there was a big cost-benefit of going ahead sooner rather than later with an expansion to the Convention Centre. Can you confirm what your proposal is and the cost-benefit ratio? Is there a chance, a possibility, that you could bring it forward? You have said that we are fully subscribed now; what is the delay, and can we get it going sooner rather than later?

Mr Barr: In order for it to happen, we need to commence construction and complete a replacement pool. Obviously, we have secured a site from the Prime Minister for that, so the first stage of a commonwealth contribution. We have also been doing the

development work and the detailed design work and scoping with the relevant stakeholders for the identified site, and we have committed funding to that.

We have also committed that we will not close the Civic pool until a new one is operational. As soon as the current site, the proposed site, is available, then, yes, there would be the potential to be able to start construction; but, obviously, that requires a funding partnership with the commonwealth, and we will continue to put forward our case in that regard.

MS CARRICK: When did the Civic pool move from being a district Civic pool to a pool for the whole of Canberra? Because it appears that we have pools in the districts, and the fact that Civic has now become for 500,000 people is at the expense of the Philip pool.

Mr Barr: We certainly made a commitment to an expanded Canberra aquatic centre as part of the election campaign, but I think the issues with the Civic pool, and its age and its condition, have been known for some time.

MS CARRICK: How come it is a good outcome for Civic, but Philip, Woden, gets a different outcome? How can they both be good outcomes when we are looking at an outcome-based planning?

Mr Barr: The facility that we are proposing provides for Canberra, so for the entire city, an aquatic facility in the centre of Canberra, in the middle or on the edge of Commonwealth Park, jointly funded with the Commonwealth government. So it is a city-wide facility, and the community outcome is a new convention centre and a new pool.

MS CARRICK: Yes, but what about the outcome for Woden?

Mr Barr: I cannot build a convention centre in Woden, and I can build one in the centre of the city.

MS CARRICK: No, the pool. We are talking about the pool.

Mr Barr: Again, that is not my portfolio, and it is not the projects that we are talking about today.

THE CHAIR: Chief Minister, I have a question.

Mr Barr: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Yesterday, and also today, you touched on international flights to Canberra and the scale of the Canberra economy as an obstacle to encouraging international flights. What levers does the ACT government have, and what is the process? Are you always accepting opportunities? Does the government go out? Where are the levers?

Mr Barr: They are largely with us chasing. Eventually, at some point in Canberra's future, its population will be sufficient that airlines will make a decision that they will

fly. That will only happen, and it will happen quicker, if we are putting the proposition in front of them.

The levers that we can pull are to align the airports at either end of a direct service. The airline, the national tourism agencies and the regional ones, effectively, put forward a package, a proposition to the airlines. Examples of that are available both in a domestic sense, where we will work with another state and another airport to secure a domestic direct flight, or in the international context in recent times Fiji Airways is an example, Singapore is another.

We continue our engagement with Air New Zealand, and we are also now actively working with Virgin and the Qantas group on some new direct routes that would benefit our tourism economy. Part of that involves needing to line up with the partner airport, the partner state tourism marketing agency, and, often, if its international, Tourism Australia as well. Quite a coordinating effort.

THE CHAIR: I would say! I want to quickly ask about Floriade 2024 and improvements to Floriade in 2025. It was a reasonably successful iteration. What is next?

Mr Barr: Ross?

Mr Triffitt: Thanks for the question. For Floriade 2024 our attendance was the fifth highest in our history. We generated \$48.8 million in economic impact, which is the highest economic impact we have generated; over 220,000 room nights, which was a record as well.

Floriade each year has a different theme. It was “art in bloom” in 2024. We have not announced the 2025 theme as yet, but it will be different. It is very important that Floriade is a different proposition each year to attract visitation and bring people back.

Certainly, in terms of improvements, we are really focused on that now. The horticulture program is set. In terms of the event planning side, there are thoughts about programming elements, the infrastructure that is going in et cetera; but I cannot really give you an answer around what 2025 looks like at this point.

THE CHAIR: This is a very parochial follow-up, so forgive me, but the Floriade at schools program—at my daughter’s primary school—was a suburban hit. Is that going to continue? Are we going to do more or the same?

Mr Barr: Yes. I think it is under the banner of Floriade in the community, and it had its origins during COVID, when we could not stage the events, so we spread the flowers. We had ordered the bulbs, so they needed to be planted. It was such a hit that we have continued it. We have a process where we invite potential community hosts who have a garden bed that they would like to offer up as part of the planting season, which occurs in May, generally. Is it May and June?

Mr Triffitt: Yes, that is correct.

Mr Barr: It is starting to get cold and then—

THE CHAIR: That is an aspect of Floriade that will continue—

Mr Barr: Yes, absolutely.

MR EMERSON: I have a supplementary question on that. I think during COVID we also had businesses host them, and those businesses were promoted by the government. Is there consideration to do that again at any point?

Mr Triffitt: Yes, we do have a program that has, essentially, evolved from that, called Floriade About Town. It is a way that businesses can link to the publicity surrounding Floriade and attract attendees from Floriade to their business. That program is continuing.

MR EMERSON: Does it go the other way around as well, where the ACT government is specifically promoting those businesses?

Mr Triffitt: Yes, we promote those businesses through the Floriade channels and we run activities like Find Floyd's Family, where gnomes are placed in businesses. There are a range of activities to try to create that economic spill-out of the event into local business, and of course the event itself also has a focus on showcasing local businesses within Commonwealth Park as well.

MR EMERSON: On supporting local businesses through these events, Floriade and also Enlighten, do we have a minimum local content policy in terms of the stallholders at these events?

Mr Triffitt: We do not. We provide an advantage to local stallholders in the assessment. Basically, there are a number of key metrics that are looked at in terms of what the presentation and offering of the product is. We are fortunate that we have some great local businesses and, generally, local business is the lion's share of the stallholders. But it is also very important with a national tourism product that we do have the best of the best, so we do not limit it to quotas.

MS CASTLEY: What does it cost for a business to be involved in that?

Mr Triffitt: It is free.

MS CASTLEY: It is free; great.

MS CARRICK: I have a question to confirm my understanding. Events are good for social and economic activity, but there is no plan for them across the suburbs. There are centralised plans for events, but there is no plan for events for the social and economic benefit of those events out in the districts. If volunteers do not come forward, primarily—because Circus Warehouse did not get up—and look after the social and economic development through using events, nobody does.

Mr Triffitt: We provide opportunities through our major events, such as the program Floriade Community, and we have the ACT Event Fund, which is available for community organisations, event organisers, to gain access to funding to deliver events

throughout the whole city. We do not actively go in to stimulate event activity within different environments outside of some of the activity we do around major events.

MS CARRICK: So who is responsible for using events to stimulate the activity in the town centres, for example?

Mr Barr: It will depend on the town centre and its level of development, so at a certain point the Suburban Land Agency—

MS CARRICK: They do not run events.

Mr Barr: Not anymore, but they did for Gungahlin as it was being built, and—

MS CARRICK: And Molonglo.

Mr Barr: they are active in Molonglo, so at that formation of a new area. But, no, their resources tend not to be able to stretch to established areas.

MS CARRICK: So it leaves them dormitory in this respect.

Mr Barr: In the context of there being a government agency that is running events—

MS CARRICK: Or supporting or planning.

Mr Barr: The support is there.

MS CARRICK: But unless the volunteers come forward, it is gone.

Mr Barr: To an extent, a community event is driven by the community. The government cannot force people to hold events or to go to events.

MS CARRICK: It is a really big deal to run an event, as a volunteer.

Mr Barr: Yes, but we do get a large number of applications, and we provide financial and in-kind support for those events to occur.

MS CARRICK: Could you take on notice how many of those events then become annual events? How many are run for five or more years?

Mr Barr: I guess we can—

MS CARRICK: It is very hard for a volunteer to sustain it over years.

Mr Triffitt: Sorry; can I just clarify the question? In terms of events that are being funded through the ACT—

Mr Barr: Yes.

MS CARRICK: Yes, the same events that have run for longer than five years. Otherwise, it is just hit and miss, they come and go, and it is very hard to build—

THE CHAIR: Are you talking five years consecutively?

MS CARRICK: Yes; give or take. We have had COVID.

Mr Barr: Repeat events?

MS CARRICK: Yes.

Mr Barr: We can do that; no worries.

MS CASTLEY: I have some questions regarding the Netflix production out at Ginninderra Falls. It obviously has a potential for putting the ACT on a global stage. I just want to get some understanding of the process. When a production like this wants to set up in Canberra and has tourism benefits, is CMTEEDD notified? Is there a grant subsidy? How does all of that happen?

Mr Barr: If it is a screen production like the one you are referring to, Screen Canberra would be the point of contact. Depending, of course, on the scale of the promoter's ask or the producer's ask, it may then escalate to other agencies. This is in Minister Pettersson's portfolio, not in mine, but I am familiar, having been the minister previously with responsibility here. That essentially would be the process as it relates to a screen proposition. Other examples have included the ABC-British collaboration *Austin*, which was filmed in Canberra, and then there have been other Foxtel or Netflix-type productions filmed here as well.

MS CASTLEY: If there are issues or concerns relating to needing to chat to you guys about something or EPA, like has happened, Screen Canberra is their point of contact and that goes across all government?

Mr Barr: Yes. I think the complicating factor on the example you used is that it is actually in New South Wales. So probably they would have come through the New South Wales equivalent. It would have been with Yass Valley Council, I imagine.

MS CASTLEY: But relating to Lake Ginninderra?

Mr Barr: In that instance, that involved the ACT government. But the bulk of the engagement on that production would have been with New South Wales, because it is being filmed in New South Wales and presumably funded, if there is a government funding contribution, through the New South Wales equivalent of Screen Canberra.

THE CHAIR: What happens when the productions are filmed within the National Capital Authority's area?

Mr Barr: That will look into another layer of approval.

THE CHAIR: Once again, though, Screen Canberra would be the contact point?

Mr Barr: No; they would have to go straight to the NCA.

MS CASTLEY: With this one, there did seem to be a bit of frustration with the production crew trying to get help from the ACT government to obviously get the water flowing down the pipe out of Lake Ginninderra. Was that a concern that Screen Canberra was not sharing information? How did that work? Are we concerned about the bureaucratic process?

Mr Barr: Screen Canberra would not have been involved in this production because it is not in the ACT. The engagement would have been direct with the relevant area of ACT government.

MS CASTLEY: Are we concerned that it was difficult for them to get action out of the relevant area of ACT government? They were threatening to leave Canberra.

Mr Barr: I do not think there should be an assumption from a production house that they have an entitlement outside of the law, but they certainly can ask.

MS CASTLEY: No; I do not think that was their assumption. I think there was a concern that they had put requests in and it was slow, and they had gotten to the point where they were willing to leave and go elsewhere. I just wonder if you have had time to reflect and ask if the bureaucratic process is a bit heavy when it comes to things like this. They could not get any help. I am just wondering what your thoughts are.

Mr Barr: I have not, obviously, been directly involved in any of that. I will give it some consideration.

MS CASTLEY: You were contacted, I believe. They contacted your office directly.

Mr Barr: I am not aware of that. Minister Orr was managing the matter with her relevant regulators for the government.

MS CASTLEY: This is a great opportunity for Canberra.

Mr Barr: Well, it has occurred.

MS CASTLEY: This is great for Canberra. It is putting us on a global stage. I am just wondering what more could have been done to have made it less traumatic.

Mr Barr: I would need to have a deeper understanding of the level of request and whether it was reasonable or not. It appears that the water that was required was provided. As to the question of when approaches were made, I am not privy to all of that detail, and nor would I expect to be.

MS CASTLEY: I just hope we have not lost opportunities in the future because it was difficult to get through that process in the ACT.

Mr Barr: The feedback from the productions that have been filmed in the ACT that have involved engagement with our agencies has been incredibly positive, and in fact Canberra is much easier as a film set than equivalent cities. Certainly, that is the feedback as to why we have secured a number of others. It is much easier to film here, to get approvals here, than in places like Sydney or Melbourne.

MS CASTLEY: I would like to revisit, if I could, the promotion. How do you undertake your evaluation of effectiveness of your spending when you are going to China, UK or Singapore? Do you have plans to change the amount you spend on tourism marketing for those specific areas? How is the evaluation process undertaken?

Mr Barr: Obviously we get data on a quarterly basis through the Tourism Data Warehouse and the surveys that are undertaken that give us a barometer of our outcomes in terms of actual tourists from each of those markets. We also have access to ABS data that is collected at point of entry and exit from the country. We are also able to, through aviation partnerships, have a sense of tickets sold and the level of loading, if you like, on particular flights. So we do know when particular promotions are effective.

It is a lot easier now given that a lot more of the tourism marketing is undertaken in the digital context, rather than through newspaper ads or broadcast media. We will get data on conversion rates from our campaigns. We will get data from Tourism Australia, where we are partnering with them. In international markets, our budget is just not sufficient to go alone, as Mr Kobus indicated. So we will always either need an aviation partner, a hotel partner or Tourism Australia. That said, the division of responsibility for tourism marketing in the Australian Federation is that state and territory governments are responsible for the domestic market principally and Tourism Australia does the international marketing and then there is a partnership in some international markets at the discretion of the state or territory tourism entity.

But, given our available budget and the fact that, as I mentioned to Mr Werner-Gibbins, of our 5.2 million visitors, five million were Australian, we have got to spend the bulk of our money domestically, because that is the market that we can attract here easily and cheaply. Sydney is our biggest market, then regional New South Wales and then Melbourne.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, everyone. On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proofed *Hansard*.

The committee adjourned at 1.00 pm.