

Legislative Council

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MOUNT GAMBIER HOSPITAL HYDROTHERAPY POOL FUND BILL

(Extracted from Hansard)

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON (17:12): This is somewhat different to the legislation that we usually address in this council. Nevertheless, the thrust of this bill is simple enough: it proposes to allow donations that were made for a hydrotherapy pool in Mount Gambier to be returned after the appeal was aborted due to a lack of funds. The bill also requires the health advisory council to consult with the Mount Gambier community and recommend a project to put any remaining moneys towards the funding. However, the final determination will be made by Country Health SA.

It is possible that up to \$170,000 could be given back to identifiable donors, which would leave \$130,000 able to be allocated. Members have touched upon these issues in their speeches in the other place and also in this chamber, and I note the contribution of and amendments proposed by the Hon. John Darley. However, I would like to bring another angle to this debate: is it still possible that there can be a hydrotherapy pool in Mount Gambier?

As members are aware, the appeal, which attracted widespread support more than eight years ago, fell through when the Mount Gambier Hospital announced that it could not afford to install and operate a large hydrotherapy pool. It is my understanding that the government has no current plan for the establishment of such a pool at Mount Gambier.

My office was informed by a spokesperson from the health department that it was not seen as a priority and that the benefits of a pool were outweighed by the exorbitant cost of building and maintaining it and, as such, the community had accepted that the idea had been shelved. I decided that I would look into the matter further just to make sure.

I was interested to read an article in the local paper, *The Border Watch*, dated 9 December 2008 entitled 'Hydrotherapy pool push revived' which asserted that the Mount Gambier community's RSL had reignited a push for a hydrotherapy pool to be built. A phone call to the RSL's executive officer, Jock Chambers, confirmed that more than 2,000 members were supportive of the continued lobbying of the government for a pool and that, following a meeting last November, a submission had been made for the Mount Gambier Hospital's newly established health advisory council to consider.

It seems to me that the government has been trying to act as though demand for the pool had subsided simply because it does not want to spend the money on maintaining it. An RSL member with whom my office spoke disputed the government's claim that a pool would cost too much to maintain and operate, although he said that an issue had been the health department's committing itself to ongoing maintenance costs and also the reluctance on the part of the hospital administration to get behind the project. RSL State Vice-President Peter Coulson said that he was in the process of getting a reliable quote, and that he was totally convinced that Mount Gambier could purchase and maintain a slightly smaller pool than the one at Griffith

Rehabilitation Centre at Hove, which he said cost about \$12,000 to \$15,000 a year to maintain, and that is excluding heating.

The Chairman of the Community Advisory Committee also said that he was a strong advocate for a hydrotherapy pool and that the committee had voted twice in favour of one. He said that, while the government said that the ongoing costs would be ludicrous and had been estimated at around \$150,000 per year, he believed they had not been correctly evaluated. He said that the pool did not need to be massive and that maintenance costs could be offset by others, such as local physiotherapists and orthopaedic surgeons hiring the pool, as he had previously seen work well in Western Australia.

He said that he could name many people who could benefit from it, such as those recuperating from strokes and those with back and leg injuries who were trying to make do with normal pools. Although the lower house has already passed this bill to have the \$300,000 returned to the community, clearly there is still strong demand for this facility in Mount Gambier. Let us keep in mind that \$300,000 was donated by locals for its construction—no small feat for a city of fewer than 24,000 people (according to the 2006 census). Let me just say that I am certainly not in favour of the government holding onto this money which really belongs to the Mount Gambier community. I just think that, as such a large amount of money was donated for the purpose of building a hydrotherapy pool, if it is feasible and the demand for such a facility still exists, should not our priority be making it a reality?

Of course, this would take a 'can do' attitude, which the Leader of the Opposition in the other place often tells us this government just does not have. An RSL member pointed out to me that South Australian towns smaller than Mount Gambier (such as Naracoorte) have hydrotherapy pools, as do many over the border. He said that the health and wellbeing of the older population in particular would greatly benefit from such a facility. Hydrotherapy is most often used to treat musculoskeletal disorders, such as arthritis. Like many regional areas, Mount Gambier has quite an ageing population. Indeed, I am told that the biggest residential building complex is the retirement village, and the renewed push for a pool has been instigated by the RSL.

It would also benefit those recovering from accidents at work, such as those on WorkCover, or sporting injuries, for example. Patients suffering burns, spinal cord injuries and spasticity would also greatly benefit from a hydrotherapy pool. In response to this renewed push, my office met with the RSL's State Vice-President Mr Peter Coulson, Grant King of the Mount Gambier Health Advisory Council and Tony Donohue a local pool manufacturer. Mr Donohue provided a quote on the supply and installation of a 10.5 metre Southern Cross Compass pool. The total cost, including GST, was just under \$65,000. This included things such as a solar pump and sensor, dual pump and filtration, vantage in-floor cleaning, and so on.

Mr Donohue also advised that in South Australia automatic dosing units are mandatory and that the approximate cost of this would be around \$4,500—and this is outside work. The cost of installing a chair with no water connection was \$13,520, with UV sanitisation approximately \$3,000 to \$5,000 depending on the approximate pool working load. All up, Mr Donohue estimated that capital for the pool would not exceed \$100,000. I am told that the government's main issue is with the ongoing costs. My office contacted Country Health SA to request a copy of the operating costs of the Naracoorte hydrotherapy pool, but unfortunately I am yet to receive this

information. I do hope that this has not been stalled so as to let this bill pass unhindered in the meantime.

At this meeting my office was provided with some information on Griffith Rehabilitation Hospital's hydrotherapy pool. It is 13 x 6 metres in size with a depth of between 900 centimetres and 1.5 metres. The pool's capacity is 93,600 litres, which is slightly larger than what has been proposed by Mr Donohue. Annual system operating costs, excluding heating, were around \$15,000. Unfortunately, I was unable to be provided with the costs for electricity or gas, which undoubtedly will comprise a very significant percentage of the running costs.

However, I ask the minister to consider whether this small pool could be achieved within the funds available considering that the significant solar-power system would offset the electrical operating costs. As for location, the Mount Gambier Hospital was seen by those at the meeting as the preferred site but not the only option. Of course, the cost of building works would need to be considered. The RSL estimated that about \$50,000 would be required for this. I believe that there is something for the government and Country Health SA at least to consider here, and I wanted to draw this matter to the attention of this council. As I said, many stakeholders have informed my office that the original costs were vastly overstated, particularly with the smaller size pool.

It is possible that the project could still be feasible without being a drain on government finances. In addition, as a major regional centre, I think that Mount Gambier deserves such a pool. We have heard a lot of rhetoric about regional hubs, world-class facilities, super hospitals, and so on. Under the government's Country Health Care Plan, Mount Gambier was designated as a major hub, and therefore I believe it should have such facilities. After all, they are common, very common, in Adelaide. Why should Mount Gambier residents be treated as second-class citizens? If the government is serious about the health of the state's second largest city (as one local member told me), it needs to put its money where its mouth is. Another said that he was convinced that there is a need and that the government's plan should reinforce that.

I believe the government's refusal to provide a hydrotherapy pool in Mount Gambier is further proof that the country health plan is solely about savings and not services. It is not as though the residents at Mount Gambier are asking to be world leaders. When smaller country hospitals such as Naracoorte offer hydrotherapy, it seems ridiculous that the super hospital in Mount Gambier will not. So, my message to members is that I believe we should listen to the demands of Mount Gambier residents and have a hydrotherapy pool there if it is feasible, and that should be the ultimate goal. However, if I am wrong and the costs are simply too high, I will be happy to humbly apologise and support the intention of the bill.

It is an interesting point that the RSL and the Australian Hotels Association have indicated that they would prefer money to go to local charities and not to another hospital project. Is this indicative of the disillusionment in respect of this process? Mr Acting President, I table documents relating to quotes for this project, so that other members can access that information.

I commend this bill to the council. First and foremost, we should be considering whether this is a possibility and it is just a lack of will that is preventing it. The benefits of hydrotherapy are well-known and appreciated, well documented

and proven and, as a medical treatment, can bring a great deal of benefit and faster healing to many people who suffer injuries. So, I ask members to consider this point of view.