

THE POKIES PLAY YOU

Time for RSL Victoria to back a pokies-free Collingwood RSL

Sunday, June 9, 2019

The Alliance for Gambling Reform today called for RSL Victoria to explain why it is continuing to invest heavily in its pokies network whilst shunning proposals to support pokies-free facilities such as the Collingwood RSL in City of Yarra.

Alliance spokesman Tim Costello said he was bitterly disappointed to [read in *The Sunday Age* today](#) that the RSL Victoria board met on May 29 and decided to abandon the Collingwood RSL after last November pleading with City of Yarra for an opportunity to resurrect the derelict building as a services hub for younger veterans.

“Given the iconic event which is the Collingwood-Essendon ANZAC Day clash, what sort of moral compass would see the RSL Victoria board not even try to resurrect the Collingwood RSL through a non-binding EOI process?” Mr Costello said. “The RSL Victoria board and senior management have once again confirmed they are captured by the pokies industry and only seem to allocate veteran capital to propping up pokie dens rather than nurturing and developing the network of 200 pokie-free sub-branches across Victoria.”

“There is a concentration of younger veterans in the inner city who need a home and it would be iconic to resurrect the Collingwood RSL for their benefit, yet the old guard who control RSL Victoria can’t even put together an EOI after City of Yarra responded positively to a campaign by younger veterans to save this historic building after it sat vacant for almost 20 years.”

“RSL Victoria CEO Mike Annett addressed City of Yarra councillors at their November 13 meeting last year urging them to resurrect the Collingwood RSL, yet now RSL Victoria looks to be punishing these younger veterans for daring to advocate for a pokies-free future.”

The Alliance is calling on Mr Annett to make a personal explanation as to why the RSL Victoria board has not backed these specific comments (starts 1hr 9mins into [this audio file](#)) he made to councillors:

“RSL Victoria would expect the return of this site for the continued use of veterans and for the provision of services to veterans, the purpose for which it was originally built and intended.”

“We have both the means and the plan to make this place once again both a haven for and a help to our veterans across the spectrum of service and I would wholeheartedly suggest to you that we would most earnestly seek your consideration of the return of this building to the veterans community and the RSL for the delivery of those purposes.”

The Alliance is concerned that the Collingwood decision is part of a broader push by the old guard RSL Victoria board to try and defeat moves by younger veterans to get the RSL to divest from the pokies industry and instead focus more on advancing veteran welfare, services and advocacy.

Mr Costello challenged the RSL Victoria board to prove it is not captured by the pokies industry by withdrawing its proposal for a \$9.5 million expansion of the Darebin RSL as part of a push for an additional 15 poker machine, a scheme which is [currently before the Victorian Supreme Court](#).

“How can RSL Victoria waste veteran resources fighting City of Darebin in the Supreme Court trying to [install another 15 pokies](#) at the Darebin RSL when it is not prepared to follow through on its promises to restore the pokies-free Collingwood RSL?” Mr Costello said.

“Why don’t the RSL Victoria directors instead redirect funds from the proposed \$9.5 million expansion of Darebin RSL to resurrecting the Collingwood RSL as a safe pokies-free haven for inner city younger veterans?”

The Alliance applauds [the campaign](#) by the younger veterans (see [their media statement](#)) for full pokies divestment by the Victorian RSL and more investment in pokies-free venues.

“The Alliance admires the [work of younger veterans](#) such as Lucas Moon, Dave Petersen and Dan Cairnes and calls on the incumbent Victorian RSL board to treat them with respect. They should embrace their reform agenda and come up with a new business model which does not rely on predatory poker machines that continue to harm veterans,” Mr Costello said.

Recent [publicity in The Age](#) and on [ABC TV’s 7.30 program](#) about the younger veteran campaign had led to disturbing new revelations, including that a number of RSL sub-branches owned shares in gambling giant Tabcorp, sparking claims of a [conflict of interest](#).

“It is clear that the RSL Victoria continues to be overly influenced by the gambling industry, including through the \$500,000 annual sponsorship from Tabcorp [referenced on 7.30](#) and the revelations about the Tabcorp shareholdings,” Mr Costello said.

“After several [recent failed attempts](#) to expand its pokies empire it is time for a new board to take charge at ANZAC House and end the pokies push so that younger veterans can proudly associate with an ethical organisation doing no harm in the community.”

“At the very least the Victorian RSL board should commission a full independent audit of the pokies division which has performed poorly in recent years, leading to a number of RSL pokies venues going broke and having their buildings sold off (see [examples in May 2019 Alliance newsletter](#)).”

This review should include an assessment of whether the Victorian RSL does indeed only make \$8 million in profit on the \$260 million in revenue generated at its 52 gaming clubs and whether the RSL has the capacity to pay the estimated \$68 million owed to the State Government in August 2022 for the new 20 year pokies licences.”

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