

To: Premier Daniel Andrews

CC: Gambling the Hon Minister Melissa Horne, Treasurer Tim Pallas, Minister for Health the Hon Jenny Mikakos, Minister for Mental Health the Hon Martin Foley, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence the Hon Gabrielle Williams, Minister for Small Business the Hon Jaala Pulford

2 September 2020

Dear Premier Andrews,

We write this open letter to you as Victorian councils deeply concerned about gambling harm in our respective communities, and the urgent need for reforms to reduce these harms.

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis of recent months you have consistently listened to the advice of public health experts in relation to protecting the health of Victorians and our economy. We applaud you for being so considered in this approach. We ask that you apply the same consideration in enacting change to reduce gambling harm when poker machines are switched back on in Victoria.

Currently, Victorian poker machine venues are legally allowed to open up to 20 hours per day, with many operating for these maximum hours. These opening hours are incredibly long, even longer than in the notoriously pokies-intensive New South Wales, where venues may open for up to 18 hours.

COVID-19 has presented us with tremendous opportunities to rethink the way we do things in Victoria, and in doing so improve our way of life post this pandemic. It makes sense to look at the way poker machines operate, and especially the hours they run to help the hundreds of thousands of Victorians who experience gambling harm, either directly or indirectly.¹

Harm is occurring in poker machine venues at all times of day, but especially past midnight². We urge you to modify licensing conditions to have them close at this time and reopen at 10am. This change will undoubtedly result in reduced gambling harm -- saving and improving lives, and helping keep families together.

The hours after midnight are when extreme damage is done in gaming venues. At 2am there is normally no food service, and any staff rostered on are at the absolute minimum levels required to keep the poker machines running legally. In these early hours of the morning vulnerable people, often people experiencing mental ill-health or exposed to family violence and other issues of priority to your government and to our councils, are losing money on machines designed to entrance and addict them.

Reduced poker machine venue operating hours have been repeatedly recommended for more than a decade by public health experts, gambling counsellors and the Productivity Commission³. This will not only reduce gambling harm, but also boost the economy through increased consumer spending and reduced public health and other costs.

¹ Gambling harm in Victoria <https://responsiblegambling.vic.gov.au/resources/gambling-victoria/gambling-harm-victoria/>

² Table 14.5 <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/gambling-2010/report/gambling-report-volume1.pdf>

³ Gambling (2010) Inquiry Report, Productivity Commission <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/gambling-2010/report>

In 2014-15, the cost of gambling in Victoria totalled \$7 billion when the co-occurring conditions of mental ill-health, homelessness and domestic violence were considered.⁴ We cannot afford to ignore these costs from economic, health and social standpoints.

We must do all that we can to support local communities as we recover from the consequences of COVID-19. That includes protecting our communities from the increased likelihood of gambling during and post crises,⁵ and giving local businesses the best hope of survival during this recession and beyond.

Poker machines are a drain on local economies, and we cannot afford these losses any more. We need to support our local gambling-free hospitality businesses, where \$1 million in takings from food and meals equates to 20 jobs, whereas the same turnover in gambling income equals just 3 jobs.⁶ This is unsustainable for our communities.

Millions of dollars have been saved around every one of our council areas since poker machines were switched off. That money will have been used to pay rent, mortgages and other bills, but will also have circulated around our communities, benefiting local cafes, bookshops and other small businesses.

We urge you to enact reform to have poker machine venues closed at midnight around Victoria before poker machines are switched back on, for the health and economic benefit of all our communities. Please make a reduction in gambling harm in Victoria a true silver lining to come out of COVID-19.

Yours sincerely,



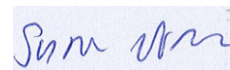
Mayor Sarah Carter



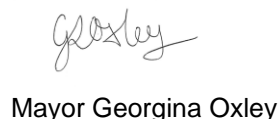
Mayor Alison Champion



Mayor Stuart James



Deputy Mayor Susanne Newton



Mayor Georgina Oxley



Mayor Georgina Papafotiou



Mayor Nicole Seymour



Lydia Wilson
Chair of Administrators



⁴ Social cost of gambling <https://responsiblegambling.vic.gov.au/resources/publications/the-social-cost-of-gambling-to-victoria-121/>

⁵ Covid-19: we must take urgent action to avoid an increase in problem gambling and gambling related harms, British Medical Journal, <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/04/06/covid-19-we-must-take-urgent-action-to-avoid-an-increase-in-problem-gambling-and-gambling-related-harms/>

⁶ The SA Centre for Economic Studies <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/saces/system/files/media/documents/2019-06/the-south-australian-gambling-industry.pdf>

Mayor Josh Gilligan



Mayor Jim Memeti



Mayor David Lowe

