

Staff concern at RSL sale

By Danielle Kutchel

The sale of the Cranbourne RSL is all but confirmed.

While the names of the new owners have not yet been made public, president of the Dandenong/Cranbourne RSL, John Wells, said contracts of sale were expected to be signed within weeks.

"The place will continue to run as an RSL for a little while after that, we think about five or six months, then it will go on pretty much as is for another 12 months with the new owners but with the RSL name off it," he explained.

Members will need to find a new home for the RSL, but Mr Wells said he hoped the "pause" wouldn't take long.

"We've committed to a new location. We're putting \$2.5 million in as a base amount to start looking for land or a building we can modify.

"It will be a smaller operation. It may well be something that runs for meals on a Thursday, Friday and Saturday or something like that.

"It will be something for darts people and indoor bowls and will have a bar – it will do most of what the current one does but on a smaller scale, and it won't have poker machines."

Mr Wells said Cranbourne members would be entitled and welcome to attend Dandenong RSL instead, but added that management would be looking to establish a new Cranbourne club house as soon as possible.

He said the management team continued to talk to staff at Cranbourne RSL to explain the situation, but had encountered "resentment".

Donna Lester, manager of the Cranbourne venue, said staff and members remained deeply disappointed with the way the sale has been conducted.

"We're expecting to be thrown out on our butts in a couple of months' time," she said.



Cranbourne RSL members and staff protest its sale. 2389980

Mr Wells said he understood staff's anxiety about losing their jobs, but said that once the contracts are signed, staff retention is expected to be included in that.

"One of the things is the buyer is anxious to keep all staff on," he said.

Ms Lester said staff had been told that the RSL had been sold to new owners, but no date for the transfer of business had been provided and no notice had been given of any planned redundancies.

"There's been no confirmation that the new owners will honour the staff's current employment contracts," she said.

Staff have sent questions to RSL management and to the new owners but have received

no further information.

Mr Wells said the Cranbourne business has been running unsustainably, meaning it had to be sold.

"It's broke now," he said of Cranbourne RSL.

"If it was a separate business, it would've been trading insolvent for five or six years.

"Dandenong members have subsidised Cranbourne by about \$11 million over 11 years. It has never turned a profit in the 11 years we have had it.

"It's getting to the point where it was threatening Dandenong's survival as well. You've got to be realistic."

Ms Lester said staff and members felt that their battle to save the RSL had been to no avail.

"We didn't change the outcome one iota," she said.

"[Dandenong] hasn't viewed us as a sub branch...they've seen us as an asset they need to get rid of with no consideration for members or staff."

But Mr Wells insisted that the people of Cranbourne were viewed "as part of our operation".

"We understand their issues and are working desperately to look after them as well as we can," he said.

"We don't want to dump these people, we want to look after them. It's not the RSL way to get rid of people doing the right thing by you. We've got a soft heart."