

RSL sells venue after Covid losses

By Cam Lucadou-Wells and Danielle Kutchel

Dandenong-Cranbourne RSL has outraged members by selling off its Cranbourne venue after a staggering \$1.3 million financial hit during Covid-19.

The sub-branch will be largely unbowed on Anzac Day however, bringing back the traditional services - if not the street march.

Mr Wells said the Cranbourne venue - an entertainment complex with bistro, bar and gaming - to an had struggled financially for years.

After losing \$11 million in a decade, the venue's sale to an undisclosed buyer had been "brought to a head by Covid".

The hand-over was expected to occur mid-2021. "Nearly all" staff will be retained by the new owner, Mr Wells said.

The sub-branch would then move out, with plans to find a new and smaller Cranbourne home "more focused on direct veteran needs".

It would retain its Young Veterans warehouse in Sladen Street, Anzac Day football matches and plans for a "memorial park of national significance".

"We're selling a building but the sub-branch will still operate," Mr Wells said.

The sell-off was losing him friends among the RSL ranks, he said. It was opposed by a "profoundly unhappy" 90 per cent of Cranbourne members but a "necessary" step.

"We can't afford to lose money that we need to do what we can for veterans."

"Cranbourne was losing more than Dandenong is making."

Donna Lester, manager of the Cranbourne RSL, said members and staff were "none the

wiser" about the future of the venue after an annual general meeting on 28 February.

"We have no outcome, we still don't know what's happening with Cranbourne RSL - we don't know if it's been sold, if that's on the agenda, or where our jobs lie," she said.

Ms Lester claimed Mr Wells "shut down" questions about the sale at the AGM, instead offering to discuss it privately with Cranbourne staff and members.

According to Ms Lester, a member tried to pass a motion at the meeting to have it postponed for four weeks so all avenues could be exhausted with regards to Cranbourne RSL's future - however, Mr Wells dismissed it.

She described the AGM as ultimately a "waste of time" for Cranbourne staff and members.

"I was hopeful that we may have an answer today one way or the other, maybe get some clarity or transparency as to what was going on for us to prepare ourselves to move on," Ms Lester said.

"We've been in this state of limbo since 31 January with no support from Dandenong as to how we as a group of staff feel.

"There's just a big question mark at the moment."

In the 2020 calendar year, the sub-branch suffered a \$1.372 million deficit but believes it has "weathered the storm".

In its financial report, the loss was attributed to "Government lockdowns" and not trading for most of the year.

Its revenue plummeted from \$15 million to \$4.5 million during the year.

Pokies revenue took the biggest hit, down from \$9.6 million to \$3 million - as well as bar

sales, food sales, keno, TAB, fundraising and donations.

At the same time, Dandenong-Cranbourne RSL trimmed expenses by \$4.6 million.

Spending such as on employee benefits, advertising, rent, welfare and charitable donations reduced from \$8.7 million to \$4.1 million.

"We were still able to provide welfare," president John Wells said - though its generosity was more restrained.

"We'll wear the cost like most people. A lot of the RSLs are in the same boat.

"If restrictions don't get any worse, we should meet our welfare commitments this year."

Mr Wells said business had been picking up quickly in the months between the second Covid wave and the recent circuit-breaker lockdown.

"We've weathered the storm, a very painful storm.

"We had people who died who we didn't give the usual pomp and circumstance."

Meanwhile, Anzac dawn services as well as the day services would be held at the Dandenong and Cranbourne clubs this April.

Unlike past years, there will "almost certainly" be no Anzac march to the Pillars of Freedom in Dandenong, Mr Wells said.

Mr Wells said there won't be a repeat of 2020's cancellation of public Anzac Day services due to the Covid lockdown.

"We can't just do nothing on Anzac Day two years in a row," Mr Wells said.

"It's too culturally important.

"Our members are unanimous that we have to do something."