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ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF VICTORIA INC.

239 A'Beckett Street, Melbourne 3000

Re:Productivity Commission: Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places

The Royal Historical Society of Victoria welcomes the Productivity Commission inquiry into Australia's historic built heritage.

Established in 1909, The Royal Historical Society of Victoria is the peak body for historical societies in Victoria. Our membership is nearly 300 societies throughout the state and over 1,000 individual members.

Many historical societies lease from the Department of Sustainability and the Environment obsolete court houses, schools and other historic buildings. In this way the societies keep the buildings occupied, open to the public, maintained and included within wider community activities.

Historical societies with their buildings provide the centrepiece for community activity. Through public programs, research and collections historical societies create engagement with a community's character, stories and past. Their programmes make these buildings accessible both physically, emotionally and intellectually. They put life into these buildings.

Historical societies play an important part within communities creating opportunities for volunteering, social networks, answering inquiries and fuelling an interest and love for heritage.

Most historical societies in Victoria are buoyant, with growing memberships, busy public programmes, and active committees expert at local government lobbying, seeking funding and playing a "big picture" role in the history movement.

However the issues raised in this submission would be common to all historical societies to a greater or lesser extent.

Occupancy arrangements of historic buildings can vary. Some societies own their

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buildings whilst others lease them. Whilst some landlords are attentive, others take no responsibility for the maintenance of their buildings. Costs of maintenance can eat up all the societies income, consume an enormous amount of energy for fundraising, or simply be unaffordable.

Obviously historical societies would be concerned with the historical integrity of the building, but either lack of money or inadequate education as to the conservation requirements of the building can put the built fabric at risk.

Many societies are responsible for important historic collections. To ensure stable environmental conditions for these collections many societies have come up with innovative solutions; some have built annexes to their historic buildings or others keep their collections off site to achieve stable conditions.

Length of leases, generally five years provides little security for historical societies. Once buildings have been occupied and improved there are examples of historical societies being evicted as more commercial opportunities become apparent for the building.

Historical societies interpret historic buildings, bringing history to life. Societies reenact court trials, recreate school days, open up buildings to the community and tourists. They help to bring communities to life and create economic opportunity through tourism. Generally this is achieved through enormous contributions of volunteer labour and volunteer's money. In the heritage industry volunteers are well organised and the interpretation of heritage is fulfilling, however the problem of obtaining insurance for volunteers over 80 years of age creates a problem. Similarly the costs of insuring the building and its contents are prohibitive for many societies.

As with maintenance historical societies are faced with making historical buildings health and safety compliant. Many historical societies cannot afford the installation of fire doors, or heritage restrictions prevent adapting buildings to include fire doors, hand rails, or other adaptations to make buildings safe for volunteers and the public.

Historical societies are important guardians of heritage. They create context for historic heritage places, they manage collections, they alert communities to heritage listings and preservation. Historical societies need more support either at local, state or federal level.

Above all, historic buildings are signposts to a past that is recoverable both because of them, and the context that can be given to them. Historical societies are a "good fit" for historical buildings_ They are good tenants, maintaining and interpreting these buildings to the best of their resources and ability. Historic buildings have an imponderable emotional impact on their viewers making their ongoing interpretation and support paramount.

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