Conserving a Rail Icon: the Australian Railway Monument at Werris Creek

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Abstract

This paper reviews the challenges facing the conservation of the heritage-listed railway station at Werris Creek and describes the development of the concept design for the Australian Railway Monument (ARM). The ARM was envisaged as a tribute to the railway industry and its employees for their contribution to Australia’s development that would enable the adaptive reuse of the majestic railway station at Werris Creek, a classic railway town in north-central New South Wales. The core challenge was to develop a feature of sufficient interest, quality and scale to serve as a major regional attraction that would attract visitors in large numbers and generate sufficient revenue to ensure its ongoing operation as a viable enterprise. The design process mobilised the Werris Creek community to come forward with their experiences, to tell the story of Australian railway workers; and, it drew on international trends in interpreting railway heritage as well as existing models of Australian success, such as the Stockman’s Hall of Fame, for guidance, rather than a typical railway museum. As yet, the vision is only partly achieved. The key factors that have hindered its fulfilment are reviewed and the lessons that emerge for the railway heritage movement in Australia generally are identified.

Background

Under the New South Wales Heritage Act, public organisations that own items of state significance have responsibility for their conservation and maintenance. In 2000, the State Rail Authority (now RailCorp) had responsibility for a large portfolio of heritage items, including the Werris Creek railway station, the third largest in the state. State Rail had commissioned a conservation management plan of the station and associated infrastructure in 1999, which concluded that the buildings were of state significance. A follow-up study was commissioned to recommend a strategic development plan for the future use of the buildings. Given their location in an isolated ‘railway town’ that was by then in serious economic decline, there was no commercial interest in the use of the buildings and some form of cultural tourism was seen as the only viable, long-term option for their use.

Dr Stuart Sharp, State Rail’s heritage officer, reviewed the traditions of the classic railway town and developed a proposal to establish the Australian Railway Monument at Werris Creek as a cultural heritage feature that would reinforce the community’s links with the railway and act as an economic stimulus for the town. It would provide a tribute to the railway industry and its employees for their contribution to Australia’s development. Dr Sharp was successful in ‘selling’ the proposal and Carl Scully, the then NSW Minister for Transport, announced in September 2001 that the State Government would fund the first stage of the project with a A$1.3 million package. This covered the external restoration of the railway station buildings and the Railway Institute in Anzac Parade, Werris Creek, together with the historical research to identify workers killed in railway service and the design of the monument and interpretative features. In making his announcement, the Minister appointed the then Member of Parliament for Tamworth, the Hon. Tony Windsor, as a chairman of a Steering Committee to provide the management overview of the Australian Railway Monument initiative. The inaugural meeting of the Steering Committee was held at Werris Creek on 30 October 2001 when it defined its strategy for the development of the ARM project.

While contracting arrangements for the building restoration work were handled directly by State Rail, it advertised a tender for a contractor to liaise with the local community, develop a concept plan for the monument and its interpretative features, and to oversee other contractors required to establish the first phase of the project (State Rail Authority 2002). The writer’s company, MWA International Pty Limited, was the successful contractor and, at his suggestion, the role was defined as that of ‘Project Facilitator’. The team comprised the writer as team leader, Desmond Kennard of ‘Museums in the Making’ and Kirsten McKillop.

The task

The contractor was appointed for two years with responsibility for guiding the ARM project toward achieving its objectives. These objectives were to conserve and maintain the Werris Creek railway station over the longer term; and through adaptive reuse of the building, establish a tourist attraction that would bring sufficient visitors to the town to generate additional income to revitalise the local economy; and, also to provide the necessary base to conserve and maintain the station over the longer term.

The tasks of the Project Facilitator were to assess the community capacity and commitment to manage the project over the longer term and to manage the tendering process for three key contractors — a landscape designer to prepare concept plans for the external monument area, someone from an unspecified field to design an outstanding monument and honour roll, and historical researchers to identify and document the names of those to be included on the honour roll — and to oversee and coordinate their work.

The plan for the external feature included a selection process that achieved an outstanding design. It was necessary to liaise with key bodies in the region, government and the private sector to gain their support for the project and, with inputs from regional bodies, develop a tourism strategy for the project. Also, from extensive consultation with the local community, the concept design was developed for interpretative features that would ‘tell the story’ and be sufficiently attractive to draw enough visitors to Werris Creek to achieve long-term viability. A suitable legal entity was recommended and established for the ongoing management of the project and its heritage assets, and
a financial and business plan was developed for the ARM entity to serve as a basis for its ongoing operation and as a guide for potential donors. The skill needs of volunteers were identified in order to deliver appropriate training. It was emphasised that the project must be assured of adequate promotion, including the marketing of the project to potential donors.

The MWA team had a strong background in Australian railway history, an understanding of rural communities, emerging trends in interpreting history for the general public and project must be assured of adequate promotion, including the extensive international experience in the evaluation and design of sound development projects. Our first task was to document a strategic approach. Lessons highlighted were that the many railway museums in Australia had been developed by small groups of men to serve their particular interests and fail to capture the interests of the general public; that successful attractions commence from a thorough analysis of the potential market — they are demand-driven rather than supply-orientated; and that an attractive feature must ‘tell the story well’ to a wide range of market segments. The rural location of the ARM presented a number of challenges, but there were also opportunities to establish a product that relates to the particular interests of the targeted market. These include the unique themes that a non-metropolitan location can build on. And although volunteer-only groups can achieve much in a short period through the enthusiasm of members, momentum is difficult to maintain over an extended period. Therefore, a sustainable venture needs to be on an adequate scale to support several core staff members.

In order to meet these requirements, we saw the first priority to be the building of close links with all segments of the local community. We leased a house in Werris Creek for the first twelve months and Kirsten McKillop spent most of her time there getting to know not only the key people promoting the project, but also those who felt they were ‘outside’ this circle. Having a young woman in this role who could relate equally to the youth of the town and the ‘big boys at the Railway Hotel’ was a great benefit. The writer also spent extended periods at Werris Creek throughout the concept design process.

Challenges and opportunities

As a railway town, Werris Creek is a special place. Its people have great pride in their railway traditions but, socially and economically, the community has been in decline over recent decades as technological change and the decline of regional railways drastically reduced employment opportunities. In its heyday, the railways had over 700 employees at Werris Creek and the population of the town peaked at 3000, but by 2001 there were just 90 railway-related jobs and the population had declined to 1400. Banks and a large proportion of businesses had closed and with them the business leaders and skilled workers had moved on. Many of those who remained were retirees or recipients of social security benefits.

As a one-industry town, Werris Creek lacked a tourism infrastructure and experience in the hospitality industry. Its location off the New England Highway meant that few people outside the local area had ever heard of the town or knew where it was. For the establishment of a cultural tourism venture, Werris Creek was starting with a distinct disadvantage. Against this challenge, the enthusiasm and coherence of the local community was a key factor driving the project. The dominance of the railway had built a strong culture in the town that persists today. And while the lack of a broad leadership base meant that there was a strong dependence on others to ‘make the project happen’ in the initial stages, local capacity to take on an expanding role quickly developed.

A major asset is the magnificent heritage railway station, but that too presented challenges for a cultural heritage attraction. The platforms and parts of the building are still in use as a public railway station with two daily passenger trains plus numerous freight trains passing through, so there are challenges in defining museum and public space, together with associated security issues. In addition, years of neglect meant that restoring the building to prime condition would be an expensive business, particularly to fit out the internal spaces and bring them up to today’s requirements for public access. For example, the utilisation of first-floor spaces would require a lift for disabled access and the movement of display materials, which could be a major investment in itself. The station buildings also offered opportunities. Restored to their former glory, they are a major feature in themselves and there is ample space for a range of challenging displays, but, thankfully, insufficient space to incorporate full-scale locomotives or rolling stock!

While Werris Creek may be ‘off the highway’, it is situated in close proximity (45 km) to a major regional centre,Tamworth, which has established itself as the ‘country music capital’ of Australia. Moreover, the large tourist infrastructure built there to cope with the huge influx of visitors during the Country Music Festival each January is under-utilised for much of the year. Tamworth tourism needed additional attractions that would help generate a more even flow of visitors throughout the year.

Another opportunity soon became evident. The location of the Australian Railway Monument is in the ‘heartland’ of the more densely populated eastern states and sufficiently distant from any major city to stand outside the metropolitan and state rivalry that so often hinders rational decision-making. It is in an ideal position to tap into the growing interest in social history by telling the stories of Australian railway men and women and to do so in a way that takes advantage of its location. Moreover, it seems better to create a true Australian Railway Monument that captures the names of those killed in service to the railway from every state by locating it in a place like Werris Creek with its strong railway traditions and heritage.

Tackling the tasks

An early task was to define the scope of services and evaluation criteria for the above tenders. The landscape design was tendered first in order to provide a technical specialist to assist with the monument design process. The successful contractor, Jane Irwin, had grown up in nearby Quirindi and her technical expertise and affinity with the local area were to prove invaluable. For the monument, the Steering Committee sought a design process with a high degree of public participation. It was recognised that the designer might come from a range of disciplines, so expressions of interest were sought from a wide range of fields. State Rail Contracts advertised for expressions of interest through the press and on its web site, and extensive publicity was given to the process in the local media. Disappointingly, only nine expressions of interest were received. Four firms were short-listed to submit tenders for the design, and tender documents were dispatched to them on 2 January 2003 (State Rail Authority 2003). A site briefing was conducted on 8 January with an explanation of the tender documents, an illustrated presentation of the overall project concept and time
schedules, supported by a presentation of the landscape parameters by Jane Irwin and a site tour. The firms were asked to produce artistic impressions and models of their design proposal for public exhibition at Werris Creek from 3 to 9 March 2003, together with detailed work schedules and costing against an indicative budget.

The process was backed by extensive liaison with the Werris Creek community, including regular public meetings, presentations to various community groups, the publication of a regular ARM Newsletter delivered to all residences and businesses in the town, and media coverage of the project. The public exhibition of monument designs included an evaluation form to vote on the preferred concept and to provide comments on each entry. The outcome of both the public feedback and the evaluation panel was that no one entry stood out as fully meeting the criteria for the monument, while the most popular design with the public was outside the budget constraints.

Two firms were asked to revise their submission in response to the public feedback and comments by the evaluation panel, with Jane Irwin providing technical advice to both groups. In this process, sculptor Dominique Sutton revised her concept significantly, building on positive feed-back for an amphitheatre in her earlier design and capturing Werris Creek’s special place as a railway junction in symbolic tracks aligned to rail and landscape features that linked six sculptures of railway workers. It stood out as the outstanding concept and contract negotiations commenced with Dominique and her support firm, Winton Consulting.

Meanwhile, a State Rail contracts evaluation panel had selected a team headed by historian Rosemary Broomham to undertake the task of identifying the names of railway employees and contractors killed in service in New South Wales, and to prepare a user-friendly access database of the details of each accident. The MWA team briefed Rosemary in January 2003 and assisted her and another team member in fieldwork at Werris Creek early in March. The team submitted its final report in late 2003, including a database containing 2100 names of railway employees and contractors killed in service in NSW and a second database of forty-two major accidents.

Defining the strategic framework for the development of the overall project was an early priority. The MWA International approach was based on a clear hierarchy of objectives as set out in Figure 1. This strategic framework recognised that the establishment of a significant tourist attraction at Werris Creek interpreting the lives of railway workers was the key to a sustainable project. That in turn required an adequate analysis of the potential market. There was extensive liaising with local tourism bodies and a tourism strategy was prepared in January 2003, which provided a base for the overall project’s design process. This strategy seeks to extend the stay of visitors to the region and to attract additional visitors with specific interests in the core features of the ARM. These visitors would come from all over Australia through links to the individuals commemorated by the Monument or an interest in the social aspects of railway history.

The local community initiated a very successful Werris Creek 125th Anniversary celebration event in October 2002 and a similar Werris Creek Railway Festival was held on 3-4 October 2003. A local group had also established a small railway museum and this brought a small stream of visitors and school groups to Werris Creek. Steps for the establishment of a legal body to facilitate community involvement in the design and operation of the project were documented in February 2003 and the process was initiated at a public meeting on 3 April. The body, ARM Management Inc., was formally incorporated on 30 June 2003. Its key purpose was to provide the day-to-day management of the ARM operations at Werris Creek.

Training activities for local volunteers were initiated from May 2003. These covered the role of the volunteer, occupational health and safety, historical research and oral history interview techniques, tour guiding, customer service, display design, museum collection policy, managing the museum shop and administrative processes. Through its efforts in documenting the oral history of railway workers and details of many deaths of railway men and women in accidents, the local community made an invaluable contribution to both the database for the monument and the stories that would bring the social history of railway workers alive.

With the formal establishment of ARM Management Inc., this organisation took over many of the functions initiated by the MWA team, commencing with the newsletter — which became the North West Mail — and promotional activities. Steps were made to establish a museum shop. A local band produced a CD of its song ‘Fire in Their Veins’ for sale by ARM, the book Train Up! (Messner 2003) on the history of the Werris Creek railway refreshment rooms (RRR) was published by ARM, while other publications and railway videos were obtained for retailing.

Another form of community involvement was through focal groups, which worked with the external monument design team in August 2003 providing input into the design process. The detailed design was approved by the Steering Committee on 24 February 2004. State Rail advised that A$1.3 million had been allocated for the detailed design and construction of the monument (ARM Steering Committee 2004a). From June 2003, developing the concept design for the ‘attraction’, which became the ‘Rail Journeys Museum’, was the dominant task of the MWA team. Key ideas came from local people during the course of discussions and, in the case of the local youth, from a training workshop. The MWA team had extensive experience of current Australian museum

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**Figure 1: Project Design Concept and Strategic Framework.**
practice and the writer had the opportunity to visit leading European railway heritage attractions during the course of the project and lessons from this also contributed to the outcome. A draft Concept Design paper outlining six key themes and options for individual exhibits was submitted in June 2003 (MWA International 2003). The plans were systematically developed using a standard format based on established museum principles for improving interpretation, together with preliminary costing. It was recognised that the attraction would need to develop in stages as space and resources became available, and the local organisation gained the capacity and confidence to take on more demanding tasks. A public display of the proposed exhibits was presented for public feedback at the Werris Creek Railway Festival on 3-4 October 2003.

**Setbacks**

It is inevitable that the expectations of a project schedule have to be adapted in the light of external factors, but the ARM project had more than its fair share of such ‘adjustments’. First, years of neglect meant that the restoration of the station buildings was a much more time consuming and expensive task than originally anticipated. By mid-2003, it was evident that the external restoration task would require practically all the funds originally allocated to the project. Finding funds for the fit-out of the building for public use suddenly became a new challenge.

At the same time, the State Government initiated a major reorganisation of its railway administration, leaving staff uncertain of their responsibilities and future security. Decision-making became paralysed and heritage was given a low priority. The state government pressured local governments to amalgamate from late 2002 and this process had a significant impact on Werris Creek. At that time, the town was in Parry Shire, a ‘doughnut council’ surrounding Tamworth City. Various proposals were considered and debate continued for over a year, generating uncertainty and loss of momentum for the project. In the end, a tribunal ruled that boundaries should be defined over to the Australian Rail Track Corporation (ARTC). Corporate responsibility for the ARM project became ‘lost’ in the process and took a long time to be ‘found’ again.

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**The rail journeys concept**

Bringing the ARM Concept Design process to a satisfactory outcome in the new context and the available time frame required a number of things. They included specification of the work required to fit-out the station buildings and the estimated cost. MWA sub-contracted a Tamworth architect to undertake this task and he delivered his report on 10 March 2004. (Given the challenge of trying to organise a contract through State Rail, the only practical option was to initiate a sub-contract under the existing MWA international agreement and budget ceiling, with approval by the Steering Committee and State Rail.) Also needed was development of the concept design for stage one of the Rail Journeys Museum to a point where the scope of specific exhibits was defined and reasonable cost estimates could be made. The six themes were further developed, with a range of potential exhibits defined within each that could be put to potential sponsors. The approach was to present the stories of railway workers in an interactive and appealing way, while at the same time to establish a centre for learning where individuals could make their own explorations of historical issues to the depth that they desired. It would build on Werris Creek’s reputation as a friendly town to ensure that each visitor took home memories of a personal and friendly service.

A business plan was prepared for ARM Management Inc. outlining the marketing analysis, project concept, management arrangements and required funds, backed by detailed cash flow projections. A database was prepared of fifty-seven potential rail industry sponsors and stakeholders to be approached under the marketing campaign. A separate database was also defined for forty-three foundations and trusts that could be approached. Colour booklets were prepared for each of the six Rail Journey themes. They set out graphical presentations of five to eight potential exhibits that had been developed to match the interests of potential sponsors. The estimated cost of exhibits ranged from $25,000 to $250,000, with some exhibits suited to stage one and others to be developed over a longer term.

The Marketing Plan was presented to the Steering Committee in February 2004. The promotional booklets outlined the potential exhibit concepts and artefacts to be used for each of the six Rail Journey themes:

- **Shaping The Nation**: How railways shaped Australia’s settlement patterns and industries. This would have a rural focus, with exhibits on railways and farming (‘Moving the Golden Grain’) and the Federal Line from Werris Creek to Cootamundra via Dubbo (‘Railway and Federation’).
- **The Safe Way**: The evolution of signalling and other operating practices that emerged from various accidents to make railways the safest form of land transport, thus linking the internal exhibits to the external monument commemorating those railway workers who lost their lives in accidents.
- **The People’s Railway**: How railways impacted on local communities, both through their business of moving passengers and the ways in which railway technology and practices changed social values and practices, with particular emphasis on rural Australia.
Werris Creek, A Railway Town: These exhibits tell the story of Werris Creek, particularly from the perspective of railway workers in the town.

Maintaining The Lines: The lives and work of fettlers and railway gatekeepers is the focus of this theme, which also shows the evolution of track construction methods and technical standards. Gatekeepers were covered here, rather than under safe working, as they were frequently the wives of fettlers. Particular emphasis is given to the lives of workers and their families living in remote locations.

Railways in The 21st Century: This theme examines the future of Australian railways as the preferred land transport mode of the new century, again with a focus on rural rather than city settings.

There was intense activity over the following months to finalise the business plan, with inputs from many sources. Approaches to individual firms commenced in March 2004 and ten firms were visited in Sydney and Newcastle to the end of May, with a strong level of interest being shown in sponsoring individual exhibits. Further follow-up with these firms and expansion to others were required, but could not be undertaken within the timeframe of the MWA contract. The Project Facilitator also established regular contact with relevant trade unions, addressing the national executive of the Australian Rail, Tram & Bus Union ( RTBU) in Sydney on 13 May 2004. Delegates made commitments to lobby for the necessary research to be undertaken in their respective states to identify the names of railway workers and contractors to be included on the ARM honour roll.

Using the database developed by the history research contractor, a small ARM database management team took on the task of verifying these names and those subsequently submitted by other railway historians and visitors. While a number of names on the database were found not to meet the criteria, these were more than compensated for by additional names submitted by the public, and additional details were added to a number of entries. By mid-2005, the number of entries in the database for NSW was over 2400. An ARM History Group was also established following a training workshop in May 2004.

The MWA International contract concluded in June 2004, with the revised business plan and concept design documents being presented to the Steering Committee on 8 June. Unfortunately the buildings were not fitted-out for public use, while the marketing of sponsorship to industry waned due to the lack of an active promoter.

Toward stage one

The Steering Committee meeting of 8 June 2004 looked forward to an early commencement of ARM construction activities. It followed a ceremony to mark the formal completion of the external restoration of the station buildings. State Rail members advised that the contractors for the external monument had received appointment letters and could start work, a report on the monument had been prepared for the NSW Heritage Office. Lease arrangements for the transfer of the buildings to Liverpool Plains Shire Council were being finalised. It was also reported that the ‘turning of the first sod’ for the monument was expected within two months, while 1 October 2005 was set as an official opening date for stage one as part of the NSW 150th Railway Celebrations. The only note of caution was the advice that the ARTC would take up full management of the NSW country network on 4 September 2004, which would see that organisation take over responsibility for the RRR buildings and the monument site (ARM Steering Committee 2004b).

It was a false optimism. Progress stalled at this stage. There were ongoing contractual problems with the monument construction team, lease arrangements for the buildings stalled and activity failed to materialise. By March 2005, the Werris Creek community was feeling desperate. Liverpool Plains Shire Council made a commitment of $200,000 to fund the stage one museum exhibits, but internal refurbishment of the RRR building was required. The ARM challenged the key railway organisations — ARTC, RailCorp and State Rail — to match the grant and wrote to the Premier seeking his intervention. It worked, and on 5 April, ARM Management Inc. issued a media release advising that the key NSW railway organisations had pledged their ongoing commitment to the development of the Australian Railway Monument before a packed meeting of local volunteers. The ground floor of the RRR building would be completely refurbished and the external monument would be completed in time for the October opening. No monetary commitment was made, but following representation from Peter Draper, the local state Member of Parliament, additional funds were found by the Department of Transport (ARM Management Inc. 2005; NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard 2005: 16351).

It was a close call, but both the external monument and the Rail Journeys Museum were ready for an official opening by the Minister for Transport and Acting Premier, John Watkins, on 1 October as planned. The museum exhibits were developed by a professional team of curators headed by Des Freeman, who worked with ARM volunteers to develop the stories and select artefacts from the collection. As the building was still to be refurbished, it was necessary to construct modules off-site and wheel them into place in the three days prior to the opening. While the available area was small and there were no audio-visual or hands-on exhibits at that time, the exhibition was a first-class attraction that captured the great stories of railway men and women collected by the local community.

The monument also saw a hectic rush for completion. Without any opportunity for the establishment of new vegetation, it was somewhat bare for the opening, but the concept worked well and the sculptures, although challenging to some traditionalists, were met with widespread approval by visitors on the opening day. The 2400-plus names on the honour roll for NSW were presented on one of the Remembrance Walls. Other states will be added as names become available, with a list having already been submitted by South Australia.

What have we learned?

This paper has presented the ‘inside story’ of how an idea for the adaptive reuse of significant heritage buildings was transformed to practical reality. The story is told so that some of the key lessons that emerged from the experience might be available to others contemplating similar projects. A lesson that stands out is that the enthusiasm and commitment of the whole community is critical to project success. Like most communities, there were factions and pockets of opposition to the project at Werris Creek, but the town exhibited a remarkable spirit and cohesion that can only be matched by few others. Organising major community events helped build...
cohesion, while construction activity on the project built a belief that the vision of the ARM could become a reality.

Other lessons of note are that a well-managed corporate body with clear responsibility is necessary to drive the process. Once ARM Management Inc. was established, it took on an increasing range of functions. It has also been successful in building a membership base well beyond the Werris Creek community, who are kept in touch with developments through the North West Mail newsletter. Also, mobilising and building human capital is critical. ARM Management Inc. immediately set about building its volunteer base and, as described above, the MWA team provided a number of training activities. Training needs to be institutionalised to meet the ongoing needs of ARM volunteers. Negotiations were initiated with the TAFE New England Institute at Tamworth on 9 June regarding a formal partnership with ARM Management Inc. for the provision of training services.

Getting a clear collection policy in place and following it is important. The group at Werris Creek commenced with a ‘local museum’ that helped to promote the ARM project. As with most other local museums, the absence of a collection policy and the inability to say ‘no’ to well-meaning people wishing to donate items led to many difficulties. The Australian Railway Monument has been designed as a major regional tourist attraction. Achieving this objective requires strong linkages to be built across the region. Inter-town rivalries and the pressure of day-to-day tasks can hinder this process. The management team needs a member with skills in this area to take specific responsibility for this role. Industry support — both corporate and from unions — is critical for the funding and expertise necessary for long-term success. The goodwill to provide this support is there, but ARM Management Inc. needs a person with the skills and drive to make this happen.

Dependence on outside bodies for funding and direction can hinder the development of local capacity. The Australian Railway Monument is a large project that would not have happened without the initial vision and support by individuals in State Rail, together with the ongoing funding by that body. From State Rail’s perspective, the escalating costs of that support became a problem. When the project stalled, the local community mobilised political support to gain additional funds and action by the government to complete the project.

The result is that the ARM maintains a high standard with a small exhibition and an inspiring external monument. The local capacity to carry this further by mobilising industry support and other sources of finance to expand and continually update the attraction remains untested. The state government will be hoping that this start, to which it has contributed so much, can be built upon.

Postscript

National support for the ARM has continued to grow. By July 2008 South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory had all submitted the names of railway workers who had been killed as a result of their employment. At this time Queensland authorities were actively researching the names of their deceased workers for inclusion. Likewise, Victorian authorities had decided to become involved in the project.

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