

# SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES – THE BAW BAW SOLUTION

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## Abstract

In a rural shire, one of the principal challenges is to ensure that dispersed communities are enlightened, empowered and resourceful in order to make meaningful and sustainable contributions to the council's long term strategies.

Over the last two years, Baw Baw Shire Council has embarked on an extensive and successful community engagement process based on the premise that 'one size does not fit all'. A process has been developed that establishes open and honest communications between council and communities; develops plans that reflect the visions of the communities; and enables communities to own and control the process of defining their priorities and future projects to form part of a sustainable council strategy.

Council has adopted what is essentially a 'ground-up' approach to community planning and development and provides the facilitation and guidance to enable communities to establish good relationships with relevant council officers and government agencies that can assist them to deliver projects.

This paper explores the background and details of the Baw Baw Shire's community engagement process and explains how empowering communities with self direction ultimately feeds into a sustainable whole of government approach to issues and priorities raised in community plans.

**Key Words: Sustainable outcomes, community engagement, community development, Baw Baw Shire Council, empowering communities, whole of government**

## Introduction

I commenced working at the Baw Baw Shire Council in 2005 with the responsibility for delivering the Small Towns Capital Works Program which each year delivers a number of projects within the smaller towns and communities throughout the shire. In 2005, the projects listed in the program were from a historical list of items and issues raised by community members to councillors over many years. No community consultation had taken place to determine the priority of these projects, whether they were still required or whether they had the support of the broader community. The role was simply to deliver the program, which, at the time, council considered to be small towns community development.

I naively expected that I would simply meet with these communities, engage with them in defining their requirements and then proceed to deliver the projects. I was not aware of the impact of decisions made years earlier concerning amalgamation of shire councils, which changed the sense of connectedness

that local communities had with their local shire. Nor was I aware of the level of disengagement many communities felt with council about the lack of consultation in decisions regarding the projects within the program and how the council budget funds were being allocated. Many community members relayed their feelings of disconnection with council and displayed a considerable degree of anger and resentment. It became apparent that many of the infrastructure projects that council had determined were priorities were not included in the vision of the individual communities concerned. In addition I discovered that there were no individual community plans, identifying projects and priorities at ground level or any broad community consultation conducted.

I believed that I needed to engage with communities at a different level in order to make the whole Small Towns Capital Works Program more sustainable. There was little point investing council ratepayer funds on trying to repair or upgrade infrastructure that

was no longer used, or did not meet the current needs or vision of the community. Whilst many in council were interested in the concept with regards to long-term sustainability, some were preoccupied with repairing, maintaining or decommissioning the products of previous investment as a matter of course, rather than determining the future needs of the community (Hempel, 1999). Also, a number of projects were delivered as a result of internal strategies and aspirations and not as a result of any meaningful community consultation. This never was and never can be considered sustainable development.

### Community Connect Model

I had a firm belief that broad community participation needed to be encouraged to develop individual community plans in order to reconnect the community and address the anger and resentment, rather than just ignoring it. The community plans then should be reflected within the longer term council strategies and plans. At that time I had little experience or knowledge of community development, only basic consultation and engagement techniques combined with a passion to change the turmoil I was encountering. Based on my previous experience and knowledge of project management I saw this as engaging with my clients (the community) to determine their requirements and their expectations over the project outcomes. The aim was to provide the communities with the opportunity to determine what they saw as the priorities in their communities and to work in partnership with them to develop a plan that not only delivered the individual projects but also ensured that the projects identified were then encapsulated into council's strategies and plans for the future.

I undertook a pilot in 2006, conducting community engagement with the town of Longwarry. The initial model that I developed was a framework to reconnect communities with local government. It was also to gain an understanding and establish future connections between communities and local government across such areas as the environment, infrastructure, local economy, social activities and health and wellbeing.

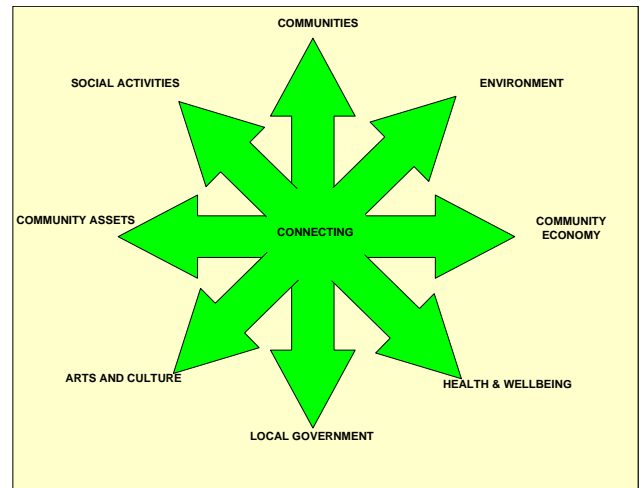


Figure 1 - Initial Community Connect Model  
The model has been further developed and refined as a result of working with a number of communities and has now evolved into a flexible process that has been used successfully across the shire over the last two years.

### Aim of Community Connect

The aim of the 'Community Connect' model was to develop a process to help communities to identify issues, problems and needs as they saw them, in their terms of reference, and to facilitate the collective resolution of these issues within a community plan. My role was to facilitate and work with the community, not from a patronising perspective as an outside expert, but on the basis of mutual emancipation (Kenny, 2006). The key aims of 'Community Connect' were to:

- Establish more open and honest communication between council and communities;
- To develop community plans that reflect the vision of communities; and
- Enable communities to own and control the process of defining their priorities and future projects.

The main outcome is an individual five-year community plan for each community that undertakes the process. Then for council to incorporate the priorities and projects within council plans so that it is a 'ground-up' approach to community planning and development. The development of the community plans is on the premise that people can and should take responsibility for identifying their own needs and managing their own future directions. It involves

supporting and strengthening communities by developing skills and resources, social interaction and participation activities (Kenny, 2006).

### Community Connect Process

The community connect process starts with the establishment of a 'community contact team'. An initial meeting is held with the core community association for each community to work through the community connect process. The aim is to establish a working partnership with the core community association and gain the commitment of a small group to work with council in promoting and organising the workshops. The community contact team establish the timeframes for the process and also provide the local knowledge of where and when to hold the community workshops. The group also assist with promoting the process locally and also provide the initial community profile information for the community plan. The establishment of the community contact teams and the introduction of local knowledge has been one of the key success factors for the process.

A series of workshops are then conducted which include a number of pre-defined activities that establishes what each community likes about living in their community, what they see as future challenges and issues, and what projects they would like to happen over the next five years. The number of workshops held is determined by the community.

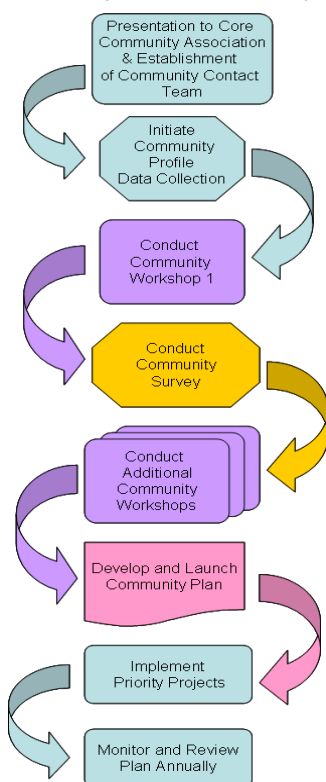


Figure 2 - Community Connect Process  
Initial priorities are determined at the first workshop. A community survey is developed between the first and second workshop that is sent to all community households. This provides the opportunity for the broader community to have input into the process. Once priorities are established and agreed, action groups for the agreed top projects are formed and action plans developed. The core community association becomes the ongoing monitoring body for the projects with annual reviews facilitated by council.

The process works well in that it:

1. Aims to be totally inclusive by creating a non-threatening environment for the community to have input into the process through a series of tasks and activities that were incorporated within the process.
2. Draws out community frustrations and issues early in the process so that they can be aired and also so that any historical issues and factors that relate to the individual community are identified and addressed.
3. Aims to create a communicative environment using a number of techniques that provide the platform for all members of the community to have input – especially those who are not confident to speak up in a public environment.
4. Is not a process of 'one size fits all' – it is flexible and it is the community itself that determines the timeframes, the where, how and what, within the process. We are open about the process, the first meeting being with the core community association from whom we seek input in to how the process is going to be run and tailored to best fit with the community.
5. Promotes consultation and engagement from the very beginning and forms a partnership with the core community association so that they drive the process and the outcomes. Council provides guidance and facilitation through the process.
6. Moves at a pace that the community sets – it is not timeframe driven. The community itself determines the timeframe and the number of workshops which vary with each community.
7. Encourages the community to take ownership of the outcomes and the timeframe with which these are achieved

is up to the community itself. The continuing role of Council is to provide guidance and facilitate relationships with other council officers and government agencies to achieve projects. The extent and pace at which this happens is up to the community.

One of the key aims of community development is to build the framework that facilitates democratic participation in decision making, which includes the processes that will enable a community to have access to information and a commitment to the empowerment of the community in such a way that they believe that they have real options to determine their future (Kenny, 2006).

Some communities have readily embraced the process and have formed project action groups, responsible for delivering a priority project and reporting progress to the core community association. The process has empowered community members to become 'active producers' rather than passive consumers and has encouraged broad-based participation within the communities (Ife and Tesoriero, 2006).

### **Community Projects**

A wide variety of projects have now either been completed or are in progress by the various communities that have participated. These projects include community infrastructure, arts, environmental, tourism, and social projects.

An initial assessment of the council funds, government grants and community-in kind contributions show an investment to date of over \$2 million dollars in community projects as an outcome of the sixteen community plans. This is a conservative figure in that the majority of community in-kind contributions have not been given a monetary value.

Examples of some of the projects include:

- Town Beautification Project – Longwarry
- Arts Bollard Project – Longwarry
- New playground at Kydd Parke Reserve – Jindivick
- New walking tracks – Jindivick, Willow Grove and Noojee
- Acquisition of an old quarry site for a flora and fauna reserve – Jindivick

- Remodelling of an existing community building into a visitor gateway – Erica
- Clean up and refurbishment of Crater Lake area – Rawson
- Creation of a family recreational and social park – Thorpdale
- Creation of timber bin covers within township – Noojee
- Upgrading of toilet facilities at Willow Grove and Tanjil Bren including the installation of solar lights
- Restoration of an historic train and installation of a protective roof shelter – Yarragon.

The community action groups working on the various projects identify the key stakeholders and how the project might be funded.

Council provides guidance and assistance in developing the initial action plans and works with the project action groups in establishing initial contacts, especially with other areas within council and also with other government organisations, depending on the areas of responsibility.

In some cases the projects have been funded by council and are were listed within the annual budget review for council programs with clear community priorities (such as the Small Towns Capital Works Program, Walking & Cycling Program and the Footpath Program). In other cases, communities have fully funded projects themselves, or have sought funding through other government funding programs at State and Federal level. For example, the Longwarry community successfully obtained a grant from Regional Arts Victoria for their arts bollard project. The playground at Jindivick was jointly funded by council and the community, who raised funds that were then matched by council.



Longwarry Art Bollards Project

Whilst each community was different and identified different issues or priorities, the process also identified some key themes from issues that were common across multiple communities. These provided indicators of common issues that could then be considered 'shire wide' and would therefore require the development of programs rather than individual projects in their resolution. The majority of these common issues also related to other government agencies that would require a more integrated approach to address and included issues such as telecommunications, public transport, road safety, speeding traffic, walking tracks and the environment. An initial workshop has been held with a number of government organisations and many have already started to develop programs to address the key themes identified. This enables a 'whole of government' approach to addressing some of the issues and priorities raised within the community plans.

### **Sustainable Community Development**

The community connect process has identified the diversity and varying visions of the communities within the shire. However, this provided the next challenge to ensure that not only are the community visions and priorities reflected in council's strategies and plans but also that they are sustainable. Whilst the initial aim of the process was to give direction to the Small Towns Capital Works Program, in terms of priorities the longer term aim was to identify broad community needs and future directions to be incorporated within council plans and strategies.

The core question for council was whether the projects that were identified for inclusion in council's plans actually met council's own planning criteria and future strategies. Whilst some communities wanted certain infrastructure or projects the questions that needed to be asked were: Did the projects meet the long term needs of the community? How was the infrastructure going to be maintained? Did they meet the environmental, capital, economic and social strategies of both the community and council?

Building communities in a sustainable way that incorporates environmental quality, social justice and economic vitality requires a

rare combination of long-range foresight and short-term adaptability (Hempel, 1999). Many communities can only see in the short-term. They have waited for certain projects or infrastructure for such a long time that the historical issues became the focus and drove the immediate needs. It was difficult for these communities to identify their future and long-term requirements and ensure that any short-term projects contributed to those future needs.

There is a balance that has to be taken with regards to community infrastructure and sustainable community development. For many of these communities the projects identified were what the broad community supported and in taking ownership and control of their plan and their vision, they were identified as priorities. The key is to develop a good relationship and an understanding of the community needs versus council obligations and responsibilities. In some cases council has not supported some of the projects for a number of reasons, and so this needed to be articulated and worked through with the communities involved. An outcome of the process has been a greater understanding by community of how council works, and of the various processes such as the budget process. A greater level of trust and communication has developed and it has enabled some frank and honest discussions with communities on the sustainability and viability of some projects that prior to this process would have been impossible.

The diversity of communities within the Baw Baw Shire also meant that sustainability had different meanings for different communities. For those communities experiencing growth, it was about meeting both the current growth and future growth needs of the community from an economic, social and environmental perspective. For other communities it was the very existence of the community and about retaining the community from the same three perspectives. For these communities sustainability was in relation to the community itself, given that they were experiencing the loss of industry, or loss of local business or even loss of residents. For many smaller communities, the hub of the local community either no longer existed or had closed; for example the local hall, or the general store or post office. The very future

of these communities is very much under threat. As a result this changed both the economic and social aspects of the town. The culture of local government does not necessarily recognise or appreciate the diversity or differences of these small towns and rural communities and often considers all smaller communities within the shire to be the same. But communities cannot be assigned so bureaucratically. People identify with communities on the basis of their own experiences and relationships and if this view is not reflected in council strategic plans this simply alienate communities (Kenny, 2006). The community connect process has enabled the Baw Baw Shire Council to have a greater understanding of the various smaller towns and rural communities and has improved the level of communication between council and communities. The outcomes from the community plans have been captured within specific areas, and a process is now underway to encapsulate community projects, not just in council's plans and strategies but within other government organisation programs. Council is also currently embarking on an assessment of all public community infrastructures and will undertake further consultation with the various communities about community asset maintenance and management.

### Conclusion

The community connect process has successfully demonstrated improved community relationships with council at a number of levels as well as establishing better communication channels within communities and between communities. It has also enabled greater community involvement in that people have actively been involved in projects and community groups where previously they did not participate. It has also established partnerships between council, other government organisations and communities to work collaboratively in delivering community projects. Whilst a number of communities have embraced the process and have delivered a significant number of projects, further work with those that have not taken control of their community plans needs to be conducted. Whether this results in true sustainable community development remains to be seen but at the very least it has changed the way

that Baw Baw Shire Council now conducts the Small Towns Capital Works Program and has resulted in a number of community projects being delivered, that have fully met community priorities, needs and expectations.

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### Biography

Lynn Mizen – BIT (with Distinction), Grad



Cert Regional Community Development  
Lynn Mizen has a strong background in project management and has undertaken work within the private sector in Australia, UK and Singapore, delivering

leading edge IT based projects since 1995. Upon returning to Australia, Lynn joined local government at Baw Baw Shire Council in 2005 to project manage the Small Towns Capital Works Program.

Lynn experienced initial difficulties in delivering the program because many communities had become disengaged with Council. Based on initial experiences with communities and her knowledge of standard engagement techniques, Lynn developed a flexible community engagement model that has proved to be extremely successful. In 2006, Lynn completed a Graduate Certificate in Regional Community Development at Monash University and is currently studying for a Masters in Regional Community Development.

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