

The Tallangatta revitalisation process illustrates what can be achieved when local government, design consultants and the community work together to envisage and plan for the future of regional Australia.

TALLANGATTA TOMORROW

[By DEAN LANDY]

Located in the north east of Victoria on the shores of Lake Hume, the town of Tallangatta had seen better days.

In the 1950s, the town was forced to shift 8km to the west to accommodate the expansion of Lake Hume. Now, 50 years on, the towns facilities, services and infrastructure are tired and in need of refurbishment.

The major catalyst for the project was the local council, Towong Shire, which identified that the population of Tallangatta was steadily declining. Resident satisfaction was low and nothing much had changed in Tallangatta in the last 50 years since the town was relocated. Something had to be done to reverse this trend otherwise Tallangatta - the Shire's second largest town - was potentially heading towards an unrecoverable decline.

The answer was not a single built solution, but a fresh look at the entire town from the perspective of population growth, economic stimulus and community infrastructure.

With Goulburn-Valley Water, the authority responsible for the management of Lake Hume, providing financial support,

the shire began to develop a coordinated and strategic revitalisation strategy - a new master plan for Tallangatta.

Juliana Phelps, CEO of Towong Shire Council said: "Master plans sometimes include too many goals or a series of unrealistic goals. Over time these plans can lose focus and the master planning process may need to be repeated at great cost. Therefore, our brief for Tallangatta made it clear that the master plan must generate a series of realistic and practical projects that can be implemented within a five year time frame".

In 2011, Towong Shire instigated a significant selection process resulting in the appointment of ClarkeHopkinsClarke (CHC), a Melbourne-based architectural practice.

CHC took a strategic and organised approach to generate a level of community engagement unprecedented in the town. This began with developing a brand for the revitalisation project - Tallangatta Tomorrow - underpinned by a public consultation campaign consisting of three stages: 'What's the big idea?', 'Here's a plan' and 'Let's make it happen!'

The campaign was launched with the establishment of a publicly accessible





community workshop within a shop front on Tallangatta's main street. This initiative effectively brought the consultation process into the community realm and instigated a unique and creative approach to engaging with the community. A 'green carpet' of astro turf was laid from the curb leading into the workshop to encourage passers-by to enter and look around. Inside, maps, images and visual boards were displayed to prompt ideas about what the town's issues were and how to solve them. It was also the location of several formal

holding lunch time classroom sessions with local high school students, the CHC team was able to engage with the wider community to generate more than 450 big ideas. By opening the discussion so broadly an optimal cross section of views and opinions of what the community really wanted was obtained.

After gathering this information, including community feedback in the form of formal survey results, feedback from workshops and the website, as well as Council's own previous consultant reports, CHC formulated a strategic master

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and informal workshop sessions and consultations at which the Towong Shire CEO and Councillors maintained a consistent presence.

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From meeting local football players in their change rooms after training, to

plan – the 'Here's a plan' phase. The resulting revitalisation strategy identified and prioritised 66 projects and initiatives of varying scales in the areas of housing, tourism, streets and public open space, Lake Hume and the foreshore reserve, and community facilities and services.

Ms Phelps said: “The Tallangatta Tomorrow Revitalisation Plan is focused on delivering infrastructure to support young families and stimulate economic growth. ClarkeHopkinsClarke really listened and identified realistic projects



that were a true reflection of the community's needs and potential."

The final stage of the communication campaign, 'Let's make it happen', was implemented with the completed plan, which represented a line in the sand for Towong Shire to begin incorporating the key principles into the local planning scheme. With the community's help in identifying both large and small infrastructure projects, the CHC team emphasised that the onus was on the community to stimulate change as much as the Towong Shire.

CHC provided detailed design concepts for the larger projects, which were included in the revitalisation plan report. The key projects were documented to meet Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) Regional Growth Fund (RGF) submission requirements. This ensured that each proposed project was 'shovel-ready' in the sense that Towong Shire was assisted to compile detailed funding submissions.

A great example of the community working together is the town's new Rowen Park Sporting Pavilion. Soon to commence construction, the new combined sports/community facility will draw many different community groups together, including football, netball, cricket, and swimming and will serve as a new community meeting point. The community undertook its own fundraising and provided volunteered labour to complete the ground works, while the Shire contributed a third of

the design and construction budget. A grant under the Regional Growth Fund supplied the remaining two thirds of the budget, and the project commenced in early 2013.

Another major project, the Tallangatta EcoEducation and Integrated Services Hub, received funding approval from the Victorian State Government's Regional Growth Fund in March 2013 and is soon to proceed.

The critical step of having 'shovel ready' projects meant that as soon as a federal or state government funding opportunity became available, the council was ready to tender for it with the hard work already done. This has enabled the Towong Shire to attract more funding for new projects earmarked in the master plan document than has been invested at any point in the last 50 years.

One of the first high priority projects of the revitalisation strategy to be completed is the Sandy Creek Bridge, which saw the rebuilding of a decommissioned railway line. The bridge opened in October 2012 to cyclists and pedestrians and completes the missing link in the High Country Rail Trail, connecting Tallangatta with Wodonga, and will help the town tap into the \$2.4 billion Australian cycling tourism market.

The real test of success for this project will take several years to measure, as there are many different stakeholders involved in achieving the bigger picture. The simplest measure will be whether the population ceases to decline, however





the progress achieved so far is a very positive start. Other project successes now include the unlocking of new housing developments, a new caravan park, foreshore redevelopment and smaller projects such as upgrades to the lawn bowls facility and a new lookout point and picnic area.

Towong Shire took a visionary approach by embarking on a comprehensive revitalisation plan for the town. The approach paid off as the plan has assisted the Shire to overcome the difficult hurdle of obtaining funding for key infrastructure.

This process really demonstrates the importance of having the right people on the team, who are passionate about seeing an outcome. From both council and the consultant team, the progress achieved to date would not have occurred without a close working relationship and shared vision to see the project succeed as true project partners. Furthermore, the team knew how to be best prepared with a thorough basis of documentation and information in readiness for future funding applications. Long-term planning for budget allocations is now able to occur based on the priorities set out in the master plan report.

As a result, the consultation process had the effect of empowering and mobilising the townspeople as partners and collaborators on the project rather than passive receivers of the Towong Shire's services and initiatives.

Since completing the plan in late 2011, the documentation CHC created has been effective in assisting to attract state government funding for significant infrastructure projects, along with several smaller scale projects that have been realised due to the organisation and input of the townspeople. The thorough community consultation phase ensured everyone felt that they owned the vision, which lifted the project from the community believing that 'nothing ever changes' to something they were engaged in and could work together as a community to actually see happen.

Cr Fraser OAM said: "A well-documented consultation process was a key factor in attracting significant State and Federal Government funding as we were able to demonstrate a clear link between community needs and the project being proposed."

As architects, CHC was in a unique position to really guide and facilitate a discussion beyond just words and reports. By graphically presenting new ideas and possibilities of what the town could be at every step of the project, this enabled every stakeholder to feel as though they could understand the process, relate to it and more importantly make a valuable contribution. **GN**

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