

Wye River, Separation Creek and Kennett River Community Resilience Committee

Feedback on Draft Council Plan, Strategic Resource Plan and Draft Budget 2017-21



The Wye River bushfire destroyed 106 homes and damaged a further 60. In terms of property loss, there has been no subsequent larger fire in Australia, and the recovery issues are large, complex, and ongoing. They have implications for the prosperity of the coast given their impact on tourism - the loss of holiday rentals, a decrease in tourist occupancy rates and bed nights, and decreased visitor confidence. Steps to increase confidence in rebuilding will also have a long-term positive impact on the Shire rate base.

1. Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to take part in the next phase of the community consultation for the development of the Council Plan, Strategic Resource Plan and Budget for the next four years, 2017-21.

The Wye River and Separation Creek community is very appreciative of the support and assistance the Council has provided to it to assist its recovery and renewal following the Christmas Day Fire that devastated it in 2015.

The community has agreed a vision for its future and has developed a Renewal Plan at http://wyeseconnect.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Wye-River-Renewal-Plan_March2017_FINAL.pdf to work towards achieving it. This plan was produced by the CRC, with the community and the primary community associations¹ - all have endorsed it, including the ongoing composition of the CRC, to guide its implementation. It has also been accepted by the Emergency Leadership Team – COS, VicRoads, DELWP and EMV.

The community is very diverse. As well as people who live in Wye River, Separation Creek or Kennett River all or most of the time, it is also comprised of people who are physically part of the community at weekends as well as long-term (often intergenerational) campers. All have a deep and abiding attachment and commitment to the community - it has been and is a significant part of who they are. The area has been also a significant component of Otway coast tourism and wishes to resume that status.

2. The Biggest Loss is the Trees

Apart from lost and damaged houses, to most in the community the biggest impact is the psychological and visual devastation caused by the loss of indigenous vegetation and this is an ongoing felt devastation. The loss of trees also has a significant and ongoing negative impact on land stability in an already landslip prone area, and the visual devastation deters tourism.

¹ Wye River and Separation Creek Progress Association, Wye River CFA and Wye River Surf Life Saving Club



Research from the 2009 fires found that as people see the environment recover it helps their own recovery.

Indigenous plants and seedling trees are coming back but are being significantly outcompeted by weeds.

We are very relieved to see that the Draft Plan identifies “Implement Revegetation and Weed Management Plan Post Bushfire at Wye River and Separation Creek” as a “Key program Supporting Our Prosperity”: we absolutely agree. However we observe that the \$250,000 allocation in the budget to undertake this initiative is not assured and is dependent on uncertain grant funding that may take several years to secure, if at all. We are concerned that inclusion of this figure in the budget may unrealistically raise community expectations – on the other hand if Council has a strategy to raise the \$250k we would like to know if we can provide any assistance in bringing it to fruition. What are the implications for the budget if the funding is not found?

The Draft Council Plan contains actions to; “Maintain Parks and gardens, sports reserves and streetscapes”, to “Support enjoyment of outdoor experiences through the provision of a network of quality open spaces” and to “Enhance and protect biodiversity through weed control and revegetation”;

and we request that some of the funding allocated to these actions in the Draft Budget be allocated to combat weeds in parks, open spaces and streetscapes in fire affected areas in Wye River and Separation Creek.

Immediate funding for the management of weeds is critical while larger grants for revegetation are sought.

Combatting weeds on Council land will complement actions by property owners to combat weeds on their properties.

Funding for community flora and fauna events and workshops for the next three years, both as community education and wellbeing initiatives, is required.

3. Landslips Created Risk and Traumatized the Community for a Second Time

Significant landslips following heavy rains last spring traumatized all community members, not only those impacted by fire and not only those physically living in the community all the time. The landslips also exacerbated the anxieties of people impacted by the fire.

The landslips resulted in damage to local roads and people being isolated, cut off from essential services and from one another. Poor communication and a lack of information about what action was being planned exacerbated peoples' stress.

Renewal of local roads and establishment of a secure local road link between Wye River and Separation Creek is essential.

The Draft Budget allocates funds for the restoration and improvement of local roads and we request that some of this funding be allocated to restoring local roads and establishing a secure local road link between Wye River and Separation Creek.

Smaller landslips are still occurring on local roads and when they do a rapid response is required to prevent further damage in Council road reserves, roads, and neighbouring properties

We agree that one of the "Key Programs Supporting Our Places" is the "Reticulated Drainage Scheme at Wye River and Separation Creek". The development and implementation of this drainage scheme is critical for the security and safety of the whole community.

The community understands that the State Government has provided \$6m to Council for the development and implementation of this drainage scheme, as well as for preliminary drainage works and the building of some retaining walls. We appreciate the commitment Council has made to working with the community on the design and implementation of this drainage scheme. However the allocation of this funding is not easily identified in the budget papers.

We request clarification - as to how the State Government funding for the reticulated drainage scheme will be allocated - be provided.

4. Need for Continuing Community Recovery and Renewal

Members of our community are at very different stages in their recovery. Some, especially those not directly impacted by the fire, are well on the way to recovery or have significantly recovered. Others have not.

The expert psychologist engaged by Emergency Management Victoria to assist the community recover, has emphasised that the second year into recovery is often more difficult than the first, people can feel more stressed, helpless, despondent and angry.

Research following the Black Saturday fires of 2009 suggests that some people may take up to five years to recover from the disaster. This research also found that being involved in community activities makes a difference – it results in better mental health outcomes².

The stress of rebuilding exacerbates and complicates peoples' recovery and affects all in the community, not just those rebuilding or repairing their damaged homes. Conflict between efforts to rebuild as soon as possible, to work long hours, and another person's quiet enjoyment of the environment is not atypical. Action is required to prevent and ameliorate avoidable disagreements arising between community members, builders and authorities such as Council.

It is for these reasons that our Renewal Plan and our submission to Council contain initiatives to Build and Sustain an Inclusive Respectful Community and to continue to Support Individuals to recover from the disaster.

² Gibbs L, et al, Beyond Bushfires: Community Resilience and Recovery Final Report. November 2016, University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

We agree, as outlined in the Draft Plan, that one of the “Key Programs Supporting our Communities” is “Community Recovery Support to Wye River and Separation Creek”.



Continued Council support and funding for community and individual wellbeing activities, that are often low key, such as the one above – a BBQ lunch in the CFA fire station - but effective ways of bringing the community together, is crucial. We need funding for these activities for another three years.

Maintaining connections and providing information to the community is also vital for individual and community wellbeing.

We thank Council for continuing *wyeseconnect* on the Council website and the email Community Renewal Newsletter, formerly the *Bushfire Newsletter*, and we request that Council continue to support these initiatives. The email newsletter is particularly important and we wish to significantly expand its reach across the community as the current scope of issues - including traffic management, construction site security and reticulated drainage - concern all in the community, not just those directly impacted by the fire.

Communication is critical to recovery and rebuilding the community, and we trust that the budget contains funding for continuation of these highly effective channels of information and communication.

5. Development of Community Fire Plan

We applaud the inclusion in Council's Draft Plan of action to "Deliver localised planning to communities to reduce fire risk" and the development of Community Fire Plans.

As a community we have learnt much about actions that assist a community to lead the development of its community fire plan and actions that don't. There are lessons to be learnt from our experience and we are keen to incorporate them into the development of the community fire plan for our community:

- The development of the plan must be genuinely community led.
- Development must be based on how a community usually operates, not on how it operates following a disaster.
- Consultation does not equate to community leadership.
- It is possible to integrate community development principles and practices with command and control procedures³.

The immediate and ongoing responsiveness of Council during 2016 has been very much appreciated – and acknowledged by the CRC and its community members at community and work group meetings - and we look forward to working with Council on the development of our community led fire plan.

6. Advocacy for the Great Ocean Road

We are appreciative of and support the advocacy Council has been undertaking to restore and improve the management and amenity of the Great Ocean Road (GOR) and to bring together the many authorities and organisations along the GOR into one authority – a Great Ocean Road Authority. We also appreciate and support efforts to balance the care and protection of the environment with growth and development, especially along our striking but fragile coastline.

We absolutely agree that tourism assets need to be improved along the GOR, especially basic infrastructure such as toilets, appropriate signage and parking.

We seek education of tourism operators to ensure responsible practice in our fragile environment. The situation at Kennett River is currently unmanaged.

³ For a full discussion of the lessons learnt see our submission to the Emergency Management Victoria consultation on Resilient Recovery on wyeseconnect

We agree with actions to increase visitation, and bednights per visit in smaller towns and request the Council to strongly advocate for extension of the Great Ocean Walk from Apollo Bay to Torquay to assist this.

We also support rationalization of the number of authorities dealing with the road in order to decrease planning confusion and increase efficiency.

7. Working with Council

We are keen to maintain and develop our relationship with Councillors.

We look forward to working closely with Council staff, especially Gareth Smith as our appointed principal contact, to establish the Recovery Plan for Wye River and Separation Creek as the benchmark for successful Council and community collaboration.