The Process of Town Renewal in Australia

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1. Introduction

Small towns and their rural districts face accelerating demographic, economic, social, technical and environmental changes and challenges. An understanding of these changes and their root causes is an essential starting point for community revitalization.

Demographic Change

Throughout the twentieth century, Australians deserted what is affectionately referred to as 'the bush' and became predominantly urban city dwellers clinging to the coast. At the beginning of the twentieth century, most Australians lived in inland rural areas. 54% of the population lived in 'the bush' and only 37% of the population lived within what are now the eight State and Territory capital cities. Another 9% of population inhabited large coastal towns. By the end of the twentieth century, 'the bush'-big city ratio of Australians had almost reversed - 21% now live in 'the bush' and 63% and 16% respectively within capitals and coastal provincial cities. 70% of Australians now live in 10 cities, up from 41% in 1900 (Salt, 2000). Continuous population decline for many small inland towns and communities has now become a consistent trend, with over 50% of inland small towns and communities losing population. KPMG annual publication, Population Growth (2000), reveals that during the twenty two year period (1976-1998), 198 rural municipalities lost population. In fact 75 communities lost more than 20% of population. Between 1998 and 1999, 120 rural municipalities lost more than 1% of their population base.

Economic Change

One of the major economic changes in rural Australia has been the economic decline of agriculture. Increased production, technology, developing markets and diversification have maintained the value of Australian agricultural production at relatively stable levels for decades. However, over the same period, world prices have led to a cost/price squeeze decreasing Australian farmer's terms of trade (prices received for outputs as a percentage of costs incurred in production) from over 200 in 1952-1953 to 98 in 2000-2001(ABARE, 2000).

The Australian economy is fundamentally shifting from primary industries to a service and knowledge base. Total number of jobs was increased by 17.3 % between 1986 and 1996. However, employment in agriculture and mining declined by 11.0% and 5.9% respectively. Over the same period, there were 30.9% more jobs in trade, finance, administration, retailing and services (Hugo, 2000). In Queensland for example, employment in services has almost doubled since 1960 to over 34% of all jobs. But, decreasing farm profitability and labour efficiencies from agricultural technology and mechanisation have changed rural employment.

The proportion of the Queensland workforce in agriculture has decreased from over 45% in the 1860s to 18% in 1961 and 5% in 1996 - a trend repeated in most western economies (Office of the Government Statistician, Queensland, 1999). Rural youth are opting for non-farm employment (Rousseaux, 2000). Since the late 1960s, farm succession within families in Britain has decreased from 75% of cases to less than half (Ward, 1996).

Social Change

Rural depopulation, reduced economic status, changing demographics and general changes in societal norms have contributed to a loss of social cohesion and community participation in rural areas. Outmigration and the decline of the family farm have dispersed social networks (Alston, 1994; Swanson, 1990; Wellman, 1979). The specific loss of young people deprives communities of a socially active group and potential leaders (Pretty, 1998). Many of the smaller communities struggle economically and socially against the regional centres which are now aptly described by Salt (2000) as 'sponge cities'. One of the major social pressures is declining quality of life. Virtually every measure of the standard of living - income, health, education, aged care, access to services, infrastructure, housing - is stable or declining in rural Australia (Sidoti, 1998; Sarantakos, 1998). Finally, there have been a number of reports which have provided evidence about the negative impacts on small communities due to the contraction in health, education and banking services (Harrison, 1997, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1999, House of Representatives, 2000, Australian Bankers Association, 1998).

Environmental Challenges

Increasingly, a variety of environmental challenges are impacting upon the quality of life of many small towns.

Firstly, salinity and water quality are two of the most significant issues confronting rural communities and industries.

Secondly, growing community (especially metropolitan population) concern over logging of natural forest areas has forced governments to restrict forestry operations and extend national parks. Consequently, forestry jobs have been lost, and many rural communities are obliged to examine new economic and employment options.

Thirdly, the recent growth of plantation forestry on cleared agricultural land has had a major impact upon the farming and small town community landscapes.

Centralism and regionalism

Certainly the cumulative impact of government and business policies to regionalise and centralise services has contributed to the decline of smaller communities. The Productivity Commission regularly advocates removal of barriers to mobility of labour and capital to enhance 'people prosperity' over 'place prosperity'. This approach sees no intrinsic merit in 'maintaining' small towns if people and business are opting for larger centres (Collits, 1999). For example, the Productivity Commission's report (1999) on competition policy in rural and

regional areas states the impact of national competition policy is likely to lead to an estimated 2.6% job loss across wheat-belt Western Australia (Anthony, 1999).

2.   The Process of Small Town Renewal

A.   Definition

Rural renewal involves a sustained and united effort by the whole community to improve their local economy, quality of life and future options. It represents a process of planning, action, organisation and learning where community residents enhance and balance the local economic viability, community well being and environmental health of their community (Cavaye, 2000, Kenyon 1999, Bauen et al. 1996, Hart 1999, Center for Community Enterprise 1999). It is about local people taking responsibility for their preferred future, and about communities and their residents utilising their human, physical and financial resources to maintain or enhance local development opportunities and their quality of life. (Kenyon, 1999) Rural renewal is a process that increases choices. It focuses on new options, diversification, thinking about issues differently and anticipating change (Christensen et al., 1989).

B.   Principles/process ingredients

Rural renewal is about sustainable development which stands in sharp contrast to conventional, business-at-any-cost economic development strategies. Kinsley (1997) sees the process of sustainable development as one which:

°   redefines prosperity, weighing quality of life, community character, and the environment alongside economic considerations;

°   seeks true development, in the sense of getting better, instead of expansion, which is merely getting bigger;

°   advocates the long term stewardship of community resources, ensuring that present actions do not erode the basis for future prosperity;

°   pursues self reliance and a more democratic approach to decision making, representing community wide interests over those of an elite few; and

°   stresses diversity, resilience, and a conviction that many small efforts work better than a single one-size-fits-all solution.

Likewise, the Municipal Association of Victoria (1994a) advocates a process that:

°   focuses on the stimulation of opportunities that will generate additional income and jobs, while preserving and hopefully enhancing the dynamics and features that make the local community special;

°   seeks more resilient, durable and diversified local economies;

°   encourages development processes compatible to local aspirations, needs, values and resources; and

°   emphasises a holistic approach to development;

C.   Specific Process Elements

National and international literature consistently stresses the importance of six aspects of the renewal process.

1.   An expression of healthy frustration with the status quo, and a willingness to explore and experiment with developing

2.   The demonstration of positive mindset, passion and opportunism

3.   The use of appropriate community planning and development processes

4.   The implementation of a comprehensive and locally owned and resourced local economic development agenda

5.   The presence and continuous renewal of local leadership.

6.   The practice of healthy community behaviours

D.   Conclusion

There is a wealth of international and national literature on themes associated with rural community renewal. Collits (2000) provides a useful local summary of key process factors when listing the success factors emanating from an analysis of Mainstreet/Small Towns Program of the New South Wales Department of State and Regional Development.

° Community ownership of the planning process;

° Commitment to working in partnership with other local organisations;

° Commitment to funding the program locally;

° Local council support and involvement; ° an active committee with broad representation from local government, business and community groups;

° Local leadership;

° Broad community support for the local program;

° Knowing the local economy;

° Focussing on the retention and expansion of existing businesses rather than attempting to attract large employers;

° A realistic strategic plan developed through a public consultation process;

° Detailed action plans;

° A human resource commitment to implementing the strategic plan;

° Monitoring progress and ongoing evaluation;

° Keeping people informed, particularly through positive media coverage; and

° Acknowledging and celebrating success.

3.   Australian Small Town Renewal Case Studies

Throughout rural Australia, there are various illustrations of small inland towns which have demonstrated that the ability to survive and thrive is not based on location, weather, proximity to the coast or a regional centre, but more related to attitude, local leadership and local action.

Despite their unique circumstances, size and location, there are some remarkable similarities. A number of themes appear common to the renewal of most if not all of the following stories.

° **Right timing** - timing and circumstances appears important in the process for many towns including:
  - Local residents recognising that "something must be done and that no one else
  - will do it"
  - Often the occurrence of a wake up call or crisis, eg, closure of major employer, withdrawal of a service, negative publicity etc.
  - Local people coming together to discuss and seek a better future.

° **Use of community planning processes** - to formalise thinking, planning and action about their assets, needs, preferred future, and prioritised actions.

° **Enthusiastic local champion(s) and leadership** - having at least one influential and skilled local person or group actively and enthusiastically promoting the concept of renewal and providing the leadership for action.

° **Positive attitude** - positive belief in the community and its future, and the expectation that deliberate steps could be undertaken to enhance existing activities or develop new options and pathways for the community and its residents.

° **Local entrepreneurism** - existence of local people and groups providing leadership and example in terms of civic and/or business entrepreneurism and opportunity obsession.

° **Local investment** - willingness by locals to contribute towards the financial resources to make positive change occur.

° **Smart use of outside resources** - awareness of, and access to the technical and financial resources to assist project development.   All the communities have been successful in cultivating allies, actively seeking information, networking with outside supporters and securing outside funding.

° **New community networks** - that actively support new ideas, new thinking and new ways of working together.

° **Youth focus** - attention being given to the key issues affecting the retention of young men and women, including employment diversity, education options, transport, accommodation, lifestyle, image and participation.

A: Boonah (Queensland)

Boonah is the vibrant heart of a small rural shire in south east Queensland. The township of Boonah has a resident population of 2,700, while the Boonah Shire is home to 8,000 people. Despite its proximity to key centres - Ipswich (30 minutes), Brisbane (90 minutes) and Gold Coast (45 minutes) - Boonah is often referred to as 'pure rural heartland'.

Introduction

Like many inland Queensland rural towns, it enjoyed the boom times during most of the twentieth century, but experienced the full negative impact of the more recent rural agricultural downturn. However, through vision and the formulation and implementation of a comprehensive action plan, Boonah has achieved national recognition for its community led rural economic revival.

The Downturn of Boonah

With the downturn in rural commodities and the exodus of rural people to the cities looking for easier, better paying employment, the economies of these communities started to fade.

- The mills closed
- The butter factory closed and moved to the city
- Shops were empty, boarded up or pulled down
- Employment for young people was almost nonexistent

Remained two options:
- A dying and destitute rural community clinging to its traditions as its youth drifted to the cities, those who remained grew older and lost hope;
- Or it would become a dormitory suburb for the nearby metropolitan centres, the soul of the community would be lost and the rural nature and strength of our Shire would wither.

A Series of Events and Actions

° **Rejuvenation of the main street of Boonah:**

A desire to convert an architecturally unappealing, grey and boring street into a green, leafy, colourful and inviting community heart was the initial catalyst for community economic development. After failing three times to achieve funding from the State Mainstreet Program, locals decided to utilise the principles of Mainstreet, but carry out the revitalisation task with their own resources. This five year project started in 1992. The result represented a huge change for a conservative rural community, particularly when the two-way street changed into a one way thoroughfare with new angle parking and garden beds.   The expected hostility from some quarters was quickly overcome as a safer, cooler and more aesthetically pleasing CBD eventuated. Today the beautiful streetscape is a source of much local pride, and of visitor praise. Above all, it represented an illustration of the change possible through local effort.

° **Creation of a working partnership between the Boonah Shire Council and the Boonah Shire Chamber of Commerce**:

This helped to mobilise civic and business support for development.

° **Attendance at a Positive Rural Futures Conference:**

In 1998, a Boonah team attended this conference at Biloela. Through exposure to what other communities were undertaking, and a range of encouraging and inspiring conference sessions, the team returned to Boonah convinced they were on the right path, and determined to marshal ideas and resources and implemented a comprehensive action plan. As one local put it "we came home from that Conference believing that we could change our world and in essence we did and we have".

° **Coordination of a Community Opportunities Workshop:**

Utilizing Peter Kenyon from the Centre for Small Town Development, a Community Opportunities Workshop was held in May 1999. This event attracted 250 participants, and resulted in the prioritisation of 20 project areas. Subsequently, 10 of the project areas have been implemented.

° **Employment of an Economic Development Officer:**

  Through funding from the Federal Government's Regional Assistance Programme, a project officer was appointed to develop a number of project areas that emerged from the workshop.

° **Tourism Project:**

Being adjacent to seven national parks and World Heritage Listed areas was something locals had taken for granted. The realisation of the potential of this comparative advantage resulted in a plan to enhance the eco tourism opportunities of the shire. A $207,000 grant enabled the Ecotourism project to begin in October 1999, and to date an ecotourism strategy is in place, a database is being built, promotional material developed and value adding opportunities for local farmers and landowners identified.

° **Introduction of the Boonah Shire Rural Economic Development Institute:**
Through a partnership with the Bank of IDEAS, the concept of an annual conference based on best practice in rural economic development was designed and implemented in October 1999.   Such an event attracted participants and resource people from across Australia, New Zealand and the USA. It was based on the Nebraska Rural Development Institute in the USA, an opportunity for experimental learning within a living laboratory. The Institute has attracted a grant of $80,000 from the Federal Government, enabling it to expand into a calendar of events. The Institute has returned many benefits to the Boonah community œ national and state media focus, economic contribution from the presence of two hundred participants, partnership with a host of state and federal departments and organisations, the reality of over 100 volunteers working together, and the unique opportunity to showcase the richness and diversity of the Boonah Shire.

The factors of the positive revitalization

° **Commitment**:
Change has occurred in Boonah due to the determination and extraordinary level of commitment by a number of local people and groups. Johnson (2000:18) summarised their spirit well, "be prepared to get your hands dirty. There is no part of community economic development that - just happens".

° **Local entrepreneurialism**:
The entrepreneurial flair of local people is a key factor in the town's positive development. It is well captured by the Mayor, and local entrepreneur, John Brent – "In our area we are lucky to have entrepreneurial individuals … that's part of the strength of the community. The tenacity and individualism is coming to the fore, and they are using their own resources to establish things … it's not with government handouts. More than half the phone calls I receive are from people looking for help, advice and direction on moving forward, doing something or creating something within our shire" (Wright, 2000:4).

° **Initial streetscape activities**:
This was a catalyst for future change. It showed the community the positive social and economic impact that could be achieved if people worked together. It initiated the regular community consultation that occurs in Boonah, and it taught much about maintaining momentum despite regular criticism.

° **Positive community attitude and ownership:**
The community has worked hard on building the community's belief in itself. It uses every opportunity to highlight the positive aspects of the community including a weekly newspaper column entitled Ramblings, seizing any opportunity to speak about the community at state and national events. A local speaking team has addressed six such events in the last 12 months.   A popular expression in Boonah is "Never go away. Never falter. Never say die"

- **Local leadership:**

  Boonah is blessed with a core of passionate energetic leaders in civic, business and community sectors. The partnership between Council and the Chamber of Commerce is a major factor in the towns achievement. In the words of Ian Flint (council CEO and Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce) – "Boonah Shire Council and the Boonah Shire Chamber of Commerce have formed a unique partnership of working together to create opportunities and drive initiatives for development of the Boonah Shire community. Our collective resources have been focused on the common objective of helping our community to help itself to revive and strengthen its social and economic base from within".

- **Smart use of outside resources:**

  Over the last 2 years Boonah has been the recipient of over $350,000 funding from state and federal governments. Early in the process they recruited a journalist to prepare applications, and in the words of local builder Rick Stanfield "we have adopted an attitude of never going away; if we are knocked back the first time we find out why and then overcome each problem as it is presented". Creighton adds further insight to the necessary process – "we soon learned that the day you submit a grant application is the day that the hard work begins… you have to know your project inside out and be prepared to argue your case strongly" (Johnson, 2000:18).

- **Importance of outside community champions:**

  Boonah has invested in building positive relationships with a host of people at state, national and international levels, always ready to promote and support the efforts of Boonah. In particular, their local federal member, Kay Elison, has been tireless in her support, as have a host of energetic and visionary public servants working in a variety of departments.

- **Focus on young men and women:**.

  Boonah has a strong focus on the active involvement of young people.

  - Young people are strongly represented in the Institute team of volunteers.
  - The Institute has a special youth development program.
  - $20,000 was secured to erect a skate bowl.
  - Boonah was the first community in Australia to pilot the national 'Youth at the Centre' initiative.
  - A strong objective of the Tradespersons' Cooperative is to collectively employ young
  - people, six new apprenticeships resulted in the first six months of operation.

- **The fun component:**

  Boonah people knew the time commitment that would be required to ensure the success of their numerous projects. They understood that the only way they could operate was to ensure the process was fun. "We make it all social. People trying to get an event together don't have formal meetings, they sit and talk in a nice café. If I had an idea to float, I'd

invite the relevant people to dinner. Between 10.00pm and midnight the best ideas start to flow" (Creighton in Johnson, 2000:18).

° **Belief in the interdependency between town and rural hinterland:**

Boonah is a community whose beliefs are firmly based in its rural heritage. They believe that for a rural community to retain its identity and lifestyle, there must be a vibrancy in both the town based and the rural based economies. Both economies are viewed as inseparably interlinked, and all must work together to create a common positive future.

B. Coolah (New South Wales)

On 5 November, 1999, a Giant Street Party was held in Coolah to celebrate the community's achievements over the previous four years. The event represented the opening of the first stage of their magnificent revamped main street, the official 'turn on' of their new heritage lighting and the first birthday of their community Telecentre.

Introduction

Coolah is a small central west New South Wales agricultural service town, 360 kms north west of Sydney. With a population of 880 and servicing a district population of 1,500 people, this small town experienced significant economic and social down-turn due to the rural recession, drought and particularly the closure of the town's mill following the State Government conversion of the local State Forest into a National Park. These actions, together with the discovery that Coolah was left off a range of recently published tourism and national parks maps spurred local residents to take action. A local development and coordination vehicle, the Coolah District Development Group, was created with the following mission statement: "to foster safe, healthy, cultural and heritage environment for our community; preserve our town services, character and continue to encourage growth and development of the district with productive and sustainable industries'.

Eight step Strategy

°   Step 1 – 'Put Coolah back on the map' with a street photograph involving 600 Coolah
        residents. It succeeded in gaining widespread media attention.
°   Step 2 – 'Clean up Coolah's act' - a major spring clean event.
°   Step 3 – 'You don't get a second chance at a first impression' - employed landscape
        architects to prepare plans to beautify the main street.
°   Step 4 – 'Raise money for the streetscaping' -an open garden weekend was organised
        involving eight local gardens and raised $22,000.
°   Step 5 – 'Create attractive town entrances' entrance statements and signs were prepared
        and installed.
°   Step 6 – 'Lobby government' - funding was sought for an all weather road to access the
        national park and enhance tourism numbers.
°   Steps 7 and 8 – 'Promote the district' - a colourful brochure and a tourism video were
    both produced

A Set of Projects

°   Focus on, and continual upgrade of, their main-street, providing the community with an
    attractive heart and a constant source of pride for locals and positive comment by visitors.
    Over $500,000 has been expended in a main street heritage refurbishment;

°   Establishment of a local Telecentre which was born out of a need to provide low cost
    internet access and technology based opportunities for Coolah residents. Funding to
    build the Telecentre and establish their own Internet Service Provider (ISP) business was
    jointly funded by grants from the Networking the Nation program and The Department of
    Primary Industries and Energy. The Centre employs five people.

°   Creation of mobile telephone coverage for the Shire.

°   Setting up of a youth council.

°   Facilitation of a series of initiatives to identify and minimise economic leakage,
    resulting in 3 new businesses providing a total of 16 jobs, together with an emphasis
    on shopping locally.

The Factors of Successful Revitalization

°   **The wake up call:**
    The creation of a national park and the subsequent closure of their timber mill was a crisis
    turning point and gave the town 'a smell of death' according to Gary Connolly, the first
    chairperson of the Coolah District Development Group. However, locals were determined
    to take responsibility for their own destiny.

° **Creation of a development vehicle:**

The creation of The Coolah District Development Group in august 1994 was an early step in the revitalisation efforts. It is an independent non-profit organisation with a widely based membership drawn from businesses, individuals and community groups. They are united in their commitment to the positive growth of the Coolah community. The organisation also generates $5,000 per year through an imaginative membership scheme.

° **Use of community development planning processes:**
Throughout the last five years, Coolah has regularly had planning forums and utilised outside facilitators. These events have generated both ideas, and community commitment to ensure their implementation. The support of the Department of State and Regional Development has been invaluable in this process.

° **Community inclusiveness:**
A strong operational principle evident in Coolah is community inclusiveness. The Development Group operates through a series of focused sub-groups, and has sought to maximise community input and participation through public workshops, working bees, and community fund raising initiatives. Development Group members also discovered early the need to approach people personally to get involved.

° **Effective fundraising strategies:**

Over a four year period, Coolah has successfully secured $1.6m in outside funding for community projects. Each community achievement helped lift the profile of Coolah. Government departments and universities then wanted to partner with the community. However, what is more impressive has been the community's internal fundraising schemes. For example, the Coolah District Garden Group, a sub group of the Coolah District development have raised over $50,000 for the main street beautification project.

° **Partnership with local government:**
The arrival of a new General Manager of the Shire, Shane Burns, occurred as revitalisation efforts were beginning. His personal commitment and ability to facilitate a council/community partnership with the community taking the lead, and council playing a resourcing role, has been invaluable. Council has certainly embraced community ownership and has become willing to invest in local economic development.

° **Marketing:**
Coolah was fortunate to have the early combination of local newspaper operator, Gary Connelly, as initial chairperson and Eleanor Cook with her strong marketing and media background as their first coordinator. Together their skills contributed greatly to achieve a number of high profile events like 'Put Coolah Back on the Map' and 'Turn On the Lights for Coolah's Future', which helped gain widespread media attention. Coolah has been very effective in utilising local, regional, state and national media to highlight their achievements, an important strategy to keep locals aware and their motivation high.

° **Pride building events:**

Besides having media profile value, Coolah through its huge community photo event, its garden fund raising events, spring clean up days and street party regularly created

opportunities for locals to celebrate their achievements and have fun. In addition, such events also had a powerful by-product.

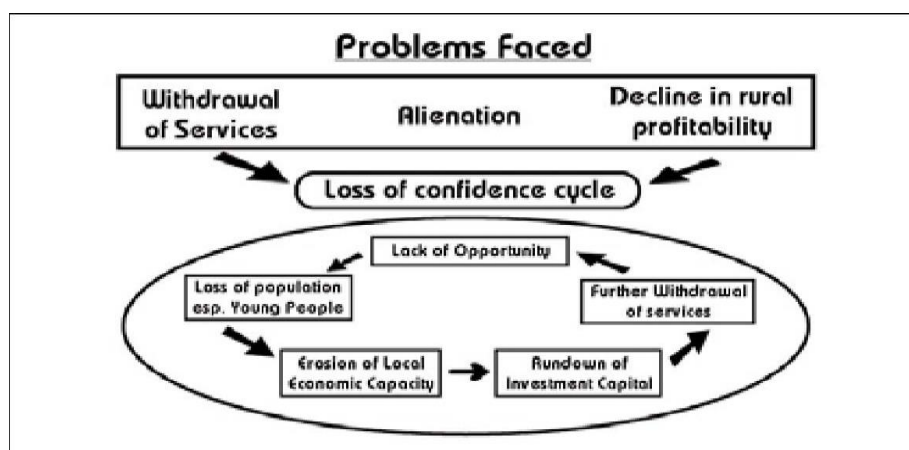## C.   Mitchell (Queensland)

Introduction

Mitchell (population 1,200), the principal town of the Shire of Booringa, is situated on the Warrego Highway, 560 kilometres west of Brisbane. Over the last two decades, as an agricultural service centre in a traditional cattle and sheep district subject to long periods of drought, the community has seen the decline in government services, business life and population (especially young people).

Shire of Booringa – population Census Figures			
	1986	1991	1996
Total population	2,297	2,151	1,934
15 – 19 years old	7.7%	6.7%	4.6%
20 – 24 years old	8.8%	7.7%	6.9%
25 – 29 years old	8.7%	8.4%	7.4%

However, the community has developed a national reputation for its revitalisation efforts, as evidenced by its selection as a highlighted case study during the Regional Australia Summit (October 1999)

Two Diagrams of Booringa Shire Council

The Chief Executive Officer of the Booringa Shire Council, Jeff Watson used the following two diagrams at the Regional Australia Summit to capture the challenges faced by the community, and the response required.

Breaking The Downward Spiral

Changing Community Attitudes

Rebuilding community confidence

Vision

Outcomes

Leadership

Empowerment

The Process of Michell's Revitalization

° 1990 - Closure of Court House and railway employment reductions;

° 1991 - Formation of the Booringa Action Group (BAG) as a vehicle for local development. BAG was one outcome of one of the first Future Search Workshops in Queensland conducted by Doug Martin of the State Department of Business, Industry and Regional Development. The Future Search Conference was the first of a number of such community planning events held during the 1990s in Mitchell;

° 1994 - Construction of the Mitchell RSL and Combined Sports Club as a premier sporting facility;

° 1995 - Employment of Sue Middleton as the first full time development officer who gave momentum to community economic development;

° 1996 - The Kenniff Courthouse was redeveloped as a tourism centre;

° 1997 - Foundation of a Community Reference Group, and foundation of the Booringa Shire Youth Council;

° 1998 - Employment of Brian Arnold as Manager, Entrepreneurial Marketing Services who immediately developed a proactive entrepreneurial approach to development. 1998 also saw further initiatives in tourism with the opening of an extended Caravan Park and Great Artesian Spa;

° 1999 - Further development of the Spa into a resort concept and a major youth employment program, and the establishment of several new enterprises with council financial support;

° 2000 - Launching of another youth enterprise project - a river boat cruise.

The Factors of Successful Revitalization

° **Wake up call:**

In 1990, the distress emanating from the closure of the Courthouse, reduction in railway employment and loss of power maintenance workers was compounded by the Queensland Deputy Premier appearing in town and mouthing the following message "the sooner you move to the nearby regional centre of Roma the better you will be. Within 10 years you will not be here". In the words of one local – "after 30 years of being kicked and having

things taken away, we decided it was time to fight back and make things happen ourselves".

° **Community planning events and outside facilitation:**

The events of 1990 led directly to the interest in holding a community planning workshop, and the first 'Future Search Workshop' in Queensland was held in Mitchell in 1991. Besides generating a range of ideas, the event also motivated people to take responsibility for their own future and get involved in the town. In the words of one organiser "this was the first time people thought about what was positive about Mitchell'. It also led to the creation of the Booringa Action Group. Since 1991 there have been a number of community planning events. As one local councillor put it – "we sensed a continuous challenge to come up with new ideas". The importance of having outside skilled facilitators has been identified as vital to encouraging broad based participation and consensus decision making.

° **Council leadership and professional staff:**

Leadership by council in terms of economic development has been vital. "Council has a progressive image and have shown they are willing to take some risks" (Manager, Entrepreneurial Marketing Services). Council have demonstrated their commitment to the economic revitalisation through their regular investment, eg, expended $60,000 on television marketing, $500,000 on developing the Caravan Park, $200,000 equity in the bottled water plant. Also there is strong recognition of the leadership role of Council CEO, Jeff Watson, and his local connection – "having a CEO born and bred in the district helps a lot". The council has also been prepared to be innovative in terms of staff appointments. When local initiatives did not take off initially, there was recognition of the need for a 'professional pair of arms and legs' and the Shire of Booringa was one of the first councils to employ an Economic Development Officer. This move has returned over $750,000 in outside funding alone. The Shire Council has also appointed a Manager of Entrepreneurial Marketing, a clear commitment to the council's proactive approach to business development.

° **Booringa Action Group:**

This local development group has played an important role. It has given local people an idea generation forum and local government a sounding board for feedback and a means to access community based funding.

° **Business development focus:**

The community has continually engaged in initiatives that seek to attract, develop and retain local business. The motivation behind their tourist initiatives is to hold visitors as long as possible within the community, recognising that this must be good for expenditure on local products and services. Their support for Young Achievement Australia programs at the local school level emanates from a belief that the "only way to develop rural communities like Mitchell is by developing entrepreneurs" (Manager, Entrepreneurial Marketing Services).

° **Tourism focus**:

Given Mitchell's location, natural advantages and the growing popularity of the outback, tourism was an obvious industry sector to develop. Mitchell in fact has become a tourist destination and resort. The spa complex has had a dramatic effect and certainly has "put the town on the map" (local business person).

° **Youth focus:**

The community has been very supportive of their council's numerous efforts to enhance employment and social opportunities for young people appointment of a youth worker, establishment of a youth council, creation of 11 trainee positions within council workforce… The spa complex has played a vital role giving young people a sense of pride about the quality of their facilities and enabling them to feel there are meaningful employment and training options within the town. The spa also generates 25 employment positions.

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