

REPORT ON LATROBE VALLEY COMMUNITY PARTNERING PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION

Community Partnering Project was a joint Latrobe City Council and Monash University pilot project, funded for 1999 and 2000, to work with marginalised groups (like unemployed young people, sole parents and ex-SEC workers) to develop community-based initiatives that have the potential to contribute to community and economic development. The project employed an asset-based approach, so initiatives built on the skills, abilities and interests that people already possessed.

Funding

Latrobe City Council	- \$20,000 cash (including \$5,000 from Australian Paper & Loy Yang Power)
	- \$20,000 in-kind contribution (e.g. office space, staff time)
Australian Research Council	- \$ 75,000
TOTAL	\$115,000

Purpose of the Report

The aim of this report is to provide a brief overview of on-going progress and achievements since Community Partnering formally ceased in December 2000. It also identifies some key learnings based on how each of the initiatives that were

developed under Community Partnering have fared over the past three years, since the funded stage of the project ended. Finally, it suggests some avenues for strengthening each of the initiatives.

This report has been prepared by Jenny Cameron (Griffith University) and Katherine Gibson (Australian National University) who were members of the Monash University team that worked on the Community Partnering Project. The report is based on a field visit to the Latrobe Valley, 8-10 December 2003, when interviews were conducted with a range of council and resident participants in the Community Partnering Project. It also builds on previous visits and interviews conducted in November 2002 and December 2001.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

1. Santa's Workshop

- Started in October 1999, and continues to operate (5 years of operation).
- Opens February/March to December, one or two days each week, with increased opening hours closer to Christmas.
- First part of the year focuses on making decorations for sale, and monies raised are used to supply materials to residents who use the workshop in the latter part of the year.
- Workshop also produces decorations that are donated to groups. In 2003, for instance, decorations were donated to one primary school and used as a prize in a fund-raising raffle. In other years, decorations have been donated to groups that include local nursing homes.
- Managed by a two local residents who work as a volunteer team.
- Approximately 15-20 residents from across the region use the workshop each year.
- Strong partnership with Latrobe City Council, with Council auspicing the project by providing the building and covering the cost of electricity and public liability insurance.
- Cost of materials covered through the sale of decorations, with some materials (mainly left-over paint) donated.

- Community Development Outcomes:
 - Participants from across the region have built strong social relationships (perhaps best exemplified through the informal bbqs that the group holds)
 - Participants have a sense of accomplishment through making decorations for their own use, for other community groups and for sale
 - Participants share skills and ideas with each other
 - Produces high impact decorations that contribute to a more general sense of community well-being.

- Economic Development Outcomes:
 - Located in the informal economy, with individuals making products for their own use, and the group making products that are donated to others, such as nursing homes and schools

- Two Work for the Dole projects have been run through Santa's Workshop.
- Links to the formal economy with products being sold and monies raised held in a Bunnings account which is used to purchase timber and other materials at cost price (this provides an avenue for Bunnings to practise corporate citizenship).



Santa's Workshop, 2002

Photo: Weekly Times, 04/12/2002

2. Latrobe Community Workshed @ Newborough Inc.

- Started in October 2000, and continues to operate (4 years of operation).
- Sixteen members, open one day each week, with a range of users including retired workers, women and secondary school students (as part of an alternative curriculum program).
- Membership of \$10/year (covers public liability insurance); users pay \$2/day which goes towards the cost of electricity, rent (\$45/week) and rates (approx. \$500/year).
- Woodworking and other equipment funded through a Regional Solutions Grant (Federal Govt).
- Initially planned as a partnership between the community group, private business (who would provide a disused workshed free-of-charge) and Latrobe City Council (who would cover the cost of rates for the premises).
- Because of conflicting ideas, the project moved from the initial premises and now only involves the community group. A volunteer Committee of Management (which includes retirees and people with disabilities) manages the project.
- Community Development Outcomes:
 - Participants have built strong social relationships across varying ages, abilities and backgrounds.

- Participants have developed a strong sense of the strengths and contributions that can be made by people with varying abilities.
- Participants have developed their capacity to organise and manage community projects.

- Economic Development Outcomes:
 - Participants make products for their own use.
 - In the first year of operation the group made Christmas hamper boxes on a commercial basis.

3. Latrobe Valley Community Environmental Gardens Inc. (LVCEG)

- Started in October 1999, and continued to operate until mid-2003 (almost 4 years of operation).
- Managed by a Committee of Management (which included unemployed people, retirees, sole parents and people with disabilities).
- Site provided by Latrobe City Council (as Committee of Management for the site which is on crown land)
- Funding from Family and Community Networks Initiatives (Federal Govt), Latrobe City Trust – Gambling Impact Fund and Latrobe City Council Community Grant used for infrastructure and training, including:
 - Perimeter fencing
 - Water reconnection
 - Gardening equipment
 - Health and safety training
 - Leadership training.
- The group also achieved:
 - Planning permission for the garden
 - Clearing of trees (with assistance of Work for the Dole participants)
 - Clearing of concrete pads (a feature of the previous caravan park)
 - Composting system and worm farms established
 - Two crops of vegetables (mainly broad beans), some of which were donated to the Food Bank.

- Community Development Outcomes:
 - Participants have built strong social relationships across varying ages, abilities and backgrounds.
 - Participants have developed a strong sense of the strengths and contributions that can be made by people with varying abilities.
 - Participants have developed their capacity to organise and manage community projects.
 - Several participants have achieved positive health outcomes by becoming more involved in the group and participating in outdoor activities.

- Economic Development Outcomes:
 - Commercial contracts for fencing and water reconnection
 - Alternative economic activities include Work for the Dole projects such as clearing of trees and weeds, and mowing

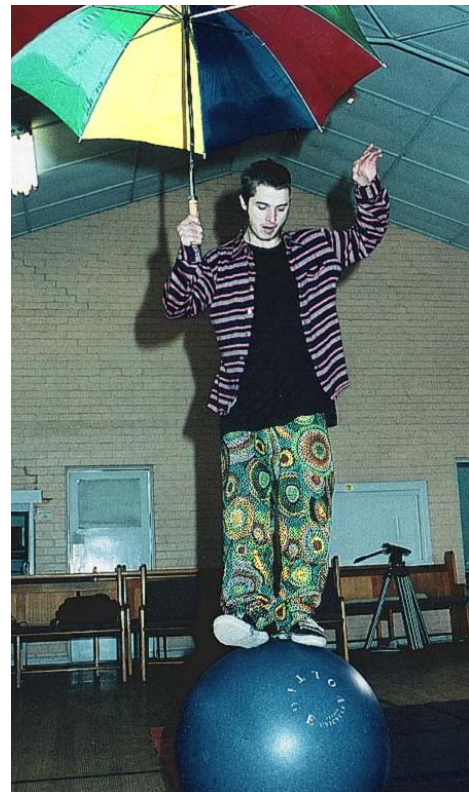
- Produce grown for individual use and for donation to the Food Bank.



Smoko on the Community and Environmental Gardens, 2000

4. Latrobe Cyber Circus

- One-day training workshop in 2000 for young unemployed people and young people in drug and alcohol rehabilitation (funded through Dept of Education Schools program) and one-week training camp in 2001 (funded through VicHealth).
- Circus camp and follow-up activities managed by a partnership involving Triple 0 Inc. (a young person's techno-electronica group), Latrobe City Council Youth Services, Luke's Place and GEST.
- Practice venue provided by Luke's Place.
- Community Development Outcomes:
 - Participants developed a strong sense of their strengths and abilities
 - Development of teamwork with participants having to rely on each for balancing and other circus skills



Circus Workshop, 1999

Photo: Latrobe Valley Express

- Participants have a sense of accomplishment through choreographing a Dr Seuss story into a circus performance
- Healthy lifestyles emphasised through all circus activities.

5. Shifting Focus: Alternative Pathways to Community and Economic Development

- Resource kit documenting all steps used in the Community Partnering Project
- Published in 2001, and available free-of-charge through Latrobe City Council website and the Community Economies website: (<http://www.latrobe.vic.gov.au/content.cfm?categoryid=14>), (<http://www.communityeconomies.org/info.html#action>)
- Accessed by a range of organisations including:
 - Brisbane City Council (Fostering Imagination project and North Place Community Development Team)
 - Gold Coast School and Community Families Project
 - South West Strategy, Charleville, Queensland
 - JET (Joint Education Trust), Muizenberg, Cape Town, South Africa
 - Jagna Municipal Council, Bohol Province, Philippines.



Workshop based on the Resource Kit, Eagleby, South East Queensland, 2002

KEY LEARNINGS

1. Institutional Support

- The level and type of support from Latrobe City Council has meant that Santa's Workshop has been able to concentrate on making Christmas decorations from the outset and therefore develop into a smoothly run operation. Because of Latrobe City Council support, the management duo are freed up from concerns such as raising funds for public liability insurance and can focus their energies on making decorations for sale and donation, and assisting others who use the workshop.
- Latrobe Cyber Circus also received strong institutional support through the partnership between Triple 0 Inc., Latrobe City Council Youth Services, Luke's Place and GEST. A team of people oversaw the Circus Camp, and practice spaces and meeting venues were readily available.
- Since withdrawal of the original offer of a rent-free site the Latrobe Community Workshed @ Newborough Inc. has had to rent commercial premises (\$45/week), and pay council rates (approx. \$500/year) and electricity. This places considerable stress on members and the Committee of Management who need to find avenues for raising these funds. This means that a newly formed volunteer and community group has to deal with commercial considerations at the same time as having to refine their activities and build community support. As a result the energy and focus of members and the Committee of Management are dispersed.

Key Learning:

Newly formed community projects need appropriate support so they can focus on doing their particular activity and building community support.

- Funding support has been relatively easy to attract. LVCEG, for example, received funding from the Family and Community Networks Initiatives (Federal Govt); the Community Workshed, from a Regional Solutions Grant (Federal Govt); and Latrobe Cyber Circus, from VicHealth.
- It has been more difficult to secure ongoing capacity building support, particularly in terms of strategic advice and training to help LVCEG and the Community Workshed refine and rethink their activities and direction.
- Importantly emerging community initiatives with relatively inexperienced members may not even be aware that they need this type of strategic support. Institutions therefore need to monitor progress and find a balance between stepping in too early with advice and support, and letting community groups develop their capacity to deal with obstacles and overcome set-backs.

Key Learning:

A critical form of institutional support is strategic advice and training. This needs to be provided in a balanced way so community groups receive strategic input while still developing their capacity to deal with challenges.

2. Focus of Activity

- Santa's Workshop is focussed entirely on one activity – making large outdoor Christmas decorations. From small beginnings in 1999 it has generated sufficient interest to develop into an ongoing and viable project. One important aspect of generating interest has been the media attention that the workshop has received.
- LVCEG was an ambitious project that aimed to include a range of activities such as individual garden plots, group garden plots (for groups such as schools, Work for the Dole, Community Jobs Placement, Community Service Workers), raised garden beds (for older people and those with physical disabilities), composting and worm farms. The group tried to develop all these activities in tandem without a clear sense of which were most viable in the Valley, given community interests and the availability of private land for gardening. For most of those concerned at the outset the opportunity to work together in an outdoor setting and to contribute something to the community was the prime attraction. In retrospect it may have been more strategic to focus on one main activity that harnessed these desires and develop the other activities more gradually.
- One possibility proposed by Basil Natoli, a community garden worker from the Office of Housing, was to use the site as an urban farm, with Work for the Dole, Community Jobs Placement or Community Service Workers growing produce for agencies like the local Food Bank. This would not preclude individuals from having their own individual garden beds, or other groups running projects on the site; rather it would help to concentrate the effort and energies of LVCEG and produce more immediate outcomes. (It would also have helped demonstrate that community gardens are not just about individual garden plots, but can comprise a great array of outdoor social activities).

Key Learning:

It is important to focus on one main activity so there are immediate and tangible outcomes and successes. Other activities can develop more gradually.

- In Santa's Workshop activity is largely focussed around individuals making their own decorations. The purpose of selling decorations is to raise funds for materials that individuals can use, and the making of decorations to donate to other groups is a secondary activity. Because of the institutional support from Council the level of individual focus is viable.
- The Community Workshed is also focussed on individual activity; however, because there is no institutional support this focus will need to be rethought. Either the workshed needs to develop some collective woodworking activities to raise funds for rent and rates, or an alternative rental arrangement needs to be found.

Key Learning:

A focus on individual activity is perhaps only possible if it is “underwritten” with institutional support. Without institutional support community groups need to find avenues for raising funds.

3. Time-Frames

- Santa’s Workshop was located in a building that required minimal preparation, and the group could start producing Christmas decorations immediately.
- The site for the community and environmental gardens was large and required considerable preparation before any gardening or environmental activities could begin. The group put enormous effort into preparing the site (e.g. planning permission, fencing, water reconnection, tree clearing), which delayed them from doing any gardening work. During these delays some members lost enthusiasm and dropped out.
- The Community Workshed was delayed because the initial arrangement for premises broke-down and the group was left to find an alternative site.

Key Learning:

Having a site or building where groups can start their main project activity with only minimal delays is important.

- Santa’s Workshop has been able to achieve success in an extremely short time-frame; however, the potential to expand into a more comprehensive endeavour in the longer-term is perhaps limited.
- LVCEG had enormous longer-term potential to develop into a comprehensive community and economic development project. The group was particularly inspired by CERES in Melbourne, which took 20 years to develop from a small volunteer group into an incorporated organisation with a \$1.6 million budget and 25 full-time equivalent positions.

Key Learning:

Smaller successes are achievable in the short-term; while larger successes need to be given longer time frames to develop.

4. Leadership

- Santa’s Workshop expanded on an activity that someone was already doing. This meant there was an immediate and identifiable leader with skills and expertise that others could learn from. This also means, however, that the project is very reliant on this leader.
- LVCEG and the Community Workshed were new activities so the groups involved had to define what the projects were about, as well as develop their skills. This has meant that activities have progressed more slowly but a pool of residents has developed their organisational and leadership capacities.

- In the initial phase of the Community Workshed one member of the Committee of Management had a different vision than other members and started “pulling” the project in another direction. The rest of the Committee of Management had to develop leadership skills to deal with this, even though this meant moving out of the original premises and into a more uncertain future.
- In Latrobe Cyber Circus one of the young people who was a key leader suffered from a mental illness that impeded their ability to lead. As a result the group disbanded.
- An important characteristic of all projects is that the leaders tended to be people who were not already well-known; rather, they were people who almost found themselves in a situation where leadership was required, and they grew into their leadership role.

Key Learning:

Potential leaders are not always readily identifiable but can emerge as they gain skills and confidence.

5. Models for Developing Community-Based Enterprises

- Each of the different projects has progressed along its own pathway. There is no necessary best model to follow, but, as outlined above, there are key points in the development of each project where strategic decisions needed to be made, and various forms of support provided.

Key Learning:

There are various pathways for developing community-based enterprises, nevertheless along each pathway there are moments when key decisions need to be made and various forms of support provided.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

1. Santa's Workshop

- Santa's Workshop is progressing extremely well, its only vulnerability is its reliance on its current leader. This means accepting that the project is likely to fold when the current leader steps aside, or working with the group to identify and foster other leaders.

2. Latrobe Community Workshed @ Newborough Inc.

- It is a major constraint that this volunteer and community group has to deal with commercial considerations (weekly rent and annual rates) so early in its life.
 - ⇒ **Assist the workshed to find alternative premises where they do not have to pay rent (or assist them negotiate for reduced rent)**
 - ⇒ **Provide economic development advice for product/s that can be easily produced by members and sold commercially (thereby covering the cost of rental and rates). (In the first year the workshed did produce Christmas hampers on a commercial basis).**

3. Latrobe Valley Community Environmental Gardens Inc.

- Even though LVCEG has disbanded considerable work has been done to ready the site for gardening/farming/environmental activities, and there has been investment in necessary infrastructure. In effect there is now an area that could readily be used by another group (indeed the Rose Garden is currently using the site, although the site drainage is not the best for roses).
 - ⇒ **Identify other groups who could use the site, particularly identify and support any group who could use the site as a Work for the Dole project (or Community Jobs Placement or Community Service project), to produce crops for the Food Bank (which is currently calling for fresh food donations).**
 - ⇒ **The Department of Sustainability and the Environment as the crown body with final responsibility for the land may also be interested in fostering environmental activities on site.**
 - ⇒ **Acknowledge the considerable effort put into site preparation by the five key residents involved with something like a Certificate of Appreciation.**