

Stories from the back paddock: Community building in the Pyrenees Shire

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Abstract

In 2001 the Victorian Government launched its Community Building initiative. As part of this initiative the government funded 11 locally based community building demonstration projects. One of these projects is located within the Pyrenees Shire.

In this discussion paper the authors examine the Pyrenees Shire's Community Building Demonstration Project, describing the program and its objectives. They focus on the factors which have had a significant impact on the community building process within the municipality, identifying factors which have both facilitated and impeded the process. In terms of facilitating factors they identify a number: the involvement of community champions, strong local government support and community readiness, the capacity to deliver 'runs on the board' early in the life of the project, along with a flexible planning process. Conversely, they identify factors which have impeded the community building process in the Shire. Lack of continuity of personnel, an inability to develop shared understanding on occasions and difficulties associated with engaging disparate groups are described.

This paper is significant for a number of reasons. In the first instance, it contributes useful, 'real time' insights into the implementation of community building in regional Victoria. Secondly it may, through its contribution to theory building and managerial practice, develop and strengthen community building programs in the future. Finally, at the level of public policy, it may contribute to the growing body of knowledge around the efficiency, effectiveness and appropriateness of these types of regional interventions.

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Introduction

In October 2001 the Victorian Government launched its *Community Building* initiative, designed to help strengthen communities and support their hopes and aspirations for the future (Victorians Growing Together, 2001).

One component of this initiative is a set of 11 community building demonstration projects. These projects, initiated and funded by government, have been designed to achieve two primary objectives: firstly, to support local communities to address local priorities and strengthen capacity, and secondly, to enable Government and communities to build their understanding of the community building process (Department of Victorian Communities, 2003).

One of these demonstration projects is located within the Pyrenees Shire in Central Victoria. It is auspiced by the Pyrenees Shire Council, and managed by a steering committee comprising government and community representatives. The project, which commenced in July 2002, is focused around 10 core activities occurring throughout the Shire.

This discussion paper examines community building in the Pyrenees Shire. It seeks to contribute answers to a number of the key research questions: What is the nature of the community building within the Shire? What lessons can be learned from the Shire's community building process? The authors of the paper have gathered their information over time, through the process of evaluating the Pyrenees Shire Community Building (PSCB) Demonstration Project. Evaluation of the project is occurring on a regular basis, and involves members of the steering committee, project staff and an independent evaluator.

This paper begins with a brief overview of community building and the Victorian Government's community building initiative. It continues with a description of the core activities which comprise the Shire's community building project and the project's goals for community building. The authors go on to examine the process of implementing community building activities within the Shire, recognising that the implementation process has a significant bearing on the project's outcomes. The authors conclude by highlighting some of the key factors which have influenced the community building project within the Shire.

Community building

Community building is the term used to describe a process of community improvement, which is essentially local and comprehensive, and involves community members in a very significant way. With its focus on community ownership and engagement, the process is typically described as 'new', contrasted against more traditional approaches which were narrowly designed, problem-focused, and government sponsored social interventions (Hyman, 2003 p. 196).

The community building process is underpinned by two fundamental principles; firstly, that the community is the appropriate focus for development efforts, and secondly, that enhancing the capacity of communities to engage and support residents is a critical element of successful community development (Stone, 1996). Community building also assumes that associations within a geographic area are important for community well-being and that bringing together a broad range of stakeholders will engender better understanding of the community's problems. It is based on the premise that the most effective solutions will come from building on community assets, from careful and systematic analysis and planning, and from a shared understanding of what is required to revitalise the community (Walsh, 1997).

Community building seeks to strengthen all aspects of community well-being including the economic, environmental and social components, while addressing the interrelationships between them. Strategically, it relies on a broad, multi-sectoral repertoire of interventions in such areas as housing, education, family support, employment and health (Baum, 2001).

The Community Building Initiative in Victoria

The Victorian Government's Community Building Initiative was launched in October 2001 as part of its strategic plan for Victoria, entitled 'Growing Victoria Together'. It is designed to be a 'whole of government' approach, aimed at improving the way the government works 'in partnership' with Victorian communities to 'help strengthen communities, and to support their hopes and aspirations for the future' (Department of Victorian Communities, 2003).

The Victorian Government's Community Building Initiative has four key objectives: to improve the social, economic and environmental circumstances of communities, to develop active partnerships with stakeholders, to strengthen the capacity and cohesiveness of communities and to use bottom-up and joined up approaches to community development.

The eleven community building demonstration projects are an important component of the Government's Community Building Initiative. 10 of these projects are locality based, while the eleventh relates specifically to the indigenous community. These demonstration projects, funded for 3 years, are designed to assist Government and communities learn more about the community building process and to guide broader changes to Government programs and services (Department of Victorian Communities, 2003). A total of \$7m has been allocated to these demonstration projects. One of these projects is located within the Pyrenees Shire in Central Victoria.

Evaluating the Pyrenees Community Building Demonstration Project

The PSCB project, like others around the state, is being evaluated on a regular basis. To that end, the steering committee has appointed an independent evaluator, to work with steering committee members.

The evaluation model adopted by the PSCB project is based on the Community Building Evaluation Framework developed by Victorian firm 'Successworks' and recommended by the Victorian Government for use with its eleven community building demonstration projects. The evaluation utilises an objectives-based approach to measure the project's progress in relation to its original goals. Information for the evaluation is gathered via a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods.

The PSCB evaluation activity is designed to achieve a number of aims: to inform the ongoing development of the community building project within the Shire; to test the benefits of the community building approach more generally, and to assess the initiative's effectiveness against the broader objectives of the Victorian government.

The evaluation task presents a series of challenges for the evaluator and members of the PSCB steering committee. A number of these challenges derive from the objectives-based approach of the recommended evaluation model, while others derive from the complexity of the community building process. These challenges may limit the capacity of the evaluation activity to achieve its stated objectives.

The external evaluator has worked with members of the PSCB project over time to gather information about the project and its activities, and to make assessments about its effectiveness. Material for the following sections of this discussion paper has been gathered by the authors as part of the project's evaluation process.

The Pyrenees Shire Community Building Demonstration Project

The PSCB Demonstration Project was established in July 2002. It is managed by an independent committee of up to 10 government and community representatives appointed under section 86 of the Local Government Act. The project comprises 10 core activities which are being undertaken across the municipality. Like other community building demonstration projects, the project has a three year duration. Funding for the project will cease at 30 June 2005.

The Pyrenees Shire

The Pyrenees Shire is a diverse rural municipality with 6,200 residents. Its two principal towns, Beaufort and Avoca, have 2,600 residents in total, while the remaining 3,600 people identify with the eight small towns and ten localities across the Shire. The Shire covers 3,500 square kilometers and has around 20% of its land mass in State Forest or Park.

One third of all employment in the Shire is in primary industry (agriculture and forestry) which continues to experience significant restructuring pressures. The northern end of the Shire has a strong wine industry and emerging tourism infrastructure. The Southern part of the Shire has a sound manufacturing base and acts as a commuter area for Ballarat to the east.

Project aims and objectives

In 2002, the Pyrenees Shire engaged in a process of community consultation to identify key areas of need which could be addressed through its community building demonstration project. Surveys and town meetings were conducted in five of the Shire's principal towns, and specific priorities were identified. Based on these priorities, the Shire identified 10 activities which would constitute the core of the Shire's Community Building Project:

- establishing a community portal
- developing a shire wide weed management plan
- re-introducing government services to Snake Valley
- researching the delivery of government services to communities
- developing the Beaufort Community Action Network (BCAN)
- preparing community action plans
- providing seeding grants to support community building initiatives
- developing training and skills in the community
- involving youth and aged in community activities and
- consulting and developing project plans for remaining communities in the shire

These activities have been designed to achieve a number of outcomes related to strengthening the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the Pyrenees Shire and its residents. They will:

- maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of volunteer community time
- tailor government services to match community needs
- build a sense of belonging to local communities and to the Shire
- focus communities on their local priorities
- establish gateways to identify and access facilities and services for communities
- increase the capacity for people to be employed
- increase the self reliance and resilience of communities, and
- celebrate the strength of communities

Project progress to date

The level of progress has varied in relation to each of the project's core activities.

The community portal has been redeveloped, with some members of the community trained to input data. However, plans to make it a database or resource for community newsletters, and to have it updated continuously, have not been realised.

The weed management plan changed course early in the life of the project. It became apparent that the project, in its original form, did not have the support of broad acre landholders, who were more comfortable working within existing frameworks to source funds. The project was modified to ensure there was community representation on the gorse task force, which is the local committee steering works around this major weed.

In Snake Valley, the PSCB project has been instrumental in assisting the community to secure two significant government grants to renovate the community hall. It has worked with the local community to prioritise the services that are required, and is currently liaising with local councils and health service providers to secure the services of a visiting general practitioner.

The research project on service delivery has been completed. Consulting firm, RED³ undertook the activity, conducting a series of interviews and community workshops throughout the Shire. One of the key findings of the research project is that government services, whilst being generally available across the Shire, are not well promoted to residents.

The Beaufort Community Action Network (BCAN) project has not yet achieved its intended outcomes of rationalising and co-ordinating volunteer groups in the town. Personality factors and political agendas within and between community groups have impacted adversely on BCAN's focus, and consequently the progress of the project.

Community plans have been developed for five towns within the Shire, with the planning process underway in a further five. An external facilitator is training action plan leaders in each of the Shire's towns in an effort to ensure that plans and skills developed through the planning process are retained at the local community level. Completed action plans have been incorporated into the Pyrenees Shire Council's corporate planning process.

The seeding grants program has funded 17 individual projects within the Shire. These have supported local community activities and provided a valuable link for community building organisers into the various communities within the municipality.

Training and skills development activities have occurred in up to seven localities across the Shire. Sessions have focused on the role of council, grant submission writing and event co-ordination.

In addition to the original projects, the PSCB steering committee has also initiated and undertaken a number of other community activities. It has produced a Calendar of Events to promote various activities occurring throughout the Shire and a Community Directory of the Shire's many community groups and government agencies. It has supported local fundraising nights and organised various community barbecues in several communities. It

has also resourced training in equine studies and in hospitality; areas directly linked to industry in the Shire.

The community building process in the Pyrenees Shire

To date, much of the attention on community building in the Pyrenees Shire has been focused on the content and outcomes of core project activities. However, the process by which these activities are developed and implemented is critical to their success. Consequently, the ways in which community building decisions and actions are formulated and implemented are an important focus for evaluation activity.

In relation to the process of implementing community building activities within the Pyrenees Shire, a number of factors appear to have had a significant bearing on the success, or otherwise, of community building activities within the Shire. These factors are detailed below, and have been sorted according to whether they relate to community building organisers, the community, or the community building process.

Community building organisers

(i) Continuity of personnel

Continuity of personnel is a significant issue for the PSCB Project. Lack of continuity of personnel at project officer and at committee levels, as well as within the community action planning groups, is proving problematic, especially during the second half of the project's life. This lack of continuity presents two challenges for the project, the first relating to relationships, and the second relating to knowledge. Continual changeover of project personnel means there has been considerable need to re-form and rebuild relationships whenever personnel changes have occurred. The deeper issue for the project concerns who holds the knowledge on community building, and where such knowledge is held. Continual changeover of personnel is making it significantly more difficult to retain knowledge relevant to the project. It has also, arguably, slowed project progress and created cost inefficiencies.

Lack of continuity of personnel has highlighted the need for codifying or making more explicit, knowledge which may be embedded within a community, and for locating a central "place of reference" for that knowledge. This place could be within the Shire Council itself, though equally, it could be in another key institution like a community house, school or library. The same applies at the community level, particularly in relation to the process of engagement and consultation, and much less to actual activity or priorities. At the community level, it is hoped the town action plan documents, which describe the journeys of consultation and identify the location of important community resources, may be such a repository for knowledge.

(iii) Local government support

The PCBD Project has received considerable support from the local Shire Council from the outset. It played an important role in the lead up to the project supporting communities to identify areas of priority for the project. It has provided a physical 'home' for the project and access to Council staff and has committed additional resources to specific demonstration project activities. Most importantly, it has incorporated some project outputs, or learnings, into the Shire planning processes.

It would also appear that the Shire council has played a significant role as a champion of community building. All initiatives need champions and community building is no different. Indeed it may be even more important when dealing with highly individual and independent communities which are accustomed to taking full responsibility for their own futures. Council's support appears to derive from a deep seated and commonly held belief by Councilors and Staff that community building offers the Shire much in terms of its own planning, community liaison, service delivery and economic well being. The result has been a very public, whole of Council support for the program which appears to have had a positive benefit in terms of its acceptance at community level as well as its impact within Council itself.

(iv) The role of the committee

Committee members have different perspectives about the role of the committee in relation to the project.

Some committee members have preferred the committee to take a very direct and 'hands-on' role in relation to PSCB project activities. For them, direct involvement is the best way to ensure that project activities are undertaken in a timely and efficient manner. However, other committee members have wanted the committee to have a more indirect role, stressing the importance of community involvement and ownership, above issues of timeliness and efficiency. At times it has been difficult to reconcile these perspectives.

(v) Level of involvement of community champions

The most successful community building activities have been those which directly involve community champions. These community champions are generally well respected within their communities; they carry significant formal or informal power, and often represent an important link between the various community groups.

The PSCB Project has been able to engage a number of key people within the Shire's various communities who are linked to important networks. These individuals have been a key to the success of selected community building activities within their respective towns.

The community

(vi) Community readiness

'Community readiness' also seems to be an important factor in the success of otherwise of community building activities, and it has become apparent during the life of the project that communities vary in their 'readiness'; or their capacity to take up, and capitalise on community building activities.

Several communities within the Shire were very 'ready' to embrace community building. The communities of Snake Valley and Brewster are two examples. The Snake Valley community had worked together gradually over a period of years with the Shire to improve facilities in the township. As part of the community building process they identified the opportunity to redevelop the community hall, a \$350,000 project, as a hub for a range of

services and activities. This opportunity was grasped with enthusiasm by Snake Valley and the facility which opened in July 2004 now has up to 14 different community activities taking place in it each month as well as a range of professional services being delivered.

Likewise the community of Brewster, which has soldier settlement properties, a community hall and a CFA shed. In late 2003 the Shire and Brewster residents met over the future of the Hall. The hall was not being used and the Shire could not justify investing in it with such a low level of use. What followed was a concerted program of activities at the Hall, both fundraising and of general celebration, which have continued. The Shire committed \$3,000 in cash to hall upgrades which resulted in approximately \$27,000 worth of work being undertaken, partly funded by the State Government. There is now a safe and functional hall, combined with an active and engaged community at Brewster.

At the same time, there have been other communities within the Shire which have not been 'ready' to take on community building activities. In these communities no amount of effort from community building organisers has been able to promote the community building process.

This characteristic of community readiness seems to relate to a number of factors; in particular to whether key individuals within the community have time to devote to community building activities and to the community's perception of the likelihood of success or otherwise of such initiatives, given its past experiences.

The community building process

(vii) shared understanding

At the governance/committee level it seems particularly important for organising team members to share a common understanding about the community building process.

At the outset of the Pyrenees project there was a small core of committee members who shared a common understanding of the process, and this group guided the project for the first 12 months. However, during this time the broader management committee both struggled with, and at times rebelled against, this direction. Indeed, in a series of interviews with committee members conducted at the end of the project's first year, this lack of shared understanding of the broad goals and objectives of community building was one of the key issues raised by the majority of group members. Most members attributed this lack of shared understanding to a lack of clear guidelines to accompany the Community Building program at its inception. Although considerable effort was expended to develop a genuinely shared notion of the community building process in the Pyrenees Shire, failure to achieve this common vision impeded its progress, especially in the early stages of the project.

At the community level, the ability to develop a shared understanding of community building, and what it means to be a 'strong' community has been a continual challenge for the project.

(viii) early 'runs on the board'

Credibility, it seems, is born of results. The demonstration project appears to have been most successful where it has been able to demonstrate early results or successes to the community. In particular, the project had two areas where it has been able to establish early success.

The first of these was the project's Community Grants Program. Through this program the project was able to provide small amounts of funds to support a range of local community activities. In this relatively simple manner, the project was able to facilitate successful local activity within the Shire early on in the project's development.

The second of these was a series of simple fundraising activities which the project supported community groups to conduct for their own purposes. These were generally community barbecues, and film nights, which were easy to run, cost little to deliver, and yet were very effective in bringing community members together.

These early successes appear to have been significantly important in terms of building community awareness, and acceptance, of the community building initiative.

(ix) Ability to engage disparate groups in the process

The project has experienced mixed success in its capacity to engage and excite disparate groups within the community.

In Beaufort, the organizing team has been, to date, unable to engage a large number of disparate groups around the goals of rationalising volunteer resources and co-ordinating volunteer activity. The different agendas and personalities, of groups and group members have been, to date, impossible to reconcile. Also, in some of the towns where action plans have been developed, it has been difficult to engage some key stakeholder groups, e.g. members of the business community, in the process of community planning.

This inability to engage key groups has had an adverse impact on the project's ability to achieve some of its intended outcomes.

(x) The nature of planning

Whilst the original activities and goals of the project have remained at the centre of community building plans, some aspects of the Shire's community building plans have changed over time. These changes have occurred as a consequence of new learning; new opportunities which have arisen during the period and other external and internal factors which have impacted on the project's priorities. The original plan has been useful for guiding decision making and for maintaining project focus and momentum. However, the project's capacity to take on new priorities, new directions and new methods has enabled it to achieve some unexpected and unintended outcomes. The community building process has been both planned and emergent.

(xi) Time

Time has been a critical issue for the PSCB Demonstration Project. The short project timeframes have, on occasions, driven the steering committee and project staff to take a more direct and hands-on role in implementing community building activities; trading-off broad-based community involvement and ownership for expediency.

Community building organisers also share concerns that the short project timeframes will make it difficult for the project to achieve some of the initiative's highest-order goals around improving the long term social, environmental and economic sustainability of the community.

Implications for future community building programs

The Community Building Demonstration Project in the Pyrenees Shire is nearing the end of its three year funding period. During that time it has successfully completed most of its core community building activities, and has undertaken a number of other activities which were not part of its original project plan. The project is on track to achieve many of its intended outcomes.

Much has been learned about the factors which have significantly impacted on the community building process and its outcomes within the Shire. A number of factors clearly facilitated success: the involvement of community champions at all levels of the process, strong local government support and community readiness, together with the capacity to deliver 'runs on the board' early in the life of the project are important examples. A community building plan, which enabled the process to be both planned and emergent, was also a successful element of the project.

Conversely, other factors impeded the progress of the project. Lack of continuity of personnel, together with an inability to develop shared vision and understanding were significant obstacles to success. The project's inability to engage disparate groups also hampered progress. The limited timeframes associated with the project may also have long term implications.

These findings from the Pyrenees Shire are important, and while there is much still to be learned, they contribute to our growing understanding of the community building process and the factors that facilitate its success. As such they have important implications for public policy makers, community building practitioners and members of the research community in general. Information obtained through the implementation and the evaluation of the Pyrenees Shire Community Building Project, together with the ten other community building demonstration projects, will be critical to a better understanding of the initiative.

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