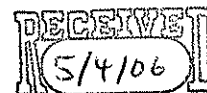


Mandy Kirsopp
19 Plozza's Rd
Haven Vic 3401



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24 March 2006 (Re-sent 21 April 2006)

Rural and Regional Services' Development Committee
Level 8
35 Spring St
Melbourne Vic 3000

Dear RRSDC Contact Person

Submission re: Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Thank you for the opportunity to suggest reasons why young people leave rural communities and to suggest strategies for the retention of young people.

Factors influencing the decision to remain or leave rural communities and factors influencing whether young people will return to their local community

For many young people, the decision to leave their local community is a normal part of life transition reflecting changing maturity, independence and a desire to experience other aspects of life. Many young people who initially leave their home community will inevitably return to their home towns or regions.

Other young people will choose to permanently leave their local community. Some possible reasons for the exodus of youth from rural Victoria include:

Access to education

This involves not just education immediately following secondary schooling, but education throughout life. With multiple career changes in a person's life, individuals need on-going access to formal education and training.

On-line learning is not the same as being able to attend classes and being able to engage in the social aspects of learning that occur in classrooms.

While formal education throughout life and career stages remains difficult to access in rural areas, people of all ages will need to move away from regional areas to access education and retraining or upgrading of skills for career progression.

Access to careers – not simply jobs

In rural Victoria it is difficult to pursue a career, as opposed to simply getting employment. For example, I am employed by the University of Ballarat and live in Horsham, in the Wimmera. My career is stalled because I live in rural Victoria. If I move to Ballarat or Melbourne, my career prospects would immediately advance. Again, despite the hype that accompanies on-line communication, learning and employment, the reality is that people are expected to be geographically available (or agree to the concomitant road travel) and so, living in a rural community is primarily for people who do not wish to pursue a career, or who, for other reasons cannot re-locate. I will eventually leave rural Victoria to advance my career.

Water

Water in rivers and in lakes adds significant value to rural living. The desperation and emotional aridity and hardship caused by drought cannot be underestimated. Water is an amazingly powerful factor contributing to job and lifestyle satisfaction (or lack of). Residential development in Melbourne either follows water courses or has water added to the estates. Land developers, at least, acknowledge the value of water to well being, ambience and lifestyle. This is an equally valid observation for people of all ages and income levels, living in rural areas.

In group/Out group biases

Rural communities are often celebrated for their closeness but there is a dark side to the shared histories of long term local families. The dark side is that outsiders; those people with different histories or different life experiences and different values are often alienated from the general community. Outsiders are not welcome.

In rural communities, people are accepted if they play sport, (football, netball or tennis), if they become volunteers, if they have novelty value, (mountain climbers) or if they have owned a local business for several years. Business owners are mostly regarded as community leaders ...

If people speak out against the conservative values that are often ingrained in local communities, they are branded as outsiders. Interest in politics, sustainable living or international affairs identifies the person as an outsider.

Rural communities are fearful of change.

That is why change-makers, or even just people who accept the need to change attitudes and practices are those people who invariably leave rural communities. They are perceived as being a threat to the long term residents and they are suffocated by the negativity shown towards new ideas.

My son, (Year 8) is more interested in the Bush/Howard/Iraq situation than local football but has been told very clearly by his classmates that his views are irrelevant in his home town. His teacher has counselled me to keep my son interested in politics (at home) until he is in Year 10, when politics will be discussed at school. My son already knows he has no long term future in rural Victoria. When the Cronulla riots occurred I was the only person who wrote a letter to the Editor of the local newspaper. Local events attracted more interest.

My childhood years were spent in Horsham but I left as a young adult and returned when my father became ill. Because of tertiary education and a range of different life experiences, I changed and my world view expanded, but the values and attitudes of the region have not changed and so, although I am a local, I am also an outsider. I am not interested in local sport and most of the people I meet acquire (not develop) their political opinions from the Herald newspaper and commercial television. I am waiting until my children complete secondary schooling and then will once again leave rural Victoria.

Parental experiences and values

My experience is that rural living is relatively inexpensive and relatively safe. It is a good place for the early years of young people. However, both my children will leave Horsham and the Wimmera when they complete secondary school. I will ensure they do. I want my children to experience cultural and ethnic diversity and to be intellectually and socially stimulated. I want them to feel they can express political opinions and actively engage in political and social change. None of this will be possible if they remain in rural Victoria.

Strategies to retain young people (and professionals) in rural Victoria

Return water to rural Victoria

Stop granting planning permits to sand mining companies (using a disproportionate amount of water), pipe the rural irrigation and rural water channels, seed the clouds, make usage of rain water tanks and grey water by local councils and households mandatory, use astro-turf where-ever possible, and use planning legislation to phase out 'lawn nature strips' and handkerchief sized front lawns.

If necessary, tilt the Eastern side of Australia so the water runs inland! (Thanks to the ABC Chaser team for this suggestion!). Apart from the obvious environmental arguments, emotional health needs require that rural Victoria must have water in its lakes and rivers.

Education, education, education

Education stimulates creativity, critical thinking, reasoning, and awareness of the wider world.

At the primary and secondary level of education, make it mandatory for teachers to have regular (annual) professional development in different learning styles, (and teaching techniques) the teaching of critical thinking and awareness of emotional intelligence so young people can be engaged in learning and become thoughtful of the world about them.

At the tertiary level make it mandatory for universities to provide education in rural areas. The Education Act has been altered so that the first years of many programs (Advanced Degrees etc) can be taught by TAFE qualified teachers. Use the Act to compel dual sector universities to break down the fire wall (of academic snobbery and funding) between Higher Education and TAFE teachers. The artificial barriers that currently exist disadvantage people in rural communities wishing to access Higher Education. Remove the barriers and greater educational opportunities will immediately become available for rural communities.

Access to careers

Broaden the definition of Equal Opportunity (or some such Act) so that discrimination on the basis of rural isolation becomes unlawful. This would alleviate the need for rurally-based residents to leave country areas to pursue their careers.

Decentralise government departments and relocate staff to regional (and rural) Victoria. This was the case 20 years' ago when Horsham (for example) supported the families of many staff employed in state government departments. A large percentage of Horsham's population, intellectual capacity and wealth moved from the region when the policy was abandoned.

Create critical thresholds or a mass

... of professionals and other people who have interests that are broader than the local cricket and football teams. This will happen naturally if careers can develop in rural communities and education is a lifelong reality. At the moment, the dominant majority of long term rural residents (the conservative mass) are contributing to the exodus of young people and their aspiring adult parents from rural and regional Victoria.

Finally

Country living is physically undemanding, with beautiful scenery and an easy lifestyle. Unfortunately, it is also very conservative, closed to new ideas and stifles intellectual and critical thought.

If this or any government is serious about redressing the imbalance between rural and regional Victoria, existing cultural norms and values and the intellectual capacity of rural Victoria must be examined and challenged.

Thank you again for the opportunity to participate in this inquiry. Please contact me if you need clarification of any of the ideas expressed in this letter. My contact 'phone number is 5382 6727.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mandy Kirsopp". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'M' and a stylized 'K'.

Mandy Kirsopp

