Murrindindi Shire Council - Economic Development and Tourism Department submission.

Infrastructure investment

Road quality/road closures – The regular road closure of the Maroondah Highway/Black Spur between Healesville and Narbethong due to road works and/or accidents is a major impediment to business. Businesses affected most significantly as a result of these road closures include those on the Marysville Triangle, the Acheron Valley to Alexandra and the Eildon/Lake Eildon region.

Similarly, if the construction of the Sugarloaf pipeline goes ahead, it could be expected that the free flow of traffic on the Melba Highway would be disrupted for significant periods of time. This can only have a detrimental effect on businesses that rely on the visitors who would normally utilise this access route to travel north. The township of Yea, which has had severe negative impacts related to bushfire and poor snow levels at Mt Buller for a number of seasons would be heavily affected by any Melba Highway closures/restrictions.

Sealing the Lake Eildon Loop Road – The capacity to create an iconic touring loop around Lake Eildon rests on government funding for the purpose of sealing the final section near Big River. This loop road would have high levels of appeal and impact significantly visitor numbers to the myriad of tourism related businesses based around Lake Eildon.

Public Transport - Murrindindi has three major highways, with two running north-south and one east-west. Despite this, public transport services (busses only) are slow to Melbourne and non-existent around the region or into other regional centres such as Shepparton, Benalla and Wangaratta. More regular bus services from Melbourne to the shire would improve visitor access (both domestic and international) and business/community development. Similarly improved intra Shire public transport options would enable visitors to move around and enhance tourism related employees/apprentices/trainees access to workplaces and training venues.
Broadband - Many businesses are still on last century dial up connections. Improvement in high speed, cost effective Broadband internet services would encourage more E - based and/or home based business to expand or relocate to regional areas where overheads may not be as large. The improvement in broadband services would also enable businesses to up skill and increase competitiveness. In industry development forums across Murrindindi participants have identified the need for more training opportunities in web based applications.

Mobile phone coverage - Black spots still exist in many regional areas where coverage is either poor or non-existent. This needs to be addressed especially in the context of the business tourism market.

Planning and Land Zoning

Changes from the Rural Zone to the Farming Zone are more restrictive to tourism development opportunities by definition, within the farming zone schedule. This is brought into tight focus in the provision of experiences and facilities for visitors close to natural attractions.

Murrindindi has a significant amount/number of natural conservation areas in private ownership that are appropriate for the rural conservation zoning, however from a tourism perspective it would be a concern if this also restricted opportunities for eco type developments.

As a region it is important that an understanding of the ways land use is changing is developed. There may be a need to develop strategies to take into account the changing nature of the landscape as it relates to the more traditional farming uses and more contemporary uses for tourism related purposes.

A key aim of these strategies should be to enable private investment attraction into regional areas for sustainable economic growth whilst retaining and enhancing the natural attractions that draw visitors to the regions.

Skills Shortage

Attracting skilled staff - A significant issue for operators in regional areas identified in the Murrindindi Training Needs Study 2005 is attracting and retaining skilled staff. Due in part to the seasonal nature of the work, many of the businesses have to make do with less than adequate staff or do everything themselves. This imposes limitations on business expansion and growth. Key areas of shortage include chefs, cooks and other hospitality staff.
Perception management - Targeting older employees and addressing the perception that tourism and hospitality employment is a job not a career would help regional tourism mature by attracting more quality employees to this sector.

Access to training - Improved access to training for new entrants to this sector through improved public transport and educational/training funding would also go a long way to addressing this skills shortage. These issues were also identified in the 2005 Murrindindi Training Needs Study.

Research

There is very limited, up to date, local area specific visitor research available. From the perspective of relevant tourism research the Murrindindi data collection area is split between the Yarra Valley and the North East, which leads to a lot of, guess work to combine and extract the relevant data.

To enable regional businesses and local government to focus on those actions and outcomes that will give the best results for input, there is a need for quality visitor research and analysis that means something in the local context. This research would include potential markets, visitor needs, perceptions and satisfaction and visitor tracking.

International Tourism

Melbourne Airport is the gateway for international tourism into Melbourne and to regional Victoria. Growth in international seats into Melbourne Airport to match the growth in predicted international tourists coming to Australia is most important. Regional areas need support to be visitor ready to take advantage of this predicted growth in international visitation. Demand for high quality, nature-based experiences to the international market is a key to increasing yield and length of stay in Murrindindi and other suitably located areas.

Nature Tourism

Investment is required – To capitalise on nature based tourism opportunities in the long term, sustainability must be promoted and the development of product such as eco lodges and iconic tours and trails, that attract high yield visitors must be supported by public-private investment. One such iconic walk could link Healesville (Yarra Valley) to Lake Mountain, Lake Eildon (Murrindindi) and Mansfield with strategically located eco lodges interspersed between the existing accommodation facilities.

Certainty around water levels - Maintenance of lake levels and recreational flow to rivers during specified periods would give operators who rely on water levels some certainty during peak seasons.
Regional Tourism Associations (RTOs)

Under resourced and undermanned - Many Regional Tourism Associations are expected to maintain the roles of servicing the industry development, marketing and peak body needs for a whole region. Many associations operate on volunteer labour, are not necessarily skills based and often struggle with transition due to poor succession planning. As a result these organisations often end up with an ad hoc approach, which is reliant on the time, goodwill and skills of their volunteers who are usually very busy tourism operators in their own right.

Instability in resource allocation - These organisations often rely on local government support and limited industry funds for buy in to programs. Contributions from industry often depend on the current economic circumstances and strength of the local tourism sector at the time. This inhibits the organisations ability to plan. The reliance on local volunteer operators whose time is dictated by the demands of their own business can also be unpredictable. Assistance in business planning is needed to ensure these associations survive and effectively serve their members.

Bushfires

Media attention - Although many areas were not directly impacted by the bushfires the local tourism industry was adversely affected due to inaccurate and over dramatised information in the media about the location and extent of bushfires and smoke haze. Bookings at many tourism businesses ceased the minute the bushfires hit the headlines. The actual location of the fires did not seem to make any difference to the choices made by potential visitors to this region.

Perception management is very difficult when the bushfire situation is being used to sell newspapers and TV time. There is an inherent tension between those managing fires state wide not wanting to encourage visitors into the regions and those in tourism wanting to achieve the opposite.

Accuracy/perception issues relating to websites – On at least one occasion the accuracy/perception of accuracy of information on fire related websites created issues for operators. As an example at one point in the 06-07 fires the DSE website had a fire symbol over the top of the township of Alexandra when the reality was that a spot fire did exist, well out of town and was under control very quickly. Operators reported cancellations as a result of this.
Allocation of recovery funding - The vast bulk of the recovery funding went to the areas, which were directly affected by fire, but there was little acknowledgement of the businesses indirectly affected which also felt a lot of financial pain through significant reductions in visitation.

Drought

EC relief - Tourism operators do not qualify for exceptional circumstances support, as do other industries such as agriculture even though they are a very significant player in the regional economies. There could be consideration, as it relates to exceptional circumstance relief, given to those tourism operators who rely on water.

Climate Change

Triple bottom line outcomes - Many businesses in regional areas are aware of climate change as an issue although the resources and practical tools are not available for them to change their business practices to incorporate triple bottom line principles which address environmental, social and economic sustainability.

Investment for all seasons - Snow based visitation will be heavily impacted by climate change over time and therefore investment in and development of all year round activities/visitation is imperative.

Education Campaign

The worth of tourism - One of the aspects of regional life that holds tourism growth back is a lack of understanding among some residents of the advantages that stem from tourism to the broader community. An education campaign aimed at improving the level of understanding of the long-term benefits to local communities of a strong tourism sector would go some way towards overcoming this impediment. Research to supplement this campaign identifying the flow on benefits of tourism to other businesses and community would be very valuable and worthwhile.

Signage

One impediment to growth expressed by a number of businesses is the perceived inflexibility of VicRoads to tourism/business signage. Once again there is often a tension between a view of the needs for signage from a road safety perspective and a view of signage from a business development and promotion perspective.
Cost to Council

Local councils are strapped for funds simply meeting the needs of visitors and as a result meeting the needs of visitors as well is increasingly problematic. In the context of the hardship evident as a result of ongoing drought, bushfires and frost, the introduction of a tourism levy would add even greater costs to business.

How small rural Councils fund development with so many competing demands with limited resources is the big question.