

Robinvale Housing Strategy

HIGHLIGHTS

Prepared for - Swan Hill Rural City Council



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Caix Square, Robinvale, VIC



Robinvale Hotel, Robinvale, VIC



Robinvale, VIC



Perrin Street, Robinvale, VIC



Murray Valley Aboriginal Cooperative, Robinvale, VIC

Introduction

The Place and The People

The Town of Robinvale is strategically located on the Murray River between Mildura and Swan Hill in Victoria. It has a twin town relationship with Euston across the Murray River in New South Wales and together the towns of Robinvale and Euston service an extensive catchment in both states.

Robinvale is a key economic centre within the Loddon Mallee Region and the majority of Robinvale's residency is driven by growth in the agricultural sector.

Agriculture is the major driver of the Robinvale economy, as indicated by:

- The Swan Hill Region currently boasts the biggest almond farms in the Southern Hemisphere;
- The largest Australian concentration of fresh stone fruit, pistachios and table grapes after Sunraysia; and
- The second largest wine grape production region in Victoria.

When compared to Australia, key characteristics of the Robinvale community include:

- Cultural diversity (a greater proportion of the population from Tonga, Italy, Malaysia and Vietnam and a significant Aboriginal population);
- Key employment industries reflect typical employment generators for townships (a higher proportion of employed population working in primary production, health, retail and education);
- Higher proportion of young families (including one parent family households) and a higher proportion of pre-retirees and retirees;
- Higher proportion of population living in rental accommodation and group households; and
- Higher proportion of population travelling to work by car as a passenger (10.7% compared with 4.6%).

It is believed that persons arrive at Robinvale for work and then seek accommodation and that the population arriving to Robinvale for work are attracted from across Australia and overseas.

The Issue and Opportunity

Accommodation is a critical issue for supplying a sufficient workforce to support economic growth of the agricultural sector. A lack of seasonal accommodation is seen as a risk to the availability of workers. Currently large numbers of people are sharing single houses and seasonal workers often do not have their own transport nor hold a local driver's license.

Workforce housing issues are identified as:

- Shortage of low-cost accommodation;
- Shortage of high-quality short-term accommodation suitable for professionals (other than motels);
- Shortage of temporary accommodation to suit more transient workforce populations;
- Styles of suitable accommodation to meet the needs of diverse groups; and
- Accommodation for specific industry workforce.

The *Swan Hill Regional Economic Development Strategy (2017- 2022)* identified:

"Robinvale has multiple and complex housing issues including a lack of suitable housing for professionals and middle management, shortages of appropriately located accommodation for seasonal horticultural workers, a lack of affordable housing and shortfalls in public housing to address overcrowding and emergency accommodation needs."

Subsequently the Swan Hill Rural City Council, with the support of Regional Development Victoria, have commissioned a Robinvale Housing Strategy to direct resources and partners toward a better accommodation and housing outcome for the town.



Robinvale Hotel, Robinvale, VIC

What has been done to date?

2005: Robinvale Mapping Exercise - Success Works

In 2005 Swan Hill Rural City Council commissioned a report to estimate the Robinvale-Euston population and understand key demographics for the community.

It identified three population categories that made up the demand for housing:

- 1 Permanent Residents, Home-makers, Business People;
- 2 Permanent Casuals (10 months of the year); and
- 3 Harvest influx population from December to April (5 months of the year).

Based on the report permanent residents and permanent casuals accounted for around 6,000 – 8,000 persons and the harvest influx for about 2,000 persons a year – arriving at a potential population peak of some 8,000 – 10,000 persons each year.

2010: Advice Towards and Affordable Housing Action Plan

In 2010 the Victorian Government in consultation with the Swan Hill Rural City Council collaborated on the delivery of an affordable housing report for Robinvale. It identified the existence of overcrowded accommodation, lack of available accommodation and low quality of occupied housing and accommodation.

It concluded the need to:

- Ensure housing can be delivered at a price the market can afford;
- Establish partnerships with affordable and social housing providers to underpin more cost-effective housing outcomes;
- Increase Council's commitment to enforcement of group and contractor operated housing; and
- Strengthen the town through community building to make it an attractive location to invest in and develop housing.

2017: Regional Skills Demand Profile

In 2017 the Victorian Skills Commissioner established a representative task force to project the skills demand for The Mallee Region, identifying:

- Potential for strong growth in labour demand of between 2,900 and 4,400 new workers from 2017 to 2020; and
- Although strong employment growth was projected, there was expected to be significant labour shortage influenced by low unemployment rates and an ageing demographic supplemented by short term contract labour.

2018: Swan Hill Rural City Council Housing Summit

The Swan Hill Rural City Council's 2018 Housing Summit brought together economic and housing stakeholders to establish six key themes for collaboration, including:

- Improving the supply of short-term accommodation to meet peak demand; and
- Improving supply of housing for permanent or long-term occupants.

2019: Population Determination Study

Using banking and water usage data, the study undertaken by Geografia estimated Robinvale's population as:

- A total population range between 7,000 in November to 8,800 in March with a mean of 7,900 residents; and
- An estimated average household size of 3.59 people per household.



Robinvale, VIC

Total Supply and Demand

Accommodation Crisis

At the 2016 Census, Robinvale SA2 had a total of just over 1,200 dwellings, occupied by a recorded population of just over 3,300 persons.

The population determination study undertaken by Geografia (2019) provided an estimated population for the Robinvale SA2 of between 7,000 and 8,800 residents with a mean population of 7,900 residents.

If the lowest estimate of the population range is used as the basis of determining demand, there is approximately 3,700 persons unrecorded by the ABS potentially occupying, or seeking to occupy, accommodation in the Robinvale SA2.

Given the primary driver for Town's resident population is employment by the agricultural sector, and the population determination estimate captured an additional 3,700 persons not recorded by the ABS, it is fair to assume that the majority of this additional population comprises individuals attracted to Town for labour based employment opportunities.

In addition, growth of the region's agricultural sector is predicted to generate up to 130 – 150 skilled FTE (not including unskilled labour) and State Government resettlement programs are anticipated to generate further demand for housing in Robinvale.

This amounts to a significant accommodation shortage within the Robinvale SA2 with potential to grow in line with growth in the agricultural sector.

The flow-On Effects

Through research and consultation it was possible to identify that housing stock within the Town of Robinvale is a significant supplier of accommodation for the agricultural sector's labour force.

The immediate flow-on effects were identified as:

- 0% rental vacancies;
- Upward pressure on rental values;
- Limited housing availability for the general population, including professional staff required by the town for essential services such as health and education; and
- An emerging housing crisis.



Perrin St, Robinvale, VIC

The Nature of Supply and Demand

The Need for Housing in Robinvale

Research and consultation into the potential housing crisis in Robinvale revealed complex circumstances and diverse needs that go beyond the accommodation of labour attracted to the town for employment.

Affordable housing and community housing

Between July 2018 and February 2019 Haven Home Safe recorded 76 enquiries, made up of:

- 40 requests for financial assistance;
- 15 requests for crisis housing;
- 10 requests for assistance with inappropriate housing conditions (e.g. overcrowding); and
- 4 requests for affordable housing.

Many people are priced out of rental accommodation and personal circumstances impact accessibility of housing for key community segments including:

- Single parent families;
- Single male adults; and
- Retirees on low/no income.

Aboriginal Housing

Demand for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing is reportedly exceeding current supply and existing stock was considered inappropriate for the dwelling needs of the community:

- Larger dwellings for larger families, families providing care accommodation for extended family members/elders or families providing accommodation for transient community members.
- Elder housing to accommodate smaller household sizes and cater for people with disability; and
- Housing specifically for single young men.

Housing was regarded as part of a critical intervention for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community as it would provide suitable accommodation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health service providers.

Migrant Housing

The availability of employment within Robinvale attracts new arrivals from overseas, and secondary migrant settlements from within Victoria/Australia. On arrival families, couples or individuals are then believed to be seeking both temporary accommodation during periods of employment and housing to support permanent settlement.

Consultation identified that there should be equal emphasis on the migrant community's desire to settle in Robinvale as is currently placed on the itinerant nature of migrant contract labour.

Slow delivery and uptake of new homes and land

Although housing is in high demand new build homes, house and land packages, and the limited existing housing stock on the market are very slow to move/aren't being taken up.

Many factors can affect the housing market such as house attributes, quality, affordability, expectations (or lack of) of capital growth and quality of tenants etc

Key drivers include:

- A mismatch between market need and existing house and land products. For example:
 - » Existing housing stock is aged, large and on large lots; and
 - » An unmet demand for 'lifestyle blocks' within proximity to the river can not be met under current zoning;
- Affordability:
 - » Approximately 46.5% of households are unlikely to afford a house and land release currently available in Euston; and
 - » Approximately 60% of households are unlikely to afford a 4-bedroom new build house currently on the market in Robinvale.
- Difficulty accessing finance due to:
 - » Seasonal nature of key employment industries; and
 - » Short term nature of professional employment contracts.
- Low land value and low/no capital growth to attract investment;
- Competitive delivery of a mix of house and land products in higher order centres such as Mildura;
- Lack of 'township offer' such as retail and hospitality.

Implementing the Robinvale Strategy

Firstly Address the Accommodation Crisis

Work with the market to deliver adaptable contract labour accommodation within the town as a matter of priority.

- Accommodation for itinerant workers that could be adapted out of season for a range of accommodation purposes.
- Attract investment by private sector to underpin the delivery of accommodation, this could include options for long term bed leases managed by employment contractors on behalf of growers.
- Implement a regulatory framework that could enable Council to provide greater support to farmers seeking the delivery of suitable/ permissible on farm accommodation types..
- Identify partnership models that can realise accommodation options at \$70 - \$90 a week to attract labourers from overcrowded rooming houses.

Secondly, Continue to Advocate

Housing affordability and housing suitability are two of the main barriers to stimulating housing investment and development in Robinvale. Council has the opportunity to use this housing research to continue to advocate for:

- Prioritisation under Government housing subsidy and incentive schemes;
- Rezoning of selected Farm Zone land for additional General Residential land suitable for the creation of lifestyle blocks that could drive market demand.

Thirdly, Promote, Promote, Promote

Develop an investment 'prospectus' that highlights suitable price points, product types and locations and identify mechanisms or options to incentivise private delivery of housing within Robinvale,

- Identify all current and future residential lots on the market;
- Organise by desirability of location relevant to market segment and housing product types;
- Compiling a 'market performance' report outlining purchases or long term leases;
- Engaging the building sector with the compiled information to attract private interest, new trades and skills to the town;
- Identify financing and project management programs that could support the delivery of new housing products; and
- Clearly defining the role of Council and other housing stakeholders (State Government, not-for-profit or the private sector).



Fourthly, Demonstrate Change

Given the market is profit driven, it may take agencies with broader objectives to collaborate on demonstration projects to instigate change. Council, Community Housing Providers and Government are all land holders within Robinvale,

- Identify co-located land holdings that could accommodate an affordable housing demonstration project.
- Establish a governance structure/partnership arrangement to oversee the delivery of affordable housing products.

Lastly, Increased Presence in Robinvale

Economic development, community development and landscape development will all contribute to a sense of place, vibrancy and amenity.

- Economic development initiatives that build the capacity of the current and potential business community within Robinvale;
- Community development initiatives that facilitate greater Township activation and community integration; and
- Landscape and asset development that contribute to a more vibrant and appealing public realm.



