

RENEWIN' STRATHEWEN – A COMMUNITY LED RECOVERY AFTER BUSHFIRE

WHAT TRIGGERED THE PROJECT ?

Our community was devastated by the February 7th 2009 bushfire which began in Kilmore East , swept across the Kinglake Ranges and down into the Strathewen valley on its way to St Andrews and Kinglake. Twenty seven lives were lost in Strathewen and eighty of the one hundred and twenty homes were destroyed. In a community of two hundred and twenty the physical, social and psychological devastation was profound.

In the days following the disaster it became obvious that Strathewen had received little attention in the thinking of emergency services before, during or after the fire. Residents felt that the media had overlooked the plight of Strathewen, overshadowed by bigger and better known locations such as Kinglake and Marysville. It was clear that government and non-government agencies had commenced an enormous recovery effort and that a small community like ours could be swept along by the State's disaster recovery imperatives, unless we established a legitimate Strathewen voice. Public meetings were held and a steering group established to draft a constitution for an incorporated association. The Strathewen Community Renewal Association came into existence at a public meeting on the 28th of June.

HOW HAS THE PROJECT IMPROVED SAFETY OR ENHANCED RESILIENCE IN YOUR COMMUNITY ?

Despite the ever present summer danger of fire, our residents have always regarded Strathewen as a safe place to live and raise a family. Strathewen was a quiet, end of the road, secluded independent community with a small school, vibrant community life and resilient spirit – the way in which we have managed our recovery so far is testament to this.

The fires damaged our perceptions of Strathewen as a safe place but our approach to managing our own recovery is laying the groundwork for a renewed Strathewen that will once more be a safe, robust community.

The Strathewen Community Renewal Association has ensured that every one of its activities and proposals have supported actions that are community inspired and community led. This means that all the Association's actions work towards building resilience in the community as people own the process and all its elements.

Rebuilding safely

The rebuilding process has required us to look closely at the elements which will contribute to making Strathewen much safer and more resilient in the future. We are involved in projects and discussions with a range of agencies to ensure that everything – from private homes to roadside vegetation management to drainage and erosion are managed in a way that helps to make ours a more sustainable and safer community into the future.

Every one of us rebuilding on fire damaged properties are required to re-build to very high fire safety standards. This process in itself has made the rebuilding task far more costly and time-consuming. To assist residents with this process, the Strathewen Community Renewal Association established a Rebuilding Subcommittee which has conducted a series of forums and provided advocacy for residents engaged in the rebuilding process. As part of the Strathewen Recovery Plan the Association submitted a Sustainable Rebuilding Project to VBRRA aimed at supporting residents in a practical way to build in a manner that meets environmental and safety requirements. This application was successful and \$160,000 has been allocated.

The environment and safety

Issues concerning environment recovery and community safety are fertile grounds for fear and conflict. The SCRA Committee has sought to put scientific expertise and environmental best practice to the fore of its discussions and has supported meaningful involvement of all key stakeholders. This has involved support for collaborative approaches involving community, local government, water and land management agencies who can best influence recovery of our catchment area.

To this end the SCRA successfully applied for funds towards development of an environment management plan that will assist in decisions about the recovery of the natural environment and most importantly will increase residents awareness of what is happening in their patch.

The SCRA has worked closely with shire staff to identify and address roadside vegetation concerns and the Strathewen Recovery Plan includes funding for a Fire Safety and Awareness Program which will explore community responses to fire preparedness and provide all residents with good information about vegetation management and fire awareness.

This increased level of cooperation with Nillumbik Shire Council and other key players is another vital element of the stronger, safer, renewed Strathewen. Conversations have opened up where there were very few and all parties have been required to operate in a 'new' way. The Strathewen Community Renewal Association is leading this 'cultural change' in Nillumbik.

TO WHAT EXTENT WAS THE COMMUNITY ENGAGED ?

It is difficult to engage with a community devastated by fire: all public infrastructure was destroyed, the primary school, public hall, cricket and tennis clubs ceased to exist. Most of those whose homes had been destroyed were resettled with friends or in emergency accommodation up to thirty kilometers away. When tele-communications were restored, enterprising residents set about creating an SMS messaging service which would keep the community and bereaved families connected. This system has remained the backbone of a comprehensive and successful communications strategy which includes regular newsletters, a website, electronic mail and face to face consultations. The Recovery Centre established at neighbouring Arthurs Creek provided a focal point for immediate needs, emergency service information, word of mouth communication and public gatherings but there was a strong desire to move the recovery effort closer to Strathewen. A partially completed home at the edge of the fire line known as the "White House" became the Strathewen Recovery Centre and housed some of the most important meetings and community gatherings. Later, with the establishment of a re-locatable building in the heart of Strathewen meetings and regular community gatherings were held at this Community Centre. These physical moves were important symbolic and physical steps in returning control of the recovery to the community. Our public meetings have been well attended and it is clear that the Strathewen trait of independence and self-determination remains intact. It's a tribute to the community and an indication of the commitment we have to leading our own recovery that 35 people joined the Constitution Steering Group and 22 people nominated for the Committee.

The Constitution Steering Group, the Committee and its Sub-committees have been acutely aware of the potential for division within the community. We are conscious that our Association is not the community and cannot represent all views. There is constant risk of undoing good work, of misunderstanding creating irreparable hurt but we have sought to act for a common good, sensitively, without haste and in a transparent manner. The Committee quickly established a sound system of governance in accordance with its constitution and best practice. From the start we understood there was potential for the Association to attract and expend millions of dollars of government, VBAF and philanthropic funds and that we must have processes to account for the decisions and the expenditures. We have also recently established a Bushfire Disaster Relief Trust to attract and manage charitable donations to Strathewen.

Our sub-committee system has been well supported by community members, friends of the association and agency staff and has conducted an enormous amount of business focused on supporting people, maintaining the sense of community, representing the interests of Strathewen with government and agencies and supporting the enormous task of rebuilding private and public infrastructure.

We've been scrupulous in seeking input and increasing participation. Our minutes and important information are posted on the Strathewen website. Our newsletters are emailed, posted and available on the website. We've held three general meetings to report on specific activities of the association and have collected residents' views and needs through seven Visioning work shops, a detailed Resident Support questionnaire, six Memorial Working Party forums and memorials questionnaire.

We've worked hard to maintain a strong sense of community; particularly difficult through the first 12 months when only a handful of residents were living in Strathewen. Residents and bereaved families have been connected by SMS which informs them of opportunities to come together. We are particularly proud of the many community gatherings big and small which have provided a purpose and place to connect. Musical events, excursions away from Strathewen, Christmas Party and the Family Fun Day have all helped to raise our communal spirit. Every Thursday up to sixty people attend BBQ/Soup/Curry night at the Community Centre. Yes the food is hearty but people don't drive 30kms on a cold wintry night just for the soup.

One of our most significant community affirming achievements was the first anniversary Commemoration Service held at the Strathewen oval. More than one thousand people attended and while it was a deeply emotional event there was also a strong sense of pride that such a fitting tribute had been achieved using the resources of our small community. A list of community events and DVD of the Commemoration is included with the attachments.

The sub-committee structure and range of achievements is listed in the recent self- evaluation provided in the attachments.

WHY IS THE PROJECT SPECIAL OR INNOVATIVE IN YOUR COMMUNITY ?

People who live in Strathewen have always considered it to be a special place with a strong sense of history and community. This spirit has been evident in the support and affection for the historic Strathewen Primary School, the community owned Strathewen Public Hall and deep personal connections with our unique natural environment. When the February 7th firestorm took so many loved ones and friends and destroyed the physical character of Strathewen, what remained was the community's spirit of mutual support and self-determination.

The questions were simple but please don't underestimate how much resilience it took to confront the situation so soon after the disaster, when the lives of so many people were in turmoil. How do we influence the renewal of Strathewen ? Can we afford to let well meaning government and agencies take control of our future ?

For our community there seemed nothing special or innovative about exerting its independence but we have certainly come to understand that the way we went about asserting a community led recovery is special, possibly unique. The testimonials of those we have worked with are provided as evidence in the attachments.

One of our greatest achievements has been to nurture an understanding that all of our residents and those in neighbouring Arthurs Creek whose lives are intertwined with Strathewen, are part of the same extended fire affected community. Our association is inclusive; the constitution recognizes that living through the fire is not the only measure of belonging. There is no them and us.

It has been an emotional 18 months. It's not hard to bump the wound and bring pain to the surface but we've strived from the first public meetings to manage the potential for division by emphasizing a culture of respect, equity and consistency in our processes and transparency in decision-making. Feedback from members, council and VBRRRA indicates confidence in our governance.

Previously, the Nillumbik Shire Council was not respected or trusted by many residents because of disputed environmental policies, initial responses following the fire and a general feeling of neglect. The SCRA Committee recognized an overwhelming willingness amongst council staff to respond in the best possible way and has worked closely with council officers to develop collaborative approaches. Council's willingness to accept the uncertainties of a community led recovery, their flexibility in proceeding at the community's pace and respect for the SCRA agenda has been fundamental in creating a very positive working relationship and improved community perceptions.

Renewin Strathewen

It's easy to rely on the resources and expertise of authorities and we have certainly been grateful for assistance from different levels of government, particularly the Victorian Bushfire Recovery and Reconstruction Authority (VBRRRA). We have also experienced the fundamental importance of a community developing its own priorities and the value of pursuing goals which don't fit the template. Developing Strathewen's 'Recovery Plan' to gain VBRRRA funding revealed some serious disconnects between what our community needed and what was possible under the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund's (VBAF) charitable status. To bridge this gap we established the Strathewen Bushfire Disaster Relief Fund and achieved a ground breaking, special ruling from the Australian Taxation Commissioner to provide Temporary Housing on individual's private land in Strathewen. In a similar vein the Strathewen Recovery Plan identified the importance of a Catchment Management audit to address environmental issues across public and private land. Through the sustained work of SCRA representatives and the Nillumbik Environment Recovery Working Group this approach went on to gain endorsement from all the agencies involved in natural resource recovery. In allocating \$170,000 to the

project, VBAF recommended it as a model for all the fire affected areas. A community can feel no greater sense of empowerment than to take up a need on behalf of its residents, bring authorities to an appreciation of a proposal's merits and cause the rules to change so possibilities are realised.

HOW DOES THE PROJECT RAISE AWARENESS IN YOUR COMMUNITY ?

Over the past 12 months the Strathewen Community Renewal Association (SCRA) Committee has implemented a strong engagement strategy. The Committee and its sub-committees have directly involved one third of the community in planning, decision-making and implementation. Community gatherings such as BBQ nights, discussion evenings, forums and guest speaker events have brought the community together and heightened everyone's awareness about their own neighbours and the wide range of relevant issues.

The Committee has worked hard to ensure that every member of the Strathewen community has access to the knowledge and practical assistance on offer. There is no doubt that Strathewen residents now have a far greater awareness of their own and others changing responses to trauma; opportunities to address well being; the benefits of mutual support; fire safety issues and how the environment of their community responds to natural disaster.

Despite the shared experience of Black Saturday not everyone chooses to be involved or connected with the SCRA. Some people are not members but dip into the activities and the information. We expect that as lives take new directions, some in new locations, the desire to be connected will diminish for some people. At the same time, as properties change hands, people are joining the Strathewen community and our association is embracing new residents and providing opportunities for them to connect with their new neighbours in ways that did not exist before.

As a whole, the Strathewen community is now in a far better position than it was before the fires to deal with threats and events. People have taken up leadership roles, learned new skills and developed new partnerships to assist their community to rebuild. As tragic as the events of Feb 7 2009 were, Strathewen is rebuilding as a stronger, more cohesive community. New residents and returning residents are part of a strong network of communication and practical support that we believe will be sustainable into the future.