



The Reality of Population Growth

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Executive members of the Committee for Ballarat and their guests were recently treated to a presentation from Andrew MacLeod, CEO of the Committee for Melbourne. By way of introduction, Andrew's CV is atypical of most corporate CEO's in that he has spent most of his time working in humanitarian roles with the Red Cross and the UN in developing countries and various conflict zones around the world in addition to more conventional roles in corporate law offices in Australia and the UK.

While there are many who are fearful of population growth because of the perceived dilution of our Australian way of life, increased unemployment, or the concern about inadequate resources, MacLeod very cogently put the affirmative case for embracing population growth in such a way that it was hard to see a worthwhile argument against it, so I have provided my own summary of part of his presentation in the next paragraph.

Just for a moment let's assume we need or want to implement a policy to restrict population growth in the state of Victoria. There are three ways to achieve this. Firstly, we could set up a border control mechanism not unlike the process at nightclubs where officers only let someone in when someone exits. Secondly, we could mandate a one child policy similar to China's, which would limit natural organic growth, effectively balancing births and deaths. Thirdly, we could actively work to make our state and our cities so unattractive that potential migrants would not want to live here – the corollary is that neither would existing residents! Can anyone honestly say that any of these options are practical, achievable or acceptable in a free, democratic society? I very much doubt it. Therefore a continuation of population growth according to published estimates for Victoria and Ballarat should be expected.

Accepting the scenario that population growth is inevitable for Ballarat we must put our energies into ensuring that infrastructure and the environment conducive for a diverse, thriving and sustainable economy is established and maintained so that liveability and community well-being are preserved and enhanced. This is the heartland for the work of the Committee for Ballarat, where the projects we have been working on, either independently or in cooperation with the City of Ballarat have been directed at meeting and embracing the challenge of population growth.

Despite recent good rainfall, a secure, sustainable water supply remains a priority and the Committee believes that inevitably Ballarat and other cities will need to increase the use of recycled water if we are to meet the population challenge. Full employment in sustainable, value-adding jobs is critical to the economic prosperity and well-being of our community and that is why the Committee has been working hard in support of the City to establish an employment zone around the airport precinct. We already have a strong and thriving manufacturing sector in the area - especially in food and transport, which would be enhanced by creating complementary industries and a freight hub to facilitate logistics in the zone. A key to making this work is a new road linking the Midland Highway south of Sebastopol through Alfredton and the airport precinct to the Sunraysia Highway, the Western Highway and finally rejoining the Midland Highway to the north of Ballarat.

The growth in population and economic activity in the west especially, will drive many other parts of the Ballarat economy. Not least of these will be thriving retail and services sectors, and the critically important, well-developed education and health sectors. The Committee for Ballarat recently launched its 10,000 jobs in 10 years campaign to highlight what must happen to avoid unacceptable levels of unemployment in our City as a result of strong population growth.

In addition to jobs, a new vision for the CBD is absolutely essential in order to accommodate and service the population growth; one that will transform the perception of Ballarat as a large country town into a major inland city. It will also necessitate a changed mind-set and behaviour for the people of Ballarat, perhaps best exemplified by the notion that has existed for many decades that one expects to park outside the front door of each shop and restaurant we wish to visit. In the process of moving to a new era and perception of ourselves in Ballarat, we will also win the confidence of the broader region to become the leading regional city in Victoria, and possibly a model for the entire nation.

The Committee for Ballarat has been involved with "Making Ballarat Central", the City of Ballarat's ambitious project to make our CBD a lively, beautiful and highly functional precinct that meets the needs of a city that is expected to grow to just under 120,000 people in the next 15 years. As the pages of this newspaper have recorded over the last few months, many people are concerned and afraid that the proposed changes will destroy something important in this process - for example the furore over the demolition of the Civic Hall.

Indeed, the proposed changes will in some cases change the CBD landscape forever. However as someone who has been part of the process from the beginning with the united support of the membership of the Committee for Ballarat, I ask that every resident considers the project in its totality. It is the view of the Committee for Ballarat that the grand boulevard of Sturt St and the areas close to it are the key to unlocking the vibrancy and inherent beauty of Ballarat that will drive residents to reclaim the CBD, increase social and commercial activity and reduce antisocial behaviour.

To achieve this, diverting through-traffic around the Sturt St CBD area is an important part of the strategy and that is why the opening up of Mair St to greater traffic flow is so important. Establishing Mair St as the major financial/business precinct in the CBD is already underway and converting the Civic Hall space, which has lain dormant for almost 10 years into a thriving hub of service industry activity and a home for council departments will create a critical mass that will attract businesses and jobs for our children in those business sectors. We now have a rare opportunity to create a sub-precinct with a major influx of commercial, financial and local and State government services which provide a stimulating boost to those sectors of the economy in a reconstructed facility – closely linked with the railway station and other parts of the CBD. The alternative is to persist with an under/unused building and surrounding space that no doubt harbours some fond memories of the past for some in the community yet generates no significant social, business or cultural activity – and shows no sign of or potential for doing so in the near- or mid-term future.

What has been lost in the debate about the Civic Hall is the fact that the council proposal will open the Town Hall and space in Armstrong St South to public use thereby providing even greater attraction to the CBD for residents and visitors alike. Given that population growth is inevitable, we must be prepared to do what is necessary to provide sufficient employment and lifestyle opportunities for existing and new residents whilst maintaining Ballarat as an attractive, liveable city. Trying in vain to hold the status quo is not an option.

Tony Chew
Chair – Committee for Ballarat