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By Bill Mundy\*

No community can ever do enough to assist those least fortunate among them, but thankfully most try and must always continue to do so.

That is the fundamental motivation behind the proposal of the Committee for Ballarat to develop an entity called Ballarat Cares, aimed at increasing the numbers of volunteers available to assist in community projects and developments within the city.

This is not an attempt to interrupt or interfere with the quality work already underway through a variety of agencies across the city to assist people in need.

It is intended to enhance that work and more effectively harness a resource which may yet not be fully utilised for the benefit of the range of support agencies in Ballarat and the region.

The idea is to generate a co-ordinated and efficient volunteer culture through the business sector, providing the opportunity for employers to free staff, their services and skills for the benefit of the needy or in the interests of major community projects and events.

The Ballarat Cares concept is to establish a structure through which this volunteering can be sourced and the agencies and projects can best benefit.

This is not to assume that businesses do not already provide generous assistance when asked. Ballarat is a caring community.

It is more a question of developing and coordinating a worthwhile and effective corporate volunteering regime which can build upon the support already provided through the city's business sector.

A forum involving community groups was held late last year to introduce the Ballarat Cares concept and representatives of the business community are being urged to attend a forum on January 30 to further consider the project. (Details at the end of this article).

Ballarat Cares is based upon similar models overseas and the one other already established in Australia, Melbourne Cares.

The prototype organisation was established in New York City in 1987 by a group describing itself as ``caring New Yorkers with demanding work schedules''.

Having searched in vain for an organisation offering flexible, hands-on volunteer opportunities, they decided to form a new organisation with a new and unique approach and named it New York Cares.

In the United Kingdom, businesses had already acknowledged a need to be involved in the social fabric of the community when, in 1982, an organisation called Business In The Community was established.

It was felt that, although companies were beginning to sponsor major sporting and cultural events, they were not involved or integrated enough in their local communities.

As an extension of the BITC initiative, a Cares program was established in 1999, with the model now having been adopted in Melbourne, where it is still in its pilot phase.

Early indications are that the corporate sector is supportive of the Melbourne model and a range of projects have benefitted from the support of corporate volunteers.

The Committee for Ballarat applauds the vibrant and enthusiastic commitment to social improvement which already exists in Ballarat.

This is obvious from the array of programs being offered through the not-for-profit (NFP) sector and supported by volunteers.

There can never be too many volunteers, however, and a carefully co-ordinated and effectively managed program of corporate volunteering under a concept such as Ballarat Cares has great potential to enhance the lifestyle and prosperity of the city.

Not only would it assist individuals and projects which need the support, it can also provide those involved with a rewarding opportunity to participate for the community benefit and can generate a great amount of corporate and community pride.

Ballarat Cares holds great potential to benefit Ballarat. It will rise and fall on the support of the corporate and small to medium enterprise sector.

I urge as many business representatives as possible to attend the forum at Sovereign Hill's Victoria Theatre on January 30, 5 pm for 5.15 pm, to hear of the positive experiences of Melbourne business under its cares model and to learn how to participate in a similar way in Ballarat.

\* Bill Mundy is chairman of the Committee for Ballarat's Ballarat Cares Task Team..

