

# REFLECTIONS ON A PILOT PROJECT



Sept. 2013

Birchip ... Boort ... Cohuna

Prepared by Kerry Anderson

**Community Leadership**  
LODDON MURRAY INC.

# Foreword

Operation Next Gen is a pilot project that took a new and creative approach to addressing a decreasing population of young people in the three rural towns of Birchip, Boort and Cohuna.

It was different because of three elements ...

- **The community** led the conversation and asked “What can WE do to address this problem?”
- **Everyone** was given permission to be creative and think about the future in a new light.
- **Entrepreneurism** was a new concept introduced to conversation

Like ripples in a pond, conversation is a very powerful tool.

Conversation can lead to changed perceptions, behaviours and direct actions that can have a significant impact on a single person that can then lead on to many more.

Operation Next Gen has been an exercise in planting seeds for the future. Simply by having a conversation and asking questions, already the outcomes are significant.

- We have a better picture of what our youth think of their home towns and their plans for the future.
- Business has been highlighted as an alternate career path to 888 secondary students.
- Community members are more aware of ways in which they can support a young person through an encouraging word, mentoring and financial backing.
- Information Technology is recognized as enabling more career paths to be pursued in rural areas.
- Community sectors are working more closely together to showcase their towns and capitalize on opportunities.

Naturally the conversation led in many different directions according to each pilot town. Whatever the results, they are led by the community for the community.

Birchip, Boort and Cohuna have looked at their existing landscapes with fresh eyes and are definitely taking charge of their own destiny! Thank you to all the ambassadors who took a leap of faith.

We hope that the Operation Next Gen conversation ripples continue throughout the region and look forward to seeing what other inspirational ideas appear throughout our wonderful landscape.

Kerry Anderson, Project Manager.



# The Project

TO RESEARCH AND TRIAL A MODEL OF PROGRAM DELIVERY AIMED AT SUPPORTING SMALL RURAL TOWNS TO BECOME MORE ENTREPRENEURIAL AND FOSTER A POSITIVE ENVIRONMENT TO CREATE A WIDER RANGE OF CAREER PATHS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WORKING IN RURAL AREAS.

## Why is it important?

The migration of young Australians to large regional centres and cities, and the negative impact on many small rural towns is well documented.

**“There is a significant deficit in the number of young people aged 20 to 39 when compared with metropolitan Melbourne.”** Parliament of Victoria Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities, 2006

## What is the solution?

It is widely acknowledged by academics that community leadership and entrepreneurship will play crucial roles in reversing this trend and embracing positive change.

**“Revitalising rural must include the participation of small communities in search of positive change, whereby local people are encouraged to think more about their futures and to put into practice their ideas for securing those futures.”** John W Keller, The Future of Australia’s Country Towns, 2001

**“The level of entrepreneurship activity in a country explains 70% of the difference in economic growth among these nations.”** Conclusion of the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor Project conducted by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation in partnership with Babson College, Ernst & Young, the London Business School and researchers from multiple countries.

With these principles in mind the Operation Next Gen project aimed to:

- Be a whole of community discussion led by the community
- Different and creative to stimulate new thought processes
- Highlight the opportunities presented by entrepreneurship in rural areas

# The Journey



RESPONDING TO CONCERNS EXPRESSED BY ITS GRADUATE NETWORK ACROSS THE REGION, COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP LODDON MURRAY INC. TOOK A LEADING ROLE IN THE OPERATION NEXT GEN PROJECT

# Community Leadership

LODDON MURRAY INC.

## Partners

With very real concerns about decreasing segments of its population, the Buloke, Loddon and Gannawarra Shires readily agreed to become project partners. The North Central Local Learning & Employment Network and Youth Connections provided invaluable guidance in relation to youth and the schools.



## Center for Rural Entrepreneurship

energizing entrepreneurial communities

Harnessing the knowledge and experience of similar studies in the United States, the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship became a key partner in the survey of secondary school students across the three shires. An international element provided a unique talking point to this project.

Goodwill and support has been demonstrated by many individuals and organisations throughout the duration of this project. Our thanks to them all.

## Funding



A \$30,000 grant was accessed through the Victorian State Government's Putting Locals First Program.

Primarily this grant supported the employment of a project manager to design and implement a community engagement process that would test the effectiveness of a community driven approach. It was also intended that the project outcomes could be documented and shared with other communities.

The Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal (FRRR) also contributed financial support to information sharing aspects of the project such as the Regional Forum in April 2013. Regional Development Australia (RDA) has committed funds to a regional roadshow scheduled for October 2013.

Overall the project was valued at \$56,304.09 taking into consideration the incredibly high level of in-kind contributions from each of the partners and pilot town "ambassadors"



## The Operation Next Gen Process

- |                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| JULY 2012         | 1. Project Manager appointed  |
|                   | 2. Advisory Committee formed and agrees on process  |
|                   | 3. Pilot Towns selected   |
| AUGUST            | 4. Ambassadors approached   |
|                   | 5. Youth and community surveyed to form a basis for pilot town conversations.                       |
| SEPTEMBER         | 6. Ambassadors meet with project manager to learn about the concept and “think tank” their ideas    |
|                   | 7. Ambassadors continue to meet at their own leisure and expand the conversation in their community |
|                   | 8. Support to keep pilot towns motivated and share information                                      |
| DECEMBER          | 9. Future Landscapes workshop with ambassadors to challenge their thinking                          |
| FEBRUARY          | 10. Ambassadors “regroup” to discuss progress with project manager                                  |
| APRIL             | 11. Regional Forum to share ideas to the wider community  |
|                   | 12. Ambassadors progress their ideas within their own communities.                                  |
| SEPTEMBER<br>2013 | 13. Share the learnings   |

### 1. Project Manager

Access to good networks, project management skills, an affinity with business, and the ability to paint a picture with inspirational stories was considered essential to this role. With a strong track record of mentoring young people in business and having recently undertaken community engagement training in the United States, Kerry Anderson was appointed project manager.

### 2. Advisory Committee

An advisory committee with local knowledge and networks was integral to the success of the project. Each of the partners nominated a representative with the shire councils favouring either a community or economic development staff member. Four Loddon Murray Community Leadership Program graduates participated on the Advisory Committee bringing with them the benefit of a regional perspective. The committee met on four occasions at Boort (central to the three shires) and was regularly consulted by group email to help shape and guide the process.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Tim Jenkyn & Cr. Cheryl McKinnon (Loddon Shire), James Goldsmith (Buloke Shire), Katrina Thorne (Gannawarra Shire), Jerri Nelson (NCLLEN), Steve Curry (Youth Connections), and Kerry Anderson (CLLM). Absent: Barry McKenzie (NCLLEN)

### 3. Pilot Town Selection

Selection of the pilot towns was undertaken by the Advisory Committee. Key criteria included:

LOCATION: Buloke / Loddon / Gannawarra Shire

SIZE: Under 5,000 population

INFRASTRUCTURE: Has a business/retail centre

STATUS: Concern about future career paths for young people and viability of existing businesses, projected population decline (or generation ratio issues)

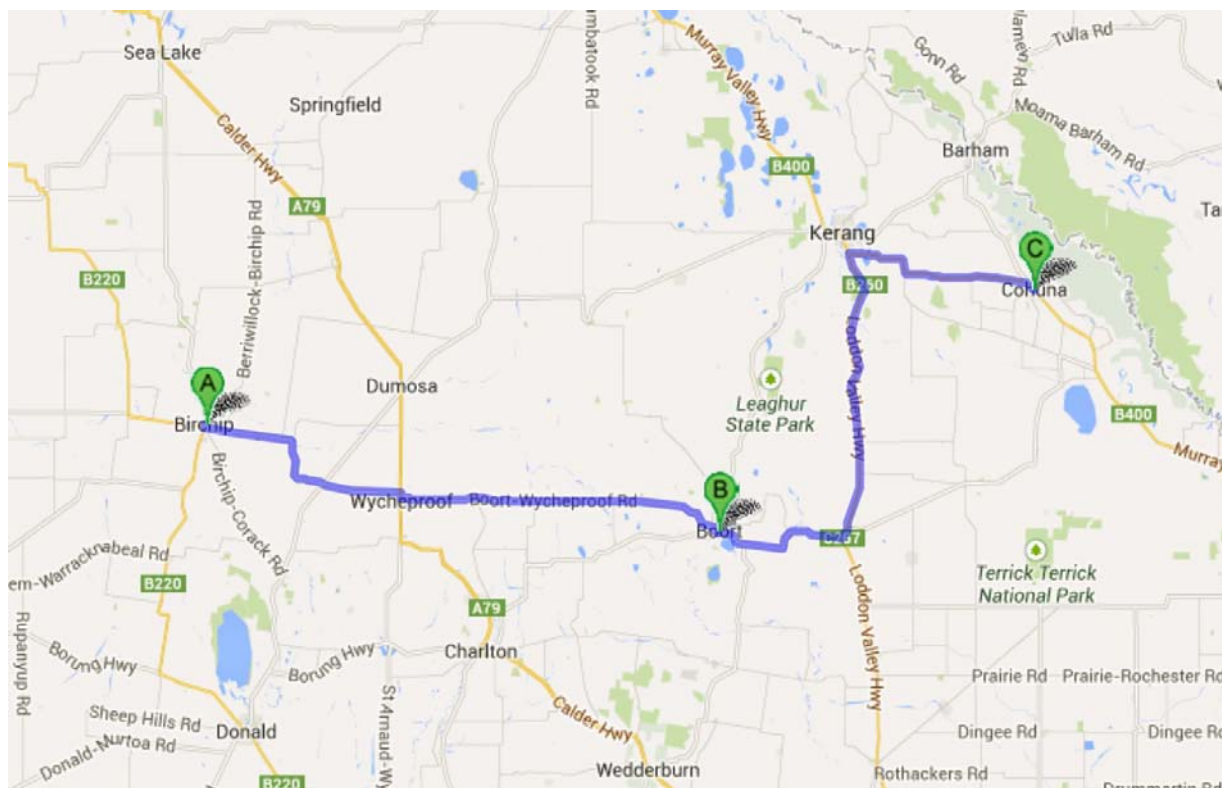
OPT IN: Community wants to participate in this project with representation of:

- Businesses
- Community Groups / Sporting Clubs
- School
- Parents

FOCUS: No other major projects that will cause the project to be under-resourced.

SHARING: Communities that willingly share their learning's for the benefit of other small towns across the region.

On this basis the towns of Birchip (Buloke), Boort (Loddon) and Cohuna (Gannawarra) were nominated by the Advisory Committee. Alternate towns were also discussed in the event that the invitation wasn't accepted.



#### **4. Ambassador / Conversation Leader Selection**

Selection criteria were developed to ensure that a broad cross section of well-respected and networked people was invited to help lead the conversation in each of the pilot towns.

The thinking was that potentially 10 people can reach another 10 people = 100 community members.

Each of the shire representatives was allocated the task of extending the invitation to ten people from their nominated pilot town. This was approached in different ways:

1. Directly approached people who met the criteria
2. Allocated the task to a key person in the community.
3. Met with key community group and asked them to take on the task.

While each process delivered similar outcomes there was some reflection that it is best not to have the shire representative do the individual invitations so that the community led aspect can be emphasized.

It was acknowledged that, as a pilot project, the concept was difficult to explain and required a “leap of faith” to commit to the process. Those that did commit did so for varied reasons including:

- Concern about the future of their town and/or future of youth.
- A desire to promote business and employment opportunities.
- Intrigued and excited by something new.

#### **5. Youth & Community Surveys**

It was important to have a starting point for our “whole of community” conversation and what better than young people telling us what they think rather than assumptions being made on their behalf.

In August 2012 youth perceptions were captured through a survey of secondary school students across the three shires. Conducted by the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship in Nebraska U.S., the results of the survey included comparisons with data from rural students the United States providing an international element to the conversation.

Getting the cooperation of the schools to participate in the survey was aided by a briefing provided to the principals by the North Central Local Learning & Employment Network. Communication proved difficult at times and emails often had to be followed up in person. The involvement of a school principal in one of the pilot town groups was definitely of benefit.

In-depth reports provided to the shires and participating pilot town schools were considered valuable and have been utilized for other important discussions.

A total of 888 students (58%) participated in the on-line survey. The offer of an iPad in a prize draw was an incentive to the students to participate although it would appear that the cooperation of teachers to allocate class time for this task was far more crucial.

What the results did highlight is that while students have an extremely high regard for their home towns, there is a strong perception that they need to leave to pursue their chosen career path and earn a higher income. Although strong interest was expressed in business, they had little understanding of entrepreneurship and did not appreciate the opportunities that modern technology brings to rural areas.



Each pilot town reflected different influences on youth in their career choices and interest in business. The results were analysed in workshops with student representatives at each of the pilot town schools. A media release written by the students helped to convey key messages to the community.

The Loddon Times — Wednesday, April 3, 2013 — PAGE 3



**Boort students put pen to paper to reveal their ambitions after assessing the results of the Operation Next Gen survey.**

## Youths rate town highly

FIVE Boort District School year 11 students recently met to analyse data collected from almost 1000 year seven to 12 students across the region.

They were pleased to see that 79 per cent of Boort students rated their community excellent to very good to live in.

The survey was conducted as part of the Operation Next Gen pilot project, which involves the towns of Boort, Birchip and Cohuna.

The purpose of the survey was to better understand the youth and the community and their future plans.

Data was collected by the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship in the United States providing the opportunity to contrast results with rural students across the world.

"It gives it a global feel," Student Representative Council member, Anya Eicher said.

Similar questions put to adults across the region revealed that young people are thinking differently.

"Adults expect us to be more interested in agriculture," School Captain, Jessica Pay said.

The number one preferred career choice of students was Education or Training followed by Early Childhood Development, Counselling or Care Services.

"The survey provides a different understanding of what the younger generation wants than the older generation," Darrell Dodd said.

Sixty per cent of Boort students say that they plan to attend university. This was higher than the region average.

"Students are keen to go away to university but 55 per cent picture themselves coming back in the future," Stephanie Couper said.

Interest in owning a business or going into the family business is much lower in Boort than the rest of the region.

While students appeared to have little understanding of entrepreneurship the adults surveyed indicated that the main barriers were lack of encouragement, finance and business skills.

A common perception of young people is that local businesses are shutting down and the majority of students think that they have to go to the city for a career.

With increasing modern technology, it is hoped that this perception will change.

"There is an opportunity to think more outside the box here," Raevan Grattan-Watson said.

Being able to compare community perceptions with those of youth was considered another interesting element to add to the conversation. Questions mirrored those asked in the youth survey and asked adults to answer in the context of "if they were a young person ..."

An online survey link was distributed via the pilot town ambassadors to community members in the pilot towns. 124 people participated and helped to highlight some of the significant differences in thinking.

Copies of both the student and community surveys can be viewed online.

## 6. Pilot Town Ambassadors inaugural meeting

Painting the picture - what we are facing as opposed to what could be with a whole of community approach - was an important component of the initial meeting followed by a “think tank” on what strategies the ambassadors thought were important and achievable. The conversation was clearly centred on what the local community could do for itself.

It is fair to say that there were many reservations leading up to this first conversation. Coming from different sectors, the ambassadors were not necessarily well known to each other. The proposal was totally new and difficult to articulate given that it is supposed to be community driven. Added to that, an unusual venue was selected to provide a link with entrepreneurship and make it clear that this was no ordinary community discussion.

Discussion items included:

1. Aims of project
2. Implications of ABS data and local youth and community surveys
3. Why entrepreneurship is important to rural communities
4. Success stories from other communities
5. Priorities and strategies for this community (world café style discussion)
6. Next steps - action points



ABOVE: Birchip met in the soon to be vacant workshop of a local machinery manufacturer. This venue has since been targeted in the community's proposal to create a “Trades Hub” to encourage and support tradespeople operating in the shire.

CENTRE: Cohuna met in the vacant Butter Factory, a relic from a past era. Since then the building has become the base for a new business and will be the location for the group's Festival launch on Melbourne Cup Weekend.

BELOW: Boort met at a local winery cellar door that they previously had little knowledge of.





## 7. Ambassador Conversations

Support from the project manager was available to the ambassadors at any time on request but it was up to the groups to drive their own conversations at their own pace.

A challenge for them was to expand the conversation to the wider community informally through their friends and associates and formally by tapping into existing group networks.

Coming from such different sectors, setting meeting times did prove to be difficult at times. Some groups preferred to meet during the day while others did so at night. Email became an important component of the conversation in between those times but face to face generated the most enthusiasm and creativity.

## 8. Support

Sharing information and continuing to inspire the ambassadors and pilot town communities was crucial to this project.

A series of webpages were developed on Community Leadership Loddon Murray's website to promote the project activities for each pilot town and to provide a base for useful community, school and business links and resources. [www.clm.org.au/operationnextgen.htm](http://www.clm.org.au/operationnextgen.htm)

A monthly newsletter was distributed by email to 149 interested people during the project. The distribution list comprised pilot town ambassadors, project partners, school principals, those that participated in the community survey and those that requested to be placed on the mailing list. Copies could also be downloaded from the website.

Monthly newsletters included:

- Updates from the project manager
- Updates from the pilot towns
- Profiles of young people in rural businesses
- Profiles of successful communities
- Useful tools and resources
- Relevant events

Media releases, updating the progress of the project in general, as well as the specific pilot town activities, were regularly distributed by the project manager.



Travis Howard of Cohuna used to be easily distracted at school.

"All I could think about was farming," he admits.

When the family dairy farm was sold in 2006 Travis contracting his skills out and kept his eyes open for opportunities.

An idea was presented to him by Cr. Goulding four years ago when the shire was trying to decide how to dispose of its green waste collection.

As a result of that initial conversation, Travis now provides a unique service that is beneficial for the shire, the environment and for farmers.

Travis buys the green waste off the Gannawarra Shire and relocates it to dairy farms that require feed pad bedding for their cows prone to mastitis and other conditions inflamed by lying on the wet ground.

After a period of time Travis then collects the further enriched waste and composts it in wind-rows over a six month period before

sifting it into a format that is suitable for vegetable gardens and pasture enhancement.

In what is proving to be a profitable business Travis started off processing 80 tonnes of waste on the ground and four years later is up to 2,500 tonnes annually.

John Keely and other local farmers have supported Travis in getting started allowing him to make use of their land to process the compost. Travis also pays credit to his father as a business mentor.

A field day sparked the original idea and You Tube and the internet provided the rest of the knowledge that Travis needed to get his business started.

"I love seeing things grow and experimenting," says Travis.

So far his experimentation has resulted in a win-win for everyone concerned. And don't think that he has finished yet. There are more plans being cultivated by this young rural entrepreneur!

<http://www.clm.org.au/operationnextgen.htm>

# CAN'T SPELL "ENTREPRENEUR" ?

## Be One and Hire Somebody Who Can!

## 9. Challenge their thinking

A key theme for the Operation Next Gen project was to “Look at existing landscapes with fresh eyes.” With this in mind it was important to challenge their thinking of what the future may look like and, in particular, bring the opportunities of technology into the conversation. Paul Higgins of Emergent Futures was selected for this task based on his affinity with the region and reputation as a futurist.

Given that it was a significant challenge for Paul to present to three different communities he kindly donated his services for this workshop so that he could use it as a test case to develop suitable materials.



It was evident from evaluation comments (significantly those that didn't attend) that this workshop was a crucial element of the Operation Next Gen project.

## 10. Regroup with pilot towns

Following the Christmas period it was essential for the project manager to set a date to “regroup” with the ambassadors and ensure that their conversations and planning remained on track. It was also an opportunity to get the group thinking about a creative approach to their presentation at the Regional Forum in April.



## 11. Regional Forum



It was important for the pilot towns to have a specific event and date at which they would share and publicly reveal their plans to the wider community for feedback. A weekday evening (22 April, 2013) was nominated as the most suitable time and Boort was selected as the most central location to the three pilot towns. Once again an entrepreneurial business setting - Simply Tomatoes - was selected as the forum venue.

56 people from the pilot towns and surrounding areas attended. Cohuna hired a bus and invited key community leaders to come to the forum. The North Central LLEN scheduled its Annual General Meeting to conclude in Boort just prior so that they could attend. Damian Drum, MLC, also attended demonstrating the Victorian State Government's support and interest in Operation Next Gen.

Hosted by Paul Higgins, each of the pilot towns had 10 minutes to present their ideas. The ambassadors and guests were then invited to visit each of the pilot town "listening posts" to ask questions and further explore their plans.

Copies of their presentations were posted on the website for those who couldn't make it.

There is no doubt that this forum was a catalyst for each of the pilot towns. They inspired each other and reinvigorated the Operation Next Gen conversation.





## 12. Pilot Towns progress their plans

After their public airing of their ideas at the Regional Forum, the pilot town ambassadors have worked diligently to expand their conversations and progress plans.

Birchip conducted a whole of town meeting on 29 July 2013 with around 100 people in attendance. Their main conversations were focused on:

- Housing
- Child Care
- Trade Hub / Business Start-ups - develop the old O'Connor's site into a trades hub and business centre
- School Exchange



Boort has worked closely with the school and Tourism Association to progress their ideas including:

- Build and create social enterprise... the marketing ,sale and distribution of local produce
- Provide a hub for intergenerational learning ... this is where young people can provide services such as the Tech Team concept
- Build community leadership capacity – young people and older
- Provide a business training model for young people linked to their school curriculum
- Provide social and promotional groups (i.e. Tourism and Arts) a space, and place to develop and connect with both the local community and visitors at times of local events in the town
- Link the portal to the Community Garden development
- Ensure that the portal has the capacity to support the sustainability of other organisations and agencies i.e BRIC

The BIG Cohuna's list of ideas has generated a lot of media interest state wide:

- Business Idea Generator: 12 months rent free premises offered
- Cohuna Festival: Open for Inspection (Melbourne Cup weekend 2013)
- Opera on the Rocks event
- Big Ideas and Business Awards
- Paint Our Town: sprucing up
- Social media and website



## 13. Share the learnings

In addition to the newsletter and numerous media releases and radio interviews, fifteen presentations were made over a period of twelve months by the project manager to interested organizations around the region and interstate. This included local councils, business awards, community leadership programs and national and international conferences, helping to create a higher awareness of the project and resources available on the website. Use of a wide range of mediums - Facebook, twitter, Instagram - and constant information was the key to creating and maintaining a profile for the project.

# How did it go?

EVALUATION WAS UNDERTAKEN BY SURVEY MONKEY AFTER EACH MAJOR ACTIVITY CONDUCTED AS PART OF THE OPERATION NEXT GEN PROJECT. THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE THEN REFLECTED ON THE PROCESS AND CAME UP WITH THESE THOUGHTS

## Outcomes

- ONG is helping to facilitate a generational change of who lead community conversations. Existing leaders able to take on a supporting rather than an up-front role.
- A very shared leadership model.
- More local buy in than anything generated by council.
- Encouraging the community to think for itself more. Not enough \$ in council budgets to meet all requests.
- An opportunity for schools to forge useful community partnerships.
- Asking youth about business and entrepreneurship. Planting seeds for the future.
- Student survey data very valuable and has been used on multiple occasions. Releasing data to the community also valuable in helping to change perceptions. Young people do want to live here!
- Positive publicity for organisations and the pilot towns involved.
- Perceptions have been influenced by the conversations. People are thinking about what could be different in the future.

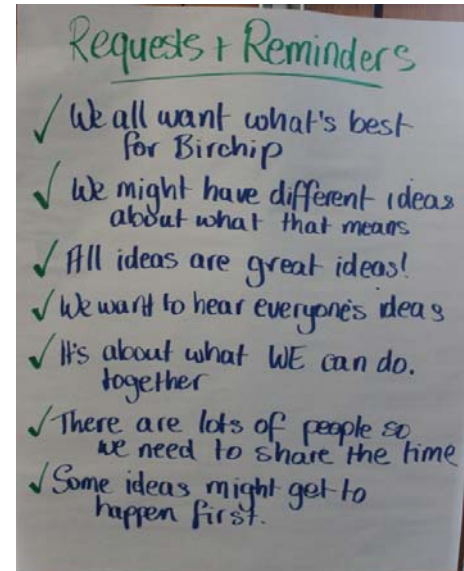
In their final evaluation survey, 64% of the pilot town ambassadors said that they have been influenced to think differently and 71% have been influenced to act differently as a result of this project. Given the skills and experience of the people that took on the role of ambassadors, this is a great outcome and indicative of positive outcomes in the long term.



LEFT: Cohuna ambassador, Sonia Wright, being interviewed by WIN TV about the Business Idea free rental offer of business premises for a 12 month period

## Points of Difference

- Using the word entrepreneurship has set the project apart from others and created wide interest.
- Community driven: structured around the people who have a stake in the outcomes. Attractiveness of being community led, not being prescriptive or told to do something. Planting the seed of an idea and watching it pop up in all sorts of places!
- A project about ideas rather than asset focussed – a reversal of usual activities brought to council and quite different to normal community development. Not bricks and mortar focussed.
- Opportunity for new community leaders to emerge. Different people involved in the conversations and driving projects.



## Crucial elements for success

- A clear brief on selection of “ambassadors” essential to ensure that there is diversity and a well-balanced group of networked people willing to embrace change.
- “Painting a picture” to support the conversations because it is so ideas focussed.
- Setting the scene for a creative environment and challenging new ways of thinking.
- Involving wider community in the conversations.
- Partnerships made on community’s terms rather than dictated to them.

## Challenges:

- Some members of community concerned that they were not invited to be an ambassador.
- Some angst from other towns at the amount of publicity pilot town is getting.
- Visibility of the conversations not always evident but become more prevalent when attached to a bricks and mortar project (ie. Cohuna shop for free rent).
- Engagement of some schools difficult.
- Hard for some people to grasp the ONG concept as new and different to the usual.
- More structure required around meetings of pilot towns.
- Invite more “ambassadors” to allow for attrition.
- Encourage “whole of community” meetings earlier in the planning stage to eliminate mixed messages.

OUR SINCERE THANKS TO THE MANY PEOPLE AND ORGANISATIONS THAT HAVE SUPPORTED THE OPERATION NEXT GEN PROJECT. IT HAS BEEN AN INSPIRATIONAL JOURNEY THAT WILL CONTINUE FOR MANY YEARS TO COME.

For more information about this project:

## Community Leadership

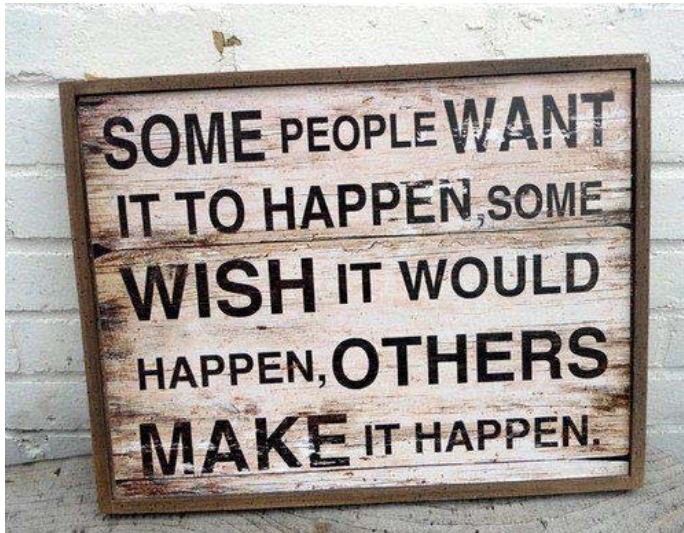
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Community Leadership Loddon Murray Inc. is committed to continuing this important conversation in rural areas and welcomes inquiries from interested groups and communities.

With thanks to the  
brave community  
members whose  
conversations started  
ripples in the pond!

### BIRCHIP

Steve Bourke  
David Chamberlin  
Deanne Ferrier  
Louisa Ferrier  
James Goldsmith  
Andrea Harrison  
Zac Holmes  
Fiona Knight  
Eileen Smith  
Jarrod Tylor  
Kylie Walsh

### BOORT

Greg Boyd  
Peter Eicher  
Stephen Field  
Roger Griffiths  
Brett Hosking  
Marilyn Lanyon  
Naomi Malone  
Jerri Nelson  
Jarrod Robinson  
Andrew Whatley

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Sonia Wright