



TXU Business & Community Round Tables North East Victoria March 2003

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Following the devastating bush fires which occurred throughout North East Victoria in January through to March 2003, TXU generously provided funding, through the Murray Hume Business Enterprise Centre, to conduct a series of "Business and Community Round Tables" in five of the communities most affected by the fires.

The purpose of the round tables was to allow representatives from individual businesses, business organisations and the general community from each of the areas an opportunity to discuss the impact of the fires, the subsequent difficulties experienced and to identify the resources necessary to revitalise the communities as quickly as possible to aid the recovery process.

The Round Tables were held in:

- Corryong
- Bright
- Mt Beauty
- Beechworth
- Myrtleford

The Round Tables were promoted through media advertising, both print and radio, direct mail-out and via news items and community notices using other electronic media outlets.

Prior to each Round Table, representatives of the Murray Hume BEC walked around the retail areas of each town to speak to individual business operators, both to remind them the round tables were being conducted and to allow them to privately discuss concerns they may have had.

This process proved to be invaluable as it quickly became apparent the majority of business operators were reluctant to publicly discuss the difficulties they were experiencing. This is of concern, as the most affected business operators or the most at risk of failure do not appear to be coming forward to seek assistance or advice.

Information provided in this report is not intended to be critical of any individual or organisation. The Round Tables simply presented an opportunity for members of the communities to put forward information or suggestions which may aid recovery in their own communities as well as assisting other communities in the future who may experience similar events.

Key issues that emerged during the round table discussions are highlighted on the following pages.

Tourism

(Possible Solutions provided by Ilena Young-Tourism Consultant)

- Whilst businesses appreciated the funding provided by the state government to aid marketing activities to encourage visitors to the region, the results of the special promotion initially conducted were not as successful as hoped. Visitor numbers remained low during the March long weekend.

Possible Solutions:

1. It needs to be recognised that recovery will be a long haul process and marketing campaigns and development will need to be ongoing – if these are 100 year fires – then recovery needs to be seen in the same scale.
2. Individual operators (and therefore the tourism industry as a whole) would benefit from structured facilitation and support for the creation and/or expansion of a regional network of tourism focused industry groups (possibly including Chambers of Commerce), through which the operators could be supported during what is likely to be a long-haul process, and resources and other forms of support could be channeled.

- The majority of businesses rely heavily on income derived during the January holiday period. While many events were cancelled, especially over the Australia Day weekend, substantial amounts of money had already been expended by businesses and community organisations in preparation for the events. Income from the January events in many cases is used to fund events for the following year and to support the activities of community organisations. There is deep concern that many events may not be able to be held in the future because of the loss of income suffered this year.

Possible Solutions:

3. Refer to point one above re long haul nature of recovery.
4. Consider the existing events program with CVTC to see whether this could be structured/added to for the next few years to address this issue.

- Communities which rely predominantly on tourism are experiencing particular difficulties because they do not have other significant industry sectors to cushion the effects of low visitor numbers.

Possible Solution:

5. This is a local structural issue – would it be worth the State Government subsidising an examination of this issue, working across the region with such towns as a group to address economic development gaps?

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- Mt Beauty was already suffering the effects of the closure of a major employer in the town and the existing problems, particularly in relation to employment opportunities, have been severely compounded since the fires.
 - A mountain bike event due to be held in Mt Beauty was postponed and moved to a weekend later in the year. However, the event will clash with other activities and the potential income from the mountain bike event will be lessened (estimated to be worth \$7-\$10k).

Possible Solution:

6. Again this is a local structural issue – however, are there any criteria through which such towns can be identified and given additional assistance?

- Fish stocks in many streams and rivers have already been depleted and further serious damage may occur due to the expected problems when rain falls in the area and the water condition deteriorates. Fishing is a key tourism activity, particularly around the Corryong area, and there is concern that fish stocks of non-indigenous species, such as trout cod, will not be replaced. This has the potential to have a serious impact on the recreational fishing industry for both the immediate and long-term future.

Possible Solution:

7. Is it possible to work with other affected agencies – DSE, CMA, etc. on something like this?

Overall

In determining solutions, three important aspects need to be considered:

1. Recovery will be a long haul process – if these are 100-year fires – then recovery needs to be seen in the same scale.
2. Solutions need to be created that bear the long-term in mind - throwing \$\$ at short-term projects will not be effective - \$\$ are needed for longer-term projects to create structures and supports that will underpin the future sustainability and resilience of the industry – so we work effectively to recover from this event – whilst also creating resilience for future events.
3. Options need to work towards networked solutions – building relationships between groups and overcoming the great fragmentation that occurs in tourism. Then again – we have input now to overcome some of the structural longer-term issues the regional tourism industry faces.

Media

- In all communities, frustration with the media was apparent. It was generally felt that while the media, particularly metropolitan television stations, were keen to sensationalise the fire event, there has been little support since to promote the fact the communities are not "fire devastated" and are indeed "open for business".
- There is also concern that many forward bookings are still being cancelled because potential visitors are under the impression the towns have been burnt out.

(Refer also to issues listed under Emergency Management and Post-Crisis Activities.

Response:

Information on the concerns raised in relation to the media will be provided to local media outlets as well as to the Victorian and Commonwealth governments' bushfire inquires.

Infrastructure

- There was confusion regarding the status of roads in the area. Clarification is needed to advise potential visitors of what roads are open, although care may still be needed in some areas.
- Communities in Corryong and Mt Beauty are seeking funding support to seal important roads in the areas, such as the Benambra Road, to allow more efficient access between communities and to encourage more visitors through the area.
- The Friends of the Mt Beauty Arboretum were concerned they were not permitted to access the area to assess the fire damage and to commence the clean up. The group fears they have lost many of the plants donated by the community and also that a public liability risk exists as people may still be visiting the area although it is officially closed. The fire has uncovered the original weir area that the group would like to work on before it again becomes overgrown.
- Also at Mt Beauty, the surveyors' road and campsites have been exposed and the community would like to take advantage of this to develop its tourism potential.
- It is estimated there is a 10-year supply of mill-able timber as a result of the fires but it has been advised this timber cannot be harvested. The ability to use the timber for commercial purposes would assist the unemployment situation in the Mt Beauty area.

Response:

Copies of this report are being provided to the Shires and also to the Victorian government bushfire inquiry, to enable examination of the issues raised.

Business Support

- Businesses are in desperate need for one-on-one consultation on a number of business and customer service related matters. Cash flow and staffing issues being the most immediate concerns.

Possible Solution:

The Victorian Government has allocated funds for its agencies to provide support to businesses, however the support infrastructure is limited and overwhelmed at the moment. It is agreed that the need here is two-fold. The communities need to work more closely together to develop some strategies that will best carry their businesses through the next few years. Councils and the Victorian Government have developed initiatives to address this matter.

- Individual business operators need to have one-on-one business support - not in the way of financial support by itself. The banks, credit unions and building societies are working together to relieve the financial pain and the Business Enterprise Centre has experts available willing to give some time to resolving these individual issues. Business review, coaching, and financial and marketing plans are needed. Personal recovery strategies in consultation with experts, such as the Business Enterprise Centre being available in areas on a regular basis would compliment existing agencies that are currently over burdened.
- The purpose of this web report is to empower individual business operators, business and community groups to seek assistance and realise that no-one expects anyone to deal with the aftermath on their own. An excellent opportunity exists to start to plan a fresh approach with new and creative ideas.

DEBT-PROBLEM MANAGEMENT surfaced as one of the single most important issues

Financial problems can come about as a consequence of an Act of God, whether directly or indirectly. They can also occur because of inherent weaknesses in the business and they plague most businesses at one time or another. The issues leading up to a problem can develop rapidly or slowly and in a quite fragmented way, on occasion.

Fire, flood, storm damage, etc, can precipitate problems that if not quickly recognised and a management strategy put in place, can cause devastating effects to a business.

Apart from the financial risk owners/managers also suffer severe stress and emotional pain. This also usually extends to their families and loved ones. One of the major causes of marriage and family breakdown is recognised as financial problems.

Managing business financial problems is an important part of good management practice. This is best dealt with in a structured and logical fashion and includes the following:

1. Assessment of impact of the event generally
2. Full liability picture and cashflow needs for expected period of recovery
3. Stocktake of resources and alternative options
4. Re-assessment of the viability of the business model and business plan
5. Ascertain precise problem and document the above
6. Discuss with accountant, banker and other advisers and if a ready solution is not available, obtain expert advice to manage a WIN/WIN resolution to the problem

Sound outcomes are the rewards for bringing expert assistance to the issue in many cases. However, it is sometimes necessary to adopt a hard decision and facing that decision is often the most difficult thing.

Some businesses encounter situations where the financial problems are beyond the capacity of management to rectify. This can be for many reasons:

- o Lack of time and knowledge
- o Inadequate resources and/or fear
- o Insufficient understanding of the options available

The important thing is - **Don't leave it too late to act** – A business owner needs to address any problem quickly before it becomes an insurmountable one and COMMUNICATING early with the financial adviser/bank/lender can in many cases avoid difficulties.

Support Agencies

Farm help

1800 050 585

Upper Murray Ag Care

02 6948 4489

Australian Tax Office

13 11 42

www.ato.gov.au

Centrelink

131 021

<http://www.centrelink.gov.au/>

Business

www.business.gov.au

Industrial Relations Victoria

www.irv.vic.gov.au

Regional Development

13 22 15

<http://www.dsd.vic.gov.au/>

Workcover Victoria

(03) 9641 1444 or 1800 136 089 (Toll Free).

<http://www.workcover.vic.gov.au/dir090/vwa/home.nsf>

Emotional Costs

- Communities were concerned they had not yet had an opportunity to “debrief” to allow them to recover emotionally.
- There is also concern about how children in the affected communities are coping now and into the future. This is of particular importance for the many children who were sent away to friends and relatives during the height of the fires and who, while separated from their parents, watched sensationalised coverage of the fires on television programs.
- Many children did not have a holiday in January because of the fires and then schools opened late, which caused further disruption to their lives.
- Also, many farmers traditionally take their only break during February when it is usually a quite time for their properties. With the extra work already required because of the drought, the inability to have a break could contribute to health problems for many in the near future. This also applies to some tourism related business operators.
- Unemployment figures for the Alpine Shire was reported at two of the round tables as 37-38% but this figure does not yet include those people who have lost their jobs at the Mt Beauty mill. The figure also does not take into account “under employment”, i.e. those people who may only work a few hours a week or households where one partner may be employed. General concern for future employment opportunities and the subsequent impact on the community is creating angst, particularly for Mt Beauty residents.
- Because of the nature of the fire, some communities were living “on the edge” for an extended period of time in anticipation of when and where the fire would progress into their area. This contributed to mental, physical and emotional exhaustion for many people.

Response:

We were impressed and humbled by the strength of the community spirit that existed in each of the areas the Round Tables were held. People were ready and willing to do whatever they could to assist friends, neighbours and their community. Since the Round Tables were conducted many of the shires and towns in north east Victoria have organised community events such as bbqs and “thankyou” days for volunteers. Some annual events, including festivals and other Easter activities have also been held. These activities have allowed people to come together and to talk through some of their experiences during and after the crisis. Further events are planned for the future.

There is a range of support services available to individuals, families and communities who feel they need further assistance, including family doctors. We have listed below just a few of the many resources available. We appreciate it can sometimes be difficult to make contact with others to discuss personal problems but anyone who is having difficulty should not

hesitate in contacting someone for advice or assistance and we encourage you to do so as soon as possible.

The Victorian Government has developed a range of initiatives to support individuals and communities impacted by the 2002/03 bushfires. Initiatives include funding to provide community counselling, hardship grants, education assistance, coordination of a volunteer recovery workforce, and a Bushfire Recovery Fund to raise money to fund recovery efforts and assistance. Information on the initiatives can be accessed on the Victorian Government website at www.vic.gov.au

Department of Human Services

The Department of Human Services is able to provide support in a number of ways. They have a range of fact sheets available on the internet covering issues such as "The Stress of Being Under Threat", "Family & Loss", "Children & Crisis", "Teenagers & Crisis", "Stress After Emergencies" and "When Someone you know has had a Traumatic Experience".

Department of Human Services Hume Region Office at Wangaratta (03) 5722 0555 (Business hours only).

www.dhs.vic.gov.au/emergency/events/bushfire.htm

Lifeline 13 11 13

Confidential telephone counselling available 24hours, 7 days a week

Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800

Kids Help Line is a 24 hour national telephone and web based counselling service for children and young people - it is free, anonymous and confidential.

www.kidshelpline.com.au

Department for Victorian Communities

The Department for Victorian Communities was established in December 2002 to deliver better services and community infrastructure for Victorian communities. The primary reason for establishing the department is to give practical effect to the Government's key objective of Growing Victoria Together "building cohesive communities". The Department brings together a range of programs, which have a broad mandate to advocate for, and deliver to, people and places.

1300 366 356

www.dvc.vic.gov.au

Alpine Shire Council

P.O. Box 139, Bright 3741

Telephone: (03) 5755 0555

Fax: (03) 5755 1811

www.alpineshire.vic.gov.au

Indigo Shire Council

P.O. Box 28, Beechworth 3747

Telephone: (03) 5728 1000

Fax: (03) 5728 1676

www.indigoshire.vic.gov.au

Towong Shire Council

P.O. Box 55, Tallangatta 3700

Telephone: (02) 6071 2999

Fax: (02) 6071 2747

www.towong.vic.gov.au

Our Community

Through the Our Community Centres of Excellence, they provide the one-stop-gateway for practical resources, support and linkages between community networks and the general public, business and government - building capacity to strengthen communities in every Australian State and Territory.

www.ourcommunity.com.au

Emergency Management & Post Crisis Activities

- There was general concern regarding access to timely and accurate information on the progress of the fires in each local area. Whilst appreciating the difficulties and challenges experienced by various authorities in managing the crisis, people were naturally anxious about their safety and felt more regular communication would have been beneficial. The information sessions conducted by DSE were considered helpful.
- Some Victorian communities are only able to access NSW based radio and media services, which added to communication difficulties.
- Some telephone numbers advertised for people to call for information on the fires or road closures were not accessible in other areas, i.e. numbers commencing with "13".
- Residents were asked by authorities to implement their Bushfire Plans, however many people were not readily aware of what actions they needed to take.
- There was also concern that many of those involved in managing the response or actually fighting the fires did not have enough local knowledge. For example, many physical landmarks or areas are often referred to locally in a different way to the official names and local knowledge of terrain and most appropriate access into areas was considered important.
- The logistical task of providing meals to workers generated a great deal of discussion. Many restaurants and cafes were virtually closed during the crisis and employers were concerned about not being able to meet financial commitments, especially staff costs. It has been suggested this issue be investigated for future events and perhaps opportunities be provided for restaurants and cafes to work on a roster system to ensure the financial impact on individual businesses is not as great.
- The efforts of other volunteers and businesses who were providing meals and drinks to volunteers was greatly appreciated however there were marked differences in the types of meals being provided to workers, depending on whether they were paid workers or volunteers.
- The timeliness of assistance, particularly financial support, to affected communities is considered to be a high priority. It was suggested that consideration be given to the development of assistance packages which could be immediately implemented for short term support, whilst further investigation into longer term needs is undertaken. Having a pool of funds available to enable businesses to access low interest or interest-free loans to overcome their most immediate difficulties was one of the suggestions made.

Possible Solution:

One of the major stresses to business and residents was the importance of communication to the decision-making process. Some of the reports that were being broadcast for remote areas were up to eight hours late. As a result of the recovery program, Douglas Allen of RTR 94.4 has implemented processes that will ensure their radio station, with a

maintenance upgrade and a diesel generator, will be able to broadcast to the whole of the affected area and will be the only broadcaster that has that ability. Mr. Allen is working closely with the SES and CFA to ensure that the station will be able to provide full coverage 24 hours a day.

Response:

All issues raised in relation to emergency management and post-crisis activities will be forwarded to the Victorian and Commonwealth government bushfire inquiries.

A full list of all comments recorded at each of the Round Tables is appended to this document.

The Murray Hume BEC wishes to thank all those who participated in the Round Tables and those who were unable to attend but who also provided information and support. The communities of the North East have also extended their appreciation to TXU for the corporate support they have provided, both through funding of the Round Table process and the infrastructure projects they are funding in affected communities.

We sincerely wish to thank TXU for their timely intervention and concern for the business and community needs for the region.

Corryong

Wednesday March 5, 2003

- β Motel & restaurant - fire people staying but now starting to return but people not aware that the fire crisis is not having the impact, that businesses are open and operating. It is interesting to see the burnt areas (as hopefully it will never happen again) and seeing the new growth. Not so bad now the smoke has gone.
- β Farmers who would normally travel this time of the year are perhaps not because of drought, etc.
- β Signage outside Wodonga that Omeo highway is closed is confusing - replace wording on signs, especially provincial towns.
- β Not much media coverage for Corryong except during height of the fire.
- β Safe alternative route to the coast and vistas to the mountains that may never be seen again.
- β Strong message during crisis advising of road closures, etc. but the message that things are returning to normal has not been as strongly portrayed in the media.
- β Continue to have problems with roads because of trees falling, etc. but travellers will not be held up forever.
- β Bit drier than normal but it still looks the same when you drive up from Albury Wodonga.
- β Fishing still good in Nariel Creek.
- β Recognised as a good trout fishing area but if substantial rain, the river will run like a tar pit. Not allowed to restock with introduced species, need to look at restocking with trout because that is what the area is known for and what people come for.
- β Cudgewa Creek is designated as a native species stream but a restocking program is not occurring, I.e. trout cod.
- β Seen on Getaway program, (one of the Daddo brothers) quoted a memory of fly fishing at Nariel Creek, it would be good to follow up with him for further promotion.
- β Keep people in town - festivals, customer service - special because of its isolation, just far enough away from Albury Wodonga so that people are not siphoned away. Self-sufficient. Strong community networks and greatest community capacity building that occurred for 60 years even over an extended period of the fires.
- β Price of fuel dearer than city areas.
- β Media coverage during crisis was free but needs to be considered that it now has to be paid for. Look at inviting national lifestyle programs for special events. Can't assume they will come to us - need to chase them.
- β Beechworth has business interests putting in money and some paid staff strongly promoting their area.
- β Programs involving local government are run from Tallangatta - some need to be based in Corryong as well.
- β Give-away promotion at Tathra - week's holiday and then approach other businesses for lunch, dinner vouchers, etc. Costs are minimal and are something that can be promoted in Albury Wodonga.

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- β Don't forget the Wagga region. Or Canberra.
 - β Have not had a Chamber of commerce for some time. Tourism committee used to do shopping centre promotions, etc.
 - β UMBI initially set up to be a chamber of commerce "with teeth". Look at strategic planning session. (James)
 - β Very active sub-committees, I.e. renewable alternative energy, may need Streetlife submission.
 - β Would not find one business in the area that would not have some benefit from tourism.
 - β Tourists appreciate Corryong craft shop because it is one of the cheapest around and the quality is good. Perception that items are more expensive locally.
 - β The Corryong shopping area is small so people tend to walk down one side and then back along the other.
 - β The trees hold their leaves longer in Corryong than Beechworth, etc. and we are not as commercialised as other areas.
 - β Icon needed for Corryong
 - β Look at a circuit for tourists, including Canberra.
 - β Get Benambra road sealed - opens up possibilities for tourists, farmers, etc. especially for those from Albury Wodonga to Gippsland and return.
 - β Government does not see this part of Victoria as being important. Lobbying has been done on a regular basis but emphasis from other end of shire because it is called the Omeo "Highway". The Benambra road would be much more effective and is a low-level road. Ministers have been taken for a drive to show them the road.
 - β Feasibility study concluded that both roads should be upgraded. VicRoads would not fund both so Towong shire recommended Omeo.
 - β VicRoads were going to appoint another consultant. Tourist maps show road as a minor road.
 - β Hardly ever needs to be closed in winter. Towong Shire will close the road until the contractor clears it for opening. Road closed for extended period last year. All stock trucks prefer the Benambra road.
 - β Local business (Brown's) supplies machinery into Gippsland.
 - β Road would have been sealed if the copper mine had gone ahead.
 - β Renewable energy program still under consideration and if it proceeds may be a great tourist attraction as well as providing other employment opportunities.
 - β Seeking funding for the feasibility study for renewable energy project
 - β Superannuation funds (venture capital) has been considered in the past for the renewable energy project
 - β Business community needs to take initiative but people cannot stretch themselves much further.
 - β Corryong is not solely based on tourism; there is diversity in industry.
 - β Airport is highly under-used - Fog is a problem
 - β Corryong has a world class museum - Man from Snowy River museum
 - β Business community needs to put something in to get something back - not just money - in kind, I.e. dinner vouchers, etc.
 - β Consider a marketing/promotions committee

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- β Look at what attracts tourists to the area
 - β Promotion needs to happen now!!! (Need to encourage Prime TV to come to the area - do their marketing people come here.)
 - β Radio stations - some people could only get Wagga stations so were not up to date with what was occurring in the local area.
 - β People were trying to change to Edge FM after their promotion but are unable to get the signal.
 - β Difficult to rely on anyone here at the moment - would consider the government package would address some of the marketing issues.
 - β Man from Snowy River festival committee may have some funds to contribute to a campaign
 - β Statue fund going for a number of years
 - β Towong Shire need to commence infrastructure/ streetscape works (this may be the catalyst/matching funding option for the Streetlife program)
 - β Coaches have not been seen - visitors for the last month has been ZERO
 - β Financial restructuring options, I.e. through banks, etc.
 - β Some businesses just had no business at all - went home knowing they were not missing trade - but bills just keep coming. Especially difficult if no other options for income.
 - β Fire fighters said they would return with their families - should be encouraged
 - β Corryong is essentially a service centre for the region - border not necessarily seen as a problem/issue

Bright

Thursday March 6, 2003

- β No patrons!
- β Why wasn't there a post-disaster plan in place ready to go regardless of what the event was, I.e. immediate response package of small amounts available.
- β Business closed for a month and basically spent the time apologising to creditors for not being able to pay bills.
- β Community needs to be involved in planning for after-the-event, e.g. chamber of commerce MUST be involved.
- β Should be an emergency shelved plan so that the situations can be dealt with immediately.
- β A-frame trailer sitting on the highway stating that Bright and district is still alive - come on up.
- β Media fantastic to fantasise what may have been going on - it will not cost millions in advertising to undo the damage that has been done.
- β Community media fund should be set aside as an immediate response for e.g. half-hour special in prime time.
- β Weatherman based in different locations and could get free accommodation and free meals.
- β Even during the fires, the spirit of the town continued and deserved some positive coverage.
- β Before any news report went out, a council representative could have verified the information, i.e. reporter saying surrounded by fire for dramatic effect.
- β Truth in media coverage.
- β (Emergency situations policy for media!!!!)
- β Media funds would have to be big money - as a community we do not have the kind of funds necessary to reach the markets we need to. (Fund set aside by the council to enable it to partner with others.)
- β In-kind support would also be available from the businesses, e.g. accommodation, meals.
- β Generally in the town there is still a positive spirit but there is definitely worry. We are here and open for business, there are events and things to see - we are back to normal but the patrons aren't.
- β Possibly back to 100% but still operating well below normal - could have perhaps organised a roster so that not all 10 restaurants were open for a few patrons. Locals could not dine out because they could not afford it.
- β Public liability insurance - when trying to run a festival or individual proprietor and one of the big cost factors is public liability.
- β Transmitters located along the highway where there are frequencies for tourism, etc. DSE - why can't we use these frequencies during disasters to keep the local community informed? One doesn't work and no one knows where it is.
- β It could run 24 hours a day - 7 days a week - and information would be relevant to the event and the location.

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- β Could be staffed by local people with local knowledge. They are community licensed.
 - β 50% of annual income comes over the 4-6 week period - that hits hard! Wait a whole year of suffering to get back in the black again.
 - β Situation rep. Would have given the true picture and people could have understood what was happening and what was likely to happen.
 - β They were advertising put in place your Bushfire Management plan - copies and information should have been more readily available.
 - β Need more information and earlier.
 - β Revise building codes in forest areas, e.g. flat roofed houses.
 - β Spent the effort saving home and business and insurance would not pay out - not even \$6000 worth of food lost.
 - β 2 banks closed and then another put a sign up part way through the day to say staff had gone home (there are only 3 banks). E.g. ATM's empty.
 - β They perhaps could have operated on a roster basis and could have been more considerate to the individual who has come in and said "I am up shit creek", why give them a 20 page document at a time when we just need help.
 - β Banks are delaying interest payments but it is accumulating.
 - β Acting from a corporate point of view but with the community in mind - only TXU where are the banks??? (They were invited.)
 - β The "big" IGA extended hours so that people had extra time. Good for the locals at the time.
 - β The period was infiltrated by the emergency services but not all accommodation places benefited. Had enough restaurants in town to feed an army and there was an army. But they were trying to set up a volunteer kitchen. All the people staying in Bright but had to travel to Myrtleford for meals after being out in the field fighting fires.
 - β Bright restaurants could have fed them every night on a roster.
 - β Would have kept my employees off the dole or employed and would not be sitting here now.
 - β All the money coming into the town was going out without the locals benefiting. The Savoy Club was trying to cope with thousands of meals they were not set up for.
 - β Food handling course - "Bright Buttons" who were all good cooks were refused as volunteers because they did not have a certificate. Community trying to repay but not welcome.
 - β All employers were really good with staff who needed to fight fires.
 - β Chamber meeting last week spoke about clustering and looked at packaging to use everyone's buying power.
 - β Difficult for restaurants because they try to be different. B&B could purchase cleaning products through a network.

Mt Beauty

Wednesday March 12, 2003

- β Federal gov grants just offered - won't know if eligible until detailed information is received
- β Parks Vic - their land but we are looking after it (Arboretum) and restoring it no money in the kitty - wait to see if any grants available - closed off to the public - need money to fix
- β Replace signage but no money available - put money in the first place
- β Some infrastructure stayed in tact but can't get in to do anything
- β \$1k down for this long weekend - mountain bike nationals postponed until Nov (long week)
- β \$10-12k event transferred to a weekend when they are full - will only the expected \$3k be enough to cover the loss already incurred?
- β Country Club used for catering as well as CFA
- β Numbers extremely down over Falls Creek over the long weekend
- β People still under the impression is still that it is a devastated area and this would probably impact Falls Creek more so
- β Bike riders who were coming at Easter thought the roads had melted
- β Need big picture help marketing the fact that there are wonderful things you will never see again
- β "fire ravaged" areas of the north east - stop staying that
- β Perception that the road is still closed but not sure where the Alpine Shire boundary is - tourism related businesses affected
- β Mis-reporting
- β Other ways and types of assistance - restoration or creation of infrastructure, e.g. mountain bike area, tracks and trails have not been cleared, many volunteers available - "too difficult" Parks Vic and Southern Hydro - 2m strips for the track - told we shouldn't be up there
- β Created a lot of tracks to get equipment in and want to return it to wilderness - we want them to remain cleared
- β Arbor - if access available they could clear weir etc (historic) and would allow water use - uncovered old surveyors site and camp sites - important part of the history of the area
- β Not simply band-aid measures but also need big picture measures
- β Parks Vic not managing - one employee to manage a huge section of the park - gateway to the high plains
- β 38% unemployment - once on intensive assistance then unable to access work for the dole - only 4 on work for the dole
- β Sealing the road from Omeo to Falls Creek - creating a loop road
- β Walking track needed along the river - between Mt Beauty and Tawonga
- β Lengthening the air strip to get charter flights in - volunteer maintained
- β If Parks manage properly with sufficient resources would bring immediate employment
- β We have the volunteers available but we are not allowed access or support to do anything to clear up, etc.

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- β Need access to dead timber but it cannot be touched - currently chipping - 10 years millable timber - potential for 10-20 direct jobs - cut down 60 trees per km but no-one is allowed to touch them (check '39 records) - if millable it is not hollow
 - β This is really only along edges of roads - need to get real near built up areas
 - β 38% does not reflect true numbers, I.e. under-employed - e.g. one partner working but other not included in figures
 - β Mill workers are not yet included in the figures (20 families affected) - if you lose them from the area you lose a teacher, etc.
 - β Promotion will help but need infrastructure projects to encourage employment and further community development
 - β Forestry industry employer-assistance information package still not available - businesses trying to do the right thing to employ people but still not able to get the guarantee
 - β Trying to hold on to the employees even though numbers are down because they may leave town and not be available when needed
 - β If there is no work over the school holiday period - greater risk of losing workers - infrastructure projects could help keep them there
 - β Arbor - need chain saws, bob cats, etc. maybe \$12,000 but trees may not be able to be assessed until spring - may have lost the redwood - only 8 rhoddies may have survived (5 acres) - had established a market
 - β Surveyors track not family or bike friendly at the moment - need equipment to make the track suitable, e.g. bob cats, tree fellers would create employment and offer something valuable for the future
 - β Need someone to come in pretty quickly to spray the blackberries!
 - β Lions lookout at Tawonga - power lines spoil the view
 - β Walking track around river and bike track on the Kiewa Valley highway could be linked up from Tawonga caravan park into town, the bakery, the pondage, around the river and back to the Lions lookout - you would need public toilets (arbor needs facilities as well) - could assist with accessibility issues for residents as well
 - β Town is aging and encouraging more retirees but a footpath network is required to assist mobility - access to library is a lot more difficult
 - β One of the biggest draw cards is the Lake - the Lions club offered to the Shire that they would do some work, i.e. seal the road but shire said no because it does not own the dam wall - Southern Hydro does. Suggest Southern Hydro handover the top to the shire - submitted a plan including the bird hides, small pier for fishing, boating, etc. Suggestion also for solar lights to encourage more walkers, visitors, etc. (Reluctance because they may need to raise the level of the dam in the future) - boardwalk area over the swampy parts - willows need to be removed
 - β Tours of power plants have stopped - educational groups, tourists, etc. averaged 42 buses per month (\$1m I.e. new lift shaft, safety railing, insurance) but if you look at the possible figures and entry fees it would not take too long to recoup

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- β Rail line up near the power station - could be opened up and used
 - β How are the children coping??? Has anyone checked through the schools, etc.?
 - β Emotional cost to the community - am I going to get another job, wives on edge as well as kids, fear factor with redundancy, tension building

Beechworth

Thursday March 13, 2003

- β Chamber trying to fund a promotional campaign to apply for matching funding - raised over \$5k to date but need at least another 4 (@\$100 per business) - chamber was looking at adding funding but has increased costs with insurance (\$3k)
- β Campaign would run over 12 months and include spots during the weather in Victoria, NSW and ACT
- β Beechworth is becoming more a destination
- β Important to include the in-kind contribution when applying for the matching funds
- β Stock and interest payments - no spare dollars for anything
- β Most businesses in Beechworth rely on tourism
- β Level of under-employment?
- β Most people in town are employed and some have 2 jobs - B&B operators also working in public sector, etc.
- β Many small businesses do not understand how tourism is important to them, e.g. hairdressers
- β B&B operator - personal ironing no longer sent out - sheets not sent out to be ironed - 4 part-time/casual employees no longer employed
- β Bakery re-rostering and some businesses continued to pay wages while people were fighting fires and it has hurt
- β Don't worry the tourists will come back - but the money missed was relied on for future - cash flow implications
- β Applying for extended credit and subsequent increased interest payments - will cost in the longer term
- β if business doesn't pick up - the town will be in serious trouble by July
- β Sun Herald will be doing a major campaign in the near future
- β Money has been provided for counselling - financial and personal - maybe this should include business planning for the future (i.e. disaster planning)
- β Business support services, i.e. mentoring, debt restructuring, cash flow - very few skilled people to act as mentors
- β Wanted business mentor but could not find one
- β Suggestion that the gov should sponsor the small business counsellors in the short term because business cannot afford the extra cost
- β So many businesses believe there is no help or support out there for them AND THERE IS THE PRIDE FACTOR - won't ask for help!
- β Need to make the tourism industry stronger and more resilient - council re-looking at the economic base in the shire for the longer term so that if there is a down turn in one sector the impact is not as great
- β The shire is aware of the issues, particularly for the small towns but those within Indigo are doing better than some others
- β Trying to get synergies between businesses through the chamber - clustering - business operators burnt out/tired?
- β Money being spent in Melb to promote but when people arrive operators are not happy, tired, etc. perhaps not able to provide exceptional service

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- β People in Beechworth got their heads together pretty quickly following the chamber meeting on Jan 31 - so most people are pretty positive - town was full on the long weekend
 - β Rest of March fairly grim but April looking better
 - β Packages on Visit Victoria website (for Ned Kelly weekend) - packages will change over time
 - β Beechworth is a unique shopping destination - does not have the franchise mentality
 - β Domestic tourism downturn, fuel prices, threat of war, drought and then fires
 - β Thanks to TXU for their support
 - β TXU are funding lights, etc.
 - β Market in Canberra area that needs to be followed up and also Wagga
 - β Lack of continuity and high burn out rate on chamber - need for strategic planning - existing plan buried in archives - broader support for chamber
 - β Perception of relevance of Chamber - sometimes due to history, e.g. clique but changes have occurred with new committee
 - β Need to bring together 2 groups - those who want to work together and those who tend to work individually
 - β Some businesses will not contribute to marketing campaigns because the "Beechworth Bakery" will bring them in
 - β Beechworth starting to "percolate and boil" and has a great future - all need to contribute in one way or another - supportiveness, Proactiveness - huge opportunity to develop