

The VPA working in Latrobe Valley

PROGRESS REPORT & EVALUATION

MARCH 2020





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1 Background

1.1 Purpose & introduction

The purpose of this report is to outline work being done by the Victorian Planning Authority (VPA) to help unlock opportunities for urban growth in the Latrobe Valley.

This report identifies strategic planning themes, lessons learned and future directions for strategic land use planning in the Latrobe Valley.

Through working in partnership with the three Latrobe Valley councils (Latrobe City, Baw Baw Shire and Wellington Shire) and other key land use planning stakeholders, some key issues have been identified:

- Ongoing technical and financial support is needed for strategic land use planning in the Latrobe Valley
- Continued focus and effort on improving collaboration between stakeholders is needed to ensure successful implementation of strategic land use plans
- Councils experience frequent turnover of skilled and experienced planning staff making it difficult to retain and improve corporate knowledge
- Infrastructure funding – in particular, for catalyst infrastructure to unlock new development fronts – is a critical issue where an answer has not been found
- Peri-urban growth is challenging therefore there is a strong need for ongoing planning to guide good outcomes taking advantage of the opportunities that arise from growth.

1.2 The VPA's role

The VPA is a statutory authority, established under the *Victorian Planning Authority Act 2017*, overseen by an independent board that reports to the Minister for Planning.

The Victorian Planning Authority has evolved from the Growth Areas Authority (established 2006) and Metropolitan Planning Authority (MPA). The authority was originally created to plan Melbourne's new suburbs in the growth corridors. Over the years the authority has continued to lead the preparation of plans in metropolitan greenfield areas but also expanded to activities across metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria.

The VPA embodies significant experience, expertise and stakeholder networks that make it the State Government's key strategic land use planning authority. The Minister for Planning directs the efforts of the VPA through the annual Statement of Expectations and the *Streamlining for Growth* program that provides \$24 million over four years (2016–17 to 2019–20) for council-initiated projects across Victoria. In regional Victoria, \$6.15 million has been invested by the Victorian Government in assisting councils.

The VPA operates across Victoria and works with regional councils and agencies to support strategic planning outputs such as precinct structure plans, development contributions plans, infrastructure contributions plans, master plans, framework plans, and various technical investigations. The VPA works with key partners such as the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) and the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions (DJPR) to deliver on the state's planning policies.



1.3 The Latrobe Valley¹

The Latrobe Valley, situated amongst the Baw Baw and Strzelecki ranges, is comprised of Latrobe City Council, Baw Baw and Wellington Shires in Victoria's Gippsland region. It has a combined population of 160,000 residents and includes an important network of settlements that are identified in state planning policy to accommodate growth.

The Latrobe Valley has largely been defined around the economic and social structures that were based upon industries of coal mining (and associated coal-fired energy production) and timber harvesting (and associated value add production such a paper milling). These industries resulted in economic growth and wealth generation which the community largely relied upon for employment from the 1920s to the 1970s; they were a source of pride and purpose for the community.

Integral to coordinating the operation of coal mining and energy production was the State Electricity Commission of Victoria (SEC), established in 1918. Through the incorporation of unions into its structure, the SEC had a paternal role in the community providing stability and for physical needs in the form of employment, vocational training, housing, health services and amenities not to mention social organisation that fostered a sense of community. Generations of residents with a lifelong association with the SEC had become accustomed to looking to the company for employment and their other needs; it was a principal economic and societal organising force in the Valley. At its height in the 1970s, around 20 per cent of the working population of the Valley was directly employed by the SEC.

The SEC's ability to perform its paternal role in the Latrobe Valley required state control of enterprise, unionism and economic protectionism which was the dominant political discourse in Australia. Towards the end of the 20th century, the political discourse was changing. Notions of economic privatisation, efficiency, deregulation, regionalism and globalism were becoming more favourable. These new notions filtered down into the Valley where the Victorian Government began to wind down its involvement in the power industry.

Privatisation and deregulation of the SEC began in the 1990s which resulted in the fragmentation of organisations, prioritisation of economic rationalism and efficiency agendas that had economic and social impact on the Valley in the form of rising unemployment and dismantling the social organisation that had relied upon the SEC for generations. A sense of pessimism and despair hung over the Valley.

The transition of the economic story of Valley continues to this very day as the Australian political and indeed global economic discourse now increasingly prioritises environmental sustainability. In 2017 the Hazelwood Power Station was closed which risked reigniting the economic decline and social negativity experienced in the 1990s. According to Latrobe City Council² closure of Hazelwood resulted in approximately 750 direct and 300 indirect job losses in the region, decrease of \$1.2 billion in output, reduction by \$255 million in demand for intermediate goods and services, and consumption effects reduced by \$103 million. The loss of Latrobe City's gross regional product from the closure was close to \$340 million.

There is whole of government effort to support the Valley in its continued transition through projects that will improve employment, infrastructure and social outcomes. In response to the closure of Hazelwood, the State Government established the Latrobe Valley Authority (LVA) and the new Economic Growth Zone. This has seen greater collaborative efforts from key agencies (including local government) contributing to achieving outcomes that support economic growth, drawing on the strengths and interests of each agency.

The VPA is working closely with DELWP Gippsland, the LVA, Department of Premier & Cabinet, DJPR, Gippsland Water, Regional Roads Victoria (VicRoads) and the three councils and has sought to build strong working relationships with them. As Victoria's key planning body, the VPA will continue to seek to work constructively with its regional partners through identified priority projects.

1 This section on the history of the Latrobe Valley has been informed by DELWP's social history study that is informing the Latrobe Valley Regional Rehabilitation Strategy: https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/policy-and-strategy/latrobe-valley-strategy#Social_History-tabs2

2 Latrobe City Council Submission to Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications Inquiry, Coal-Fired Power Funding Prohibition Bill 2017, August 2019.



Figure 1 Future directions for settlement, prepared from *Gippsland Regional Growth Plan, 2014*, Victorian Government.

1.4 Funding channels

The VPA has assisted strategic planning projects in the Latrobe Valley since 2013 starting with the preparation of the Lake Narracan, Warragul and Drouin PSPs/DCPs, funded through the Latrobe Valley Industry and Employment Roadmap 2011–12. The three PSPs were completed in 2014 and 2015. There have been many other strategic and statutory planning interventions in the Latrobe Valley initiated by DELWP and the then Minister for Planning which included the *Rural and Regional Flying Squad* program³ and Ministerial Planning Scheme Amendments.

The Warragul and Drouin PSPs are currently being implemented and have supported substantial urban growth in these two towns, attracting new residents from Melbourne and beyond.

The Lake Narracan PSP at Moe/Newborough, on the other hand, is yet to commence, and there are challenges that need to be overcome to provide the infrastructure needed to make this growth front viable. The slower start-up of Lake Narracan also reflects its relatively out of sequence location for infrastructure provision in the context of Latrobe City as a whole (Traralgon, Morwell and Moe/Newborough) and a weaker property market in the latter two towns.

Since the completion of the three PSPs, the VPA has continued to work with the Latrobe Valley councils through the *Streamlining for Growth* program. This support has come in the form of grants for council-initiated consultant technical studies, VPA assistance to create strategic planning products and VPA sharing technical expertise and advice with regional councils.

³ This program was rebranded as the Planning in the Economic Growth Zone project in the Latrobe Valley.

The following projects have been supported in the Latrobe Valley through the first three years of the *Streamlining for Growth* program:

Baw Baw, Latrobe and Wellington

Post-PSP infrastructure planning issues 2016/18 and 2017/18 – \$188,500 total

VPA staff time supported projects in the Latrobe Valley through the *Unblocking Infrastructure Barriers* project with a focus on addressing post-PSP infrastructure planning issues. It was funded by two *Streamlining for Growth* applications for the 2016/18 and 2017/18 financial years totalling \$188,500. This project has been relatively unsuccessful as the key barrier is the funding needed by pioneer developers to augment and supply costly key infrastructure including roads, water and sewerage. Sometimes the funding challenge is a result of a mismatch between the investment priorities of an agency and land use planning priorities. The VPA worked with the councils, Latrobe Valley Authority, Regional Development Victoria and the Department of Premier and Cabinet to undertake an investigation into a possible site infrastructure fund that would enable developers to obtain loan funds for infrastructure works. This project is still being considered by government.

Baw Baw Shire

Development contributions plan five-year review 2018/19 – \$85,000 grant

Baw Baw Shire Council has not yet completed this project.

Latrobe City Council

South East Traralgon Precinct Structure Plan Issues, Opportunities and Directions 2018/19 – \$50,000 VPA assistance

The VPA has produced the Issues and Opportunities report however progress on PSP preparation has slowed due to the need for advice from DJPR (Earth Resources Division) about the appropriate buffer required between the Loy Yang Coal Mine and the precinct to avoid potential future mine subsidence impacts on surrounding development.

Traralgon Activity Centre Plan stages 1 and 2 2016/17 & 2017/18 – \$75,000 VPA assistance

This project was successfully completed and a planning scheme amendment to introduce the Activity Centre Zone to the Traralgon CBD has been gazetted.

Wellington Shire

North Sale Development Plan 2016/17 – \$40,000 grant

Council has completed the development plan but it is not yet implemented into the Wellington Planning Scheme.

West Sale & Wurruk Industrial Land Supply Strategy 2018/19 – \$80,000 grant

The strategy included some technical assessments and has been completed. This formed the strategic justification for Amendment C103 which was gazetted in October 2019.

2 Focus of VPA support

VPA's support to Latrobe Valley councils has focused on five key aspects:

1 Unlocking land supply

2 Supporting planning priorities initiated by councils

3 Developing strategies to address complex planning problems

4 Facilitating issue resolution for strategic sites

5 Building stakeholder capacity

2.1 Unlocking land supply

According to *Victoria in Future 2019* projections, the Latrobe Valley is set to grow by 41,000 people between 2016 and 2036. This growth will require approximately 22,100 new dwellings. Around 65 per cent of the growth is anticipated to occur in Baw Baw Shire noting that the City of Latrobe is also anticipated to accommodate a significant amount of projected growth.

PSPs are effective strategic tools that are used across Victoria to plan and coordinate growth. They are supported by DCPs which collect funds for supporting local infrastructure. Both Baw Baw Shire and Latrobe City Council used these tools

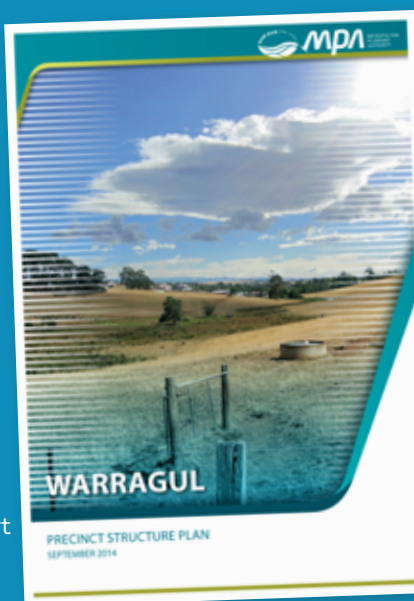
to help manage their growth and sought MPA (now VPA) assistance to prepare and lead the relevant Planning Scheme Amendments. The two councils sought to take advantage of the VPA's skillset and experience with PSP planning. The State Government, through the *Latrobe Valley Industry and Employment Roadmap*, funded the VPA assistance and necessary technical reports for three PSPs to be produced – Warragul, Drouin and Lake Narracan, all completed by 2015. These three PSPs will yield 23,000 dwellings and raise \$302 million in development contributions to fund local infrastructure.

CASE STUDY: WARRAGUL & DROUIN PRECINCT STRUCTURE PLANNING

In 2014 Baw Baw Shire Council adopted the *Baw Baw Settlement Management Plan* which responded to projected population growth by identifying appropriate locations to accommodate growth.

The plan factored in several competing interests such as infrastructure availability and environmental values, and community consultation was undertaken in the preparation process. The plan identified settlement boundaries for Warragul and Drouin which council then sought to "unlock" with the PSP and DCP strategic tools. Due to its experience in preparing PSPs and DCP, the then MPA was requested to prepare the strategic tools, mentor and support council officers as well as further support Ministerial Planning Scheme Amendment (section 20(4) of

the *Planning & Environment Act 1987*) which implemented the structure plans in the Baw Baw Planning Scheme. The amendment was gazetted in 2014.



2.2 Supporting planning priorities initiated by councils

The VPA respects the autonomy of local government and its role in implementing the planning scheme, including state objectives. However, many regional councils struggle to attract and retain the necessary strategic planning experience and/or skills required to implement their spatial planning objectives. In addition, many councils in regional Victoria lack dedicated resources for strategic land use planning. Both make it challenging to action and implement strategic planning directions.

The VPA has supported the three councils in the Latrobe Valley to action and implement their strategic land use planning priorities by supporting the preparation of strategic planning projects (and associated Planning Scheme Amendments), providing technical assistance and guidance, and contributing grant money so that councils can lead their own work.

CASE STUDY: WEST SALE INDUSTRIAL AREA

Wellington Shire completed a West Sale and Wurruk Industrial Land Supply Strategy which was formally adopted by council on 19 June 2018 and identified the 55 hectare West Sale Industrial Area as a primary opportunity to satisfy the need for industrial land in an appropriate location to encourage economic development and subsequent creation of 690 jobs according to council estimates.

To unlock this site for future economic development council rezoned land from Farming Zone to Industrial 1 Zone and applied a Development Plan Overlay to ensure that development can occur in a coordinated and timely manner.

To encourage development and to provide certainty to future potential investors and developers of the site, council sought to undertake a series of investigations which would identify constraints and opportunities as well as necessary catalyst infrastructure to service the site.

As part of the 2018/19 *Streamlining for Growth* program the VPA provided council with an \$80,000 grant to commission a consultant to carry out the necessary technical investigations. Council was also supported with funds through the PEGZ program. Planning Scheme Amendment C103 to the Wellington Planning Scheme was gazetted in October 2019.



Figure 2 West Sale Industrial Area

2.3 Developing strategies to address complex planning problems

In November 2016 Victoria's Red Tape Commissioner was asked to investigate and provide recommendations to the Treasurer on ways in which red tape and regulatory barriers stifle economic development in the Latrobe Valley as well as how they can be removed. The Commissioner met more than 100 stakeholders who collectively identified 160 specific issues. A report provided

direction about ways to remove barriers associated with land use planning and infrastructure planning.

This work has influenced a series of efforts led by various agencies in the Latrobe Valley to remove regulatory barriers and facilitate economic development. The VPA has provided leadership and advice in these processes.

CASE STUDY: UNBLOCKING INFRASTRUCTURE BARRIERS 2016/17 & 2017/18

In December 2016 Latrobe City Council applied to the Victorian Planning Authority (VPA) under the *Streamlining for Growth* program for funding and assistance to work with and co-ordinate agencies to improve approaches to infrastructure delivery and to improve subdivision and permit approval processes in growth areas.

The VPA attended meetings with council officers from the Baw Baw, Latrobe and Wellington councils and staff from Regional Development Victoria, the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, VicRoads and Gippsland Water to develop an understanding of a range of matters that affect the delivery of residential and employment land in the Latrobe Valley. This work resulted in the identification of key infrastructure/planning barriers to council nominated key development fronts and priorities for addressing these issues. The VPA has also worked with the Red Tape Commissioner to understand red tape and regulatory barriers to growth in the Latrobe Valley.

The VPA prepared a report containing recommendations to address issues and actions required to resolve the issues. The VPA concluded that many of the issues revolved around a lack of

effective engagement and collaboration between the key agencies associated with planning/development/infrastructure decisions (councils, VicRoads and Gippsland Water) at the strategic planning and subsequent implementation stage.

Latrobe City Council submitted a further *Streamlining for Growth* application in 2017/18 to enable one of the key actions in the VPA's work to commence. The application requested assistance for the VPA to run working meetings with relevant agencies to establish ways that they can resolve infrastructure and planning issues that are delaying development in the Valley – refer to Figure 2 for a visual of the resolution process.

This has been undertaken and a case study of this work is discussed in Section 2.4. Over the last 18 months the VPA has observed improvements in the way key agencies in the Valley work together to seek solutions to barriers to development relating to infrastructure requirements. Examples include Alexanders Road negotiations (refer to Section 2.4), resolution of a DCP intersection solution in the Lake Narracan PSP, Gippsland Water engagement facilitation with North East Water to learn how they forward plan.

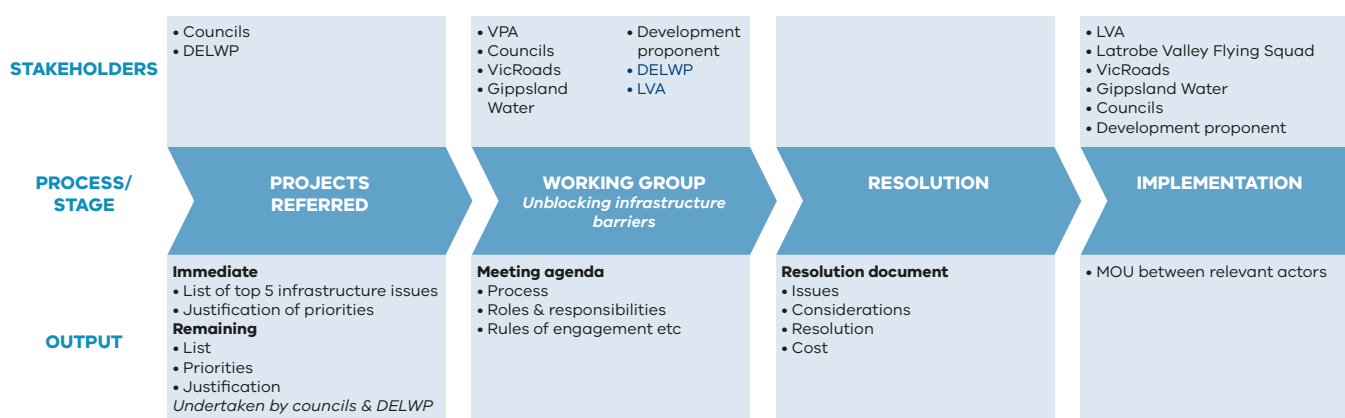


Figure 3 Issue resolution process proposed and tested by the VPA in the 2017 *Unblocking Infrastructure Barriers* report

2.4 Facilitating issue resolution for strategic sites

In 2018 the VPA embarked on establishing a resolution process using a key site in the Latrobe Valley as a pilot as per a key recommendation in the 2017 report prepared by the VPA. The three councils and key agencies agreed on the pilot site as it was one of the only projects identified by the three councils that included employment land.

Establishing a process that included issue identification and background investigation assisted subsequent stakeholder collaboration and a focus on proper identification of the issues and coming up with solutions to identified challenges. The process was made possible because of the commitment stakeholders made to working with the VPA and participation in the process. It involved evidence-based decisions and was supported by technical expertise provided by the VPA.

The councils identified many planning and infrastructure issues they consider require resolution – too many for the VPA to address with the time and resources available. The focus on a collaboration process was seen as a better way to create a change in culture and a better environment for collaboration between stakeholders.

CASE STUDY: ALEXANDERS ROAD & INFRASTRUCTURE FUNDING

Priority Action 1A of the VPA's report Unblocking Planning and Infrastructure Barriers to Development identified the need to establish a resolution process whereby issues preventing planned development could be addressed.

The Alexanders Road East site in Morwell is a 104 hectare site that has been identified in the Latrobe Planning Scheme as suitable for industrial development for nearly 10 years. A planning permit has been issued for a multi-lot and staged industrial subdivision however the proponent, VicRoads and Gippsland Water, have not been able to finalise determinations on necessary infrastructure to service the application. Consequently, development has not proceeded.

The VPA researched and documented relevant planning and infrastructure information relating to the Alexanders Road East site and documented its analysis of previous infrastructure considerations using the Latrobe Planning Scheme, Latrobe City Council's planning strategies and policies relating to the site and feedback from VicRoads and Gippsland Water. The VPA prepared and provided a document to the key stakeholders to inform collective decisions about how to proceed with the subject site. An action plan was developed providing recommendations about the intersection that

would be required to provide safe and efficient access to the land as well as necessary sewerage infrastructure. A subsequent issue raised was that funding for the catalyst infrastructure was a major challenge. The possibility of a mechanism to provide forward funding for key infrastructure at low interest to support pioneer development was discussed. The VPA provided technical input to assist the LVA to commission technical advice about the legal framework of such a mechanism. This work is ongoing and has implications for all regional areas.



Figure 4 Excerpt from the VPA report on the Alexanders Road east site identifying road access considerations

2.5 Building stakeholder capacity

The VPA provides strategic planning services to Victorians and has established a high level of planning expertise amongst its staff. The scope of the projects the VPA is involved in has also resulted in extensive networking with state agencies and local government which facilitates collaboration and issue resolution. The organisation produces a range of strategic planning outputs such as PSPs, DCPs, infrastructure contribution plans, masterplans, framework plans and corridor plans. Developing a variety of outputs requires skillsets in GIS, design, communications and engagement and engineering in addition to the strategic and statutory planning skills that the organisation has developed.

The position of the VPA in planning for Victoria is unique and provides it with valuable strategic planning insight and ability to forge collaborative efforts.

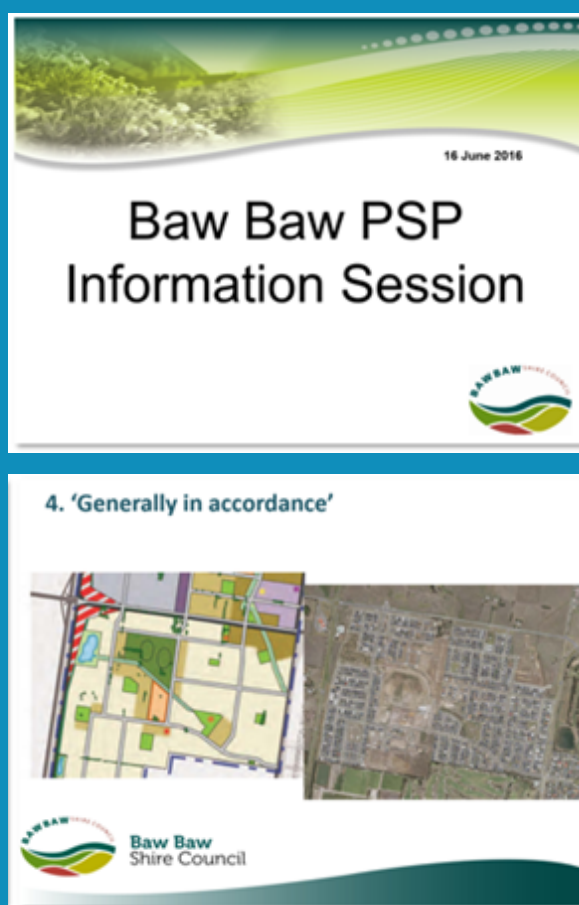
While the VPA has its offices in Melbourne, its regional team frequently work in regional Victoria and has successfully developed working relationships with partners in all parts of Victoria. The VPA was an active participant in the Latrobe Valley Planning in the Economic Growth Zone program, the Latrobe Valley Infrastructure Investment Coordination and Facilitation Group, the Latrobe Valley Regional Rehabilitation Strategy, and many other facilitated groups and committees. This has built trust and relationships with key stakeholders; it has also provided an opportunity for the VPA to assist with sharing knowledge with stakeholders to build local capacity. Over the last two years alone VPA staff have visited the Latrobe Valley on more than 30 occasions to work with stakeholders and deliver projects.

The VPA is also readily available to provide specialist advice when the councils have implementation questions.

CASE STUDY: POST-PSP ASSISTANCE

During the preparation and following the completion of the Warragul and Drouin PSP/DCPs the VPA hosted staff from Baw Baw Shire Council to work on the project and also ran a number of information sessions with council staff, agencies and the local development sectors that covered subjects of: key objectives of the PSP (including regional character, streetscapes, open space provision and housing diversity), understanding the Urban Growth Zone and Development Contributions Plan Overlay, and applying “generally in accordance with” when assessing planning permits. Over the years the VPA has continued being a source of advice to Baw Baw Shire Council staff when they have had implementation questions relating to the PSPs.

Figure 5 Slides from PSP implementation information sessions provided to Baw Baw Shire Council in 2016



3 NEXT STEPS

3.1 What we have learned

Apart from the Unblocking Infrastructure Barriers project and the yet to be completed Baw Baw DCP review, the majority of VPA PSP projects and *Streamlining for Growth* funded projects have been successful.

There are ongoing urban growth challenges in the Latrobe Valley for councils, infrastructure providers, developers and communities. Through working with Latrobe Valley partners on a number of projects the VPA has identified the following challenges with addressing urban growth challenges.

1 Need for ongoing support

There are significant strategic planning and implementation challenges that need to be resolved. For example, the three councils identified 13 development fronts that have a total of 60 implementation challenges. This will require funding assistance and technical support. However, there is potential for some of these problems to be resolved if a site infrastructure fund is established (see 4 below).

2 Need for continued collaboration

Most strategic planning and implementation challenges require multiple actors to resolve differences, share knowledge and to work together. This is a challenging task and therefore collaboration needs to be supported through processes and forums which are currently being established in the Valley, but need to be supported and enhanced, possibly even facilitated by a neutral actor. The Planning in the Economic Growth Zone initiative, led by DELWP's Gippsland regional office, and supported by the VPA, is a positive example of what can be achieved.

3 Challenge of corporate knowledge loss

This was especially the case with Baw Baw Shire Council which lost important in-house knowledge held by staff involved in the Warragul and Drouin PSPs and DCPs when they left the organisation. This created resourcing and skill gaps as the council sought to implement the PSPs and DCPs. Corporate knowledge loss is also experienced in other councils and agencies. Ways of managing corporate knowledge transfer need to be identified and implemented, such as documenting decisions and agreements to avoid unjustified change of positions on previously resolved matters. Subject to further funding becoming available, the VPA can provide support through project funding and VPA staff time for this type of issue.

4 Infrastructure funding constraints

Funding for pioneer catalyst infrastructure and possibly even state infrastructure remains a significant challenge in the Latrobe Valley and for many other parts of regional Victoria. Government needs to consider how to resource, fund and deliver solutions to regional infrastructure challenges. A concept for a site infrastructure fund that would make low cost loans available to regional developers is under development in government. The Commissioner for Better Regulation recently endorsed this approach in her report on improvements to the Victorian planning system. The VPA can continue to advocate and support the Latrobe Valley Authority and RDV to initiate a site infrastructure fund and continue to encourage an alignment of strategic planning and infrastructure provision priorities.

3.2 What we will do next

In addition to projects currently under way through the *Streamlining for Growth* program (see section 1.4), the VPA:

- is an active participant in the Regional DCP/ ICP Forum which includes 11-member councils (including Latrobe City Council and Baw Baw Shire Council); especially with the development of a DCP implementation toolkit using 2019/20 *Streamlining for Growth* grant (\$100,000) and VPA assistance (\$20,000).
- continues to work with Baw Baw Shire to assist them approach PSP/DCP implementation challenges including DCP review, councillor briefings and a future workshop with council officers.
- continues to work with agencies (including the three councils and the LVA) that comprise the Planning in the Economic Growth Zone, a program run by DELWP Gippsland.
- continues to work with the three councils through assistance and grants via the *Streamlining for Growth* program which has largely defined the VPA's role in the Latrobe Valley over the last four years.

Subject to funding being available, the VPA will continue to provide assistance through the activities identified in Section 3.2.



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