



Community Economic Development

Coolamon – success story

Challenges and opportunities

Coolamon is reputed to be centred in one of the richest agricultural and pastoral districts in the Riverina and enjoys the best of both worlds – the friendly, relaxed atmosphere of rural living, plus great shopping and excellent health, cultural, recreational and education facilities.

With a population of about 1,500 Coolamon is uniquely poised to take advantage of the many opportunities at its door step. A short 30 minute drive from the major regional centre of Wagga Wagga, it has the potential to offer visitors and locals lazy afternoon lunches and coffees, boutique shopping, fresh local produce and a country market atmosphere. Perched on the edge of garden-like surrounds, the main street and surrounding street boast a range of outstanding heritage buildings and attractions.

Most Coolamon residents think it's a great place to live and community pride is clearly one of the area's strengths. Coolamon has a rich vein of social and cultural capital and is a focused community.

A few years ago Coolamon had a number of challenges to overcome:

- competition from other cultural tourism destinations
- direct competition for some local businesses, such as supermarkets with Wagga Wagga businesses
- young people leaving the shire for work, education or training and not returning
- difficulty in attracting government funding and resources
- local perceptions that the area was in decline and lacked leadership
- the town having a low profile.

A program for change

After years of operating in an environment of declining resources, Coolamon Shire Council decided to take the lead in forging innovative partnerships with other tiers of government, the community and private sector. The council began to support new ideas, take risks, stimulate community involvement and be more resourceful.

A Cultural and Economic Development Plan was prepared. The council secured funding through the NSW Government's Main Street / Small Towns Program in 2002 toward the cost of employing a part time Cultural and Economic Development Officer. Since that time, many of the plan's actions have been implemented.

A key objective of the plan was to create an event that embraced both residents and visitors in a distinctive rural/country experience. Under the council's leadership and with funding through the NSW Government's Towns and Villages Futures Program, Coolamon on Display was created, developed and organised by the Coolamon community.

More than 3,000 people attended the event on October 9, 2004. Coolamon on Display showcased the town as an ideal place in which to live, work, visit, shop, relax and play. Everything was on display - the town, local products/produce, businesses, community organisations, health, education, childcare, sporting and cultural facilities.

Since the event, new businesses have opened, sales of residential blocks have risen, and visitor numbers continue to be higher as does Coolamon's profile. Feedback from other councils, tourism operators and centres, visitors and locals continues to reflect the success of this initiative.

Goals

In developing the Cultural and Economic Plan, the Coolamon community demonstrated a high level of shared community purpose. There is a strong desire to conserve and protect its heritage, an interest in encouraging tourism but not at the risk of impacting local lifestyle, wanting to develop new skills, and establish niche markets and businesses. The community wanted to be put on the map and not forgotten. The plan had a broad vision that recognised Coolamon's strengths – its impassioned community; its attractive Main Street; its intact heritage; and its proximity to Wagga Wagga as a regional growth centre. The council took the lead in capturing economic benefits for the Shire by:

- attracting regional recognition and working collaboratively with other tiers of government
- communicating more thoroughly with the wider business community

- being actively involved in marketing Coolamon and sourcing programs to up-skill the local business community
- establishing a solid Economic and Cultural Development Committee that links business owners, community members and council to shared goals
- sourcing funds and supporting initiatives that further the economic as well as the social health of the whole community.

How the Department's CED Programs have helped our community

- Two years ago, Coolamon's main street had an 80 per cent occupancy rate. Now there is only one available shop and it's asking for premium rent
- accommodation providers are reporting a 100 – 600 per cent growth in visitation
- 254 new residents have moved to Coolamon in the past three years – quite an influx for a community of just 1,630 people
- 17 per cent increase in Development Approvals, including 16 new subdivisions – one of which has 39 houses
- existing community events that were once struggling to survive are experiencing a significant increase in numbers
- volunteer-based community organisations are displaying increased passion and innovation in developing community initiatives
- the student population of Coolamon's schools is growing. The smaller school has grown from 66 students enrolled in 2004, to 105 enrolments booked for 2006.

All this in a rural community that is experiencing its worst drought on record!



Ongoing activities

Following the success of the Coolamon on Display event, the council established the Coolamon Commercial Development Committee to help Coolamon's business and community sectors to be unified and intelligent in growing Coolamon. The Committee aims to engage the whole community in promoting the town and to take advantage of a wide range of development opportunities.

A Coolamon on Display brochure will be launched for the 2006 event. The booklet will showcase the lifestyle, attractions, businesses and services that make Coolamon the ideal place to live, work and play.

The Coolamon on Display event is a finalist for the Events and Tourism Award category of the 2005 Regional Achievement and Community Awards.

For further information visit www.coolamon.nsw.gov.au or www.visitcoolamon.com.

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Local Government Area: Coolamon Shire
Area: 2,433 square kms, Coolamon township is 40kms from Wagga Wagga
Region: Riverina
Population: 4,323 (whole shire)
Main industries: Agriculture, retail and trade business services