



Main Street Small Towns Program

Inverell – success story

Challenges and opportunities

Inverell is a thriving regional centre on the western edge of the New England Tablelands, 675 kilometres north-west of Sydney and 489 kilometres south-west of Brisbane. The town is on the Gwydir Highway, which connects the western part of NSW and the east coast.

With a population of 11,000, Inverell has a modern commercial centre but is also known for its restored federation buildings, reminders of a proud past.

Ten years ago, Inverell Shire Council began a street beautification program in the centre of town. An avenue of trees was planted along the main street, pavers were laid on the footpaths, and the roundabouts put in at the cross-streets were filled with seasonal flowering plants. The result was a town centre which was accessible, well laid out, and attractive.

With the street beautification program came a definite shift in attitude and a new pride in the town. There was a clear feeling that the community wanted to build on these earlier initiatives, as well as attract more people and new businesses to Inverell.

First, however, a number of issues had to be addressed. Businesses needed assistance to successfully market outside their local area. There was a skills shortage within Inverell Shire. The tourism assets of this treasured part of New South Wales – with its sapphire fossicking, cool nights, sunny days, and four distinct seasons – also had potential for further development. There was work to be done.

A program for change

In 2002, the Department of State and Regional Development (DSRD) provided financial support for a community strategic plan which would become the blueprint for developing Inverell. A committee was formed with representation from DSRD, the Inverell Regional Business Enterprise Centre, the Inverell Chamber of Commerce, two councillors and the mayor. A coordinator was appointed to handle the day-to-day implementation of the plan.

The name 'Growing Inverell' was given to the program to differentiate this more commercial stage from the earlier town beautification stage.

The first step was to conduct a Business Retention Expansion (BRE) survey to clarify the community's business goals and plans.

The BRE survey results showed that 56% of the Inverell businesses surveyed indicated that they expected their turnover to increase within the next two years, and 27% were considering expanding their business. Many indicated that they would like help with business support services such as marketing, management training, industrial relations, and financial applications.

A business marketing workshop was held to ensure strong support and to stimulate interest in the 'Growing Inverell' program. It proved to be very successful. Over one hundred business people from the town attended and were given low cost, practical strategies on how to improve the overall performance of their business.

In May 2003, the initial 'Growing Inverell' community planning workshop brought together over eighty people from the business community to discuss how they would like to see Inverell develop and improve over the next few years. A brainstorming exercise was conducted, which resulted in over one hundred suggestions.

Goals

The 'Growing Inverell' program had – and still has – many goals. Among the most important are to:

- promote Inverell as a major regional service centre for the North West and Northern Tablelands
- encourage and promote businesses in the area and increase the diversity of Inverell's commercial sector
- make Inverell more accessible and encourage visitors, which will have the flow-on effect of creating more employment opportunities in the town.

Projects

In 2005, 'Inverell on Display', a showcase of the town's agricultural, manufacturing, retail and commercial businesses, was held for the first time. It was a great success, with eighty-four businesses taking part. The town's accommodation was booked out and visitors came from as far afield as Sydney and Brisbane. There has been a multiple flow-on effect and many businesses have reported that the event increased their profile.

In the early 1990's, Inverell, and the surrounding towns, did not have a regular air service. The lack of easy access to the town was beginning to stifle growth. Inverell Shire Council and over forty local investors in the community got together to establish a new service which would connect the region with the large metropolitan capitals. 'Big Sky Express' was the answer – a community funded airline which links Inverell with Gunnedah, Grafton, Taree and Sydney. A connecting service to Brisbane is also expected soon.

Already over 30 different projects have been successfully completed under the 'Growing Inverell' program. These include an informative bi-monthly newsletter to all businesses in Inverell; the development of an Inverell Retail/Business Guide; an update of promotional Fact Sheets on Inverell for potential business investors; and the development of a number of short stay packages (for 1-3 days) to encourage visitors to the region.

'Growing Inverell' has strong community support, a high level of volunteer involvement and has contributed to local business growth.

How the Main Street Small Towns Program has helped

DSRD has partnered Inverell Shire Council in funding many of the 'Growing Inverell' projects. DSRD has offered over \$100,000 since 2002 under the Main Street Small Towns Program toward activities such as community strategic planning, employment of a business program coordinator, a leadership development project, the 2005 and 2007 'Inverell on Display' business expos, BRE surveys, business marketing workshops and promotional materials to support the launch of "Big Sky Express" airline.

Ongoing activities

Inverell Shire Council won the Local Government category of the 2004 Community Enterprise Awards. The Award was given for establishing Big Sky Express.

This community airline has meant that Inverell is now easily and quickly accessible from other parts of the state, and the launch of the service has been directly responsible for creating new employment opportunities in the region.

'Growing Inverell' has also been active in developing new skills locally so that the town's youth would not drift away. The annual Careers Expo is now in its 3rd year, made possible by a partnership between Inverell Shire Council and the local schools.

Planning is well advanced for the second 'Inverell on Display' business expo, which will take place on 20-22 April 2007. Over one hundred businesses have booked to take part in the expo.

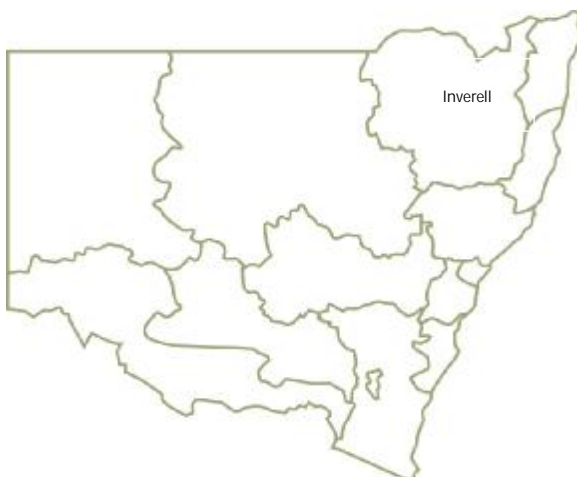
Another BRE survey is underway and will be completed by the end of 2006. The results of this survey will be compared to the survey taken before the 'Growing Inverell' program began; to ascertain exactly what has been achieved.

Inverell is a success story in the best of Australian traditions.

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Community name: Inverell
LGA: Inverell
Region: New England North West
Population: 11,000
Main Industries: Grain crops – wheat, oats, barley, sorghum and oilseed; sheep and cattle farming; light manufacturing, including agricultural machinery, sheet metal and metal fabrication; olive growing and olive oil production, bee-keeping; vineyards; and gems, particularly sapphires.