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Tributary 1.5 Partnerships for regional regeneration

Putting Coolamon on the map: building and implementing a plan for cultural and economic development

by SUE BOADEN

Through the slides you will now have some understanding of the Coolamon area. In this short presentation I'm going to present the Project's critical success factors, discuss why they were important and also bring you up to date on progress in implementing a Shire wide Cultural and Economic Development Plan.

I'm going to focus on several questions: what are the ingredients that contribute to regeneration particularly in rural communities? What are the key success factors for regeneration through partnerships? What encourages successful partnerships? How can small communities integrate the arts and cultural issues into their planning frameworks and ensure that they stay there?

The Coolamon Movable Heritage Project provides some answers to these ponderables.

Project background

The Project started life as the development of a Business Plan for Coolamon township and The Up To Date Store. The Business Plan Project was funded by the NSW Heritage Office as part of a State-wide funding program shared with the NSW Ministry for the Arts. Right from the beginning it came out of a Government partnership between two State government authorities.

In mid 2001, the Australia Street Company was appointed to carry out the Study and in particular to work closely with the Coolamon Shire Council. However during preliminary discussions with the Heritage Office it became clear that decisions about how to best conserve and promote the Store and the Coolamon town depended on some critical, Shire-wide considerations. In other words this Project could be managed as an isolated project but it would have more impact and a greater chance of success if it's scope was broadened.

Our first task then when we arrived in the Shire was to brief the Council senior management on the proposed change in the scope of the Project. After some discussion, Council agreed that a broader brief was needed which provided as a first step the preparation of a Cultural and Economic Development Plan for Coolamon Shire. The Plan would respond to the economic development opportunities presented by the area's rich built and movable heritage but it was agreed that the role of the Up To Date Store in Coolamon town centre would remain a particular focus for the Project. It was also agreed that the Plan needed to be specific about the strategies the Store Project required to move forward.

How was this essential shift in focus achieved?

First of all – the Council was prepared to be flexible and to take a risk. It was prepared to trust the Heritage Office and to agree in principle to the broadening of the Project although it was uncertain about the outcomes. It was however attracted to the potential Shire-wide benefits that could result.

The Council also realised that the concept of a Shire-wide approach also changed the nature of the membership on any Reference Group appointed to the Study. This in turn could open doors to regional support for the Council and that was an attractive option for Council

Council therefore agreed that Project Reference Group would be chaired by an interested Councillor, and that Council would convene the Group, coordinate any workshops and promote the Project. It was agreed that membership of the Group would be representative of diverse issues and would be drawn from the Shire's key community organisations, from regional support offices (economic, cultural and museums) and from Council



management. A commitment to strengthening existing and to establishing new collaborations was emerging. This was also welcomed and acknowledged by Council.

Further – the nominated members of the Group when asked were enthusiastic about participating particularly the regional specialists (museum, arts and economic development). Until this Project they had not had an opportunity to establish an active profile in the Shire.

Success factors

- the potential for economic benefits to accrue to the Shire
- the improved opportunities to attract regional recognition and support
- opportunities to work collaboratively and
- a chance for Council to be seen to take the lead.

The First meeting of the Reference Group was critical to the success of the Project.

The Reference Group members had a broad vision and it didn't take much convincing for them to recognise that this was a unique opportunity. The consultants as the new eyes in town, were able to remind the Reference Group members that a quick reconnaissance of the LGA revealed Coolamon's unique strengths – its intact heritage, its distinctive topography, its main streets, its proximity to Wagga Wagga as a regional growth engine. In short – Coolamon Shire had potential. And this potential was strongly advocated by the regional specialists at the first Reference Group meeting. The Regional. Museum Advisor and the Economic Development Manager both spoke as advocates of integrated planning and indicated that the Plan would open doors to funds, to government support and to building confidence with potential partners.

Once there had been agreement from the Reference Group that a Shire wide study was possible, we began to focus on designing the community consultation. Our research indicated that Coolamon residents were not lacking in commitment and drive. Most residents in Coolamon 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.

But there was a perception in the community that the area was in decline – that they lacked resources, that there was competition between community groups and between the five Shire towns and that there was a lack of leadership from Council.

In order to engage the community, to encourage participation and to generate ideas, we held 3 well attended workshops with around 40 people at each session. Nothing new here, but what was new was the energy in the room.

This is a community that could quickly cut to the chase and focus on the opportunities that the Study presented. They had a strong desire to conserve and protect their heritage, they had an interest in encouraging tourism but not at the risk of impacting local lifestyle, they wanted to develop new skills and to establish niche markets and businesses and they wanted to be on the map in the region and not forgotten. The Coolamon community demonstrates high levels of community-well-being and a shared community purpose. They had a lot of ideas and they were (and still are) in a hurry.

The workshops provided an opportunity to identify the key issues facing Coolamon Shire and to harness ideas. The workshops focused on identifying desired outcomes rather than looking for solutions and we were also able to communicate concepts through examples which illustrated the importance of integrated planning. We were able to work with participants to illustrate the benefits of making links, forming partnerships and how that often leads to the identification of new sources of support. In particular we were able to communicate the urgency of the need to protect their built heritage but also the need to work with the local Indigenous community and with artists. Their heritage buildings and landscapes are tangible evidence of local identity as are the stories associated with settlement. But an understanding of local Indigenous heritage is an important part of the journey. The opportunities presented by the arts and cultural development were also integrated into workshop discussion.

The planning product

The agreed Aim of the Plan was

“... to improve the quality of life of the residents by establishing Coolamon Shire as the home of Australian country/ rural heritage. It is a place where heritage is valued and where local innovative and creative products, services and events attract both residents and tourists providing them with a distinctive regional experience. “



Three strategic planning Objectives were identified for the Plan

- Protection, conservation and enhancement of the Shire's cultural life and heritage
- Revitalisation of the Shire's economy
- Increased community capacity, leadership and social capital.

From the very start we were integrating the four elements of sustainability into the Study:

The economy, culture, society and the environment .

From the workshops we were also able to identify 5 key strategies.

Strategy

1. Secure the Shire's cultural heritage both as the basis for ongoing quality of life and for economic revitalisation.
2. Invest in community cultural development as a building block for enhancing quality of life in the Shire
3. Build cultural tourism as a crucial part of the Shire's economy.
4. Build community capacity through the development of local leadership and civic infrastructure, and
5. Position The Up To Date Store in the context of a revitalised Coolamon main street.

Each Strategy identified in the Plan was action based with very specific activities identified in priority order. Some actions were about the development of specific projects, some referred to the preparation of funding applications, some required Council and community organisations to work together to initiate new programs or events. The Strategies were Shire-wide and didn't just focus on Coolamon and the Up to Date Store.

They integrated the arts, youth development issues, training, skills development and education, volunteer development, cultural tourism, collection conservation and documentation, events planning, niche market development (local produce/ growers and makers markets); visitor support – information and accommodation, urban design/ streetscape/ public art as well as more formal policy needs such as a revision of the LEP, a review of Council's Heritage Plan and a review of the governance of the Up to Date Store.

Overall the strategies focused on achieving the project Aim but also on encouraging networking, community interaction, inclusion, information sharing and exchange and the strengthening of social and cultural capital. Importantly the strategies were designed to be realistic, manageable and achievable. They were not just a long and daunting list of things to do.

Tools to build partnerships for the future

1. It was agreed at the workshops that the Council owned the Plan. This recognised and acknowledged the key role of the Council as a resource to encourage a shared approach or partnership between key stakeholders – in this case, the Shire Council, local residents, community organisations and State government regional planning and support agencies.
2. The Plan was specific in identifying and fostering partnerships. It was also very specific regarding the nature of each partnership or collaboration.

The Plan proposed opportunities to forge strong links with 18 local, regional and State wide organisations.

- Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga
- Museum of the Riverina
- Wiradjuri Elders
- Riverina Regional Library Service
- Eastern Riverina Arts Program
- Coolamon Central School
- Riverina Economic Development Board
- NSW Farmers Association



- Riverina Regional Tourism Board
- Coolamon RSL Museum
- Historic Houses Trust
- NSW Botanic Gardens
- Roads & Traffic Authority
- Rail Services Australia
- NSW Heritage Office
- Department of State and Regional Development
- Ministry for the Arts
- Booraanga Writers Centre

Implementation Plan for the Council.

At the request of NSW Heritage Office the Study also included the development of an Implementation Plan specifically for Coolamon Council. It provided a time frame for each step as a checklist of action. It complemented the overall Plan but specifically provided direction for the Council. It recognised that the Council as the Plan's owner, needed and wanted support in implementing the Project

Follow-up

Coolamon is a very focused community. We delivered the Plan in late October 2001 and by late February the community was getting restless – they wanted to know what was happening. So the NSW Heritage Office invited us to go back to Coolamon and hold a community workshop where Council could report on progress, where the community could make its concerns known and where a shared ownership of the next steps could be encouraged.

At the follow-up Workshop, the community was pleased to learn that Council had resolved to adopt the Plan in principal in December 2001. The Council was also working its way through the actions with an emphasis on getting the Shire's heritage listed; submitting grant funds for a Cultural Heritage Development Officer and sorting out the issues related to the Up To Date Store.

Council also announced at the workshop that it had resolved to fund a share of a salary for the 3 day a week specialist. It was expecting that the NSW Heritage Office and the Department of Industry and Regional Development would also provide a contribution towards salary. The Council reported that the very existence of the Plan was opening doors to funding. It was informing Council's decisions and was critical in establishing that the Project had widespread support from the community, from the region and from government.

At the workshop, communication was identified as an issue and it was agreed that Council would include news on the Project in every issue of its monthly newsletter. The Council's Heritage Advisor also offered to write a monthly article on the Project in the local newspaper. The outcome from the workshop was generally positive and participants went away feeling that some small steps had been achieved.

And the latest news is.....

The Council got the grant and applications for the new position of Cultural Heritage Development Officer close on 25th October.. The position is based in the Up to Date Store where a spatial plan has been developed to fit the place out in keeping with its Plan of Management.

Under the entrepreneurial direction of the Store Management Committee a number of events have been held on site including a national conference for a fee paying hirer which made a \$5000.00 profit.

And it's not all happening in Coolamon town. The community of Ganmain is pursuing its dream to revitalise the community hall as a cinema – they've had one trial screening (sold-out) as well as concerts and a successful market day.

The community and the Council has had one shock – recently a 100 year old wool shed on a major land holding was demolished. It wasn't on the heritage LEP. But it's disappearance helped to reinforce the message that the Shire's heritage was vulnerable and Council has agreed that a full review of the LEP is urgently required. With



the help of Planning NSW, the LEP will pay attention to local character and will recognise specific distinctiveness across the Shire.

Essential ingredients or lessons learned

Based on the Coolamon Project we have identified the following essential ingredients for developing successful cultural partnerships:

- Stamina – projects take time, nothing happens overnight
- Good timing – be strategic, be alert for opportunities
- Cooperation – share the knowledge, look for and encourage collaborations
- Leadership- identify the passionate advocates and encourage them
- Flexibility – be adaptable, be prepared to change course or to deviate from the Plan if necessary
- Pay attention to the process – look for outcomes, be inclusive, listen, provide opportunities for community networking
- Small steps- recognise that most visions are not achieved overnight, progress happens slowly and incrementally
- Utilise resources – actively foster and access the specialist resources in the region.

Conclusion

As well as working in urban Australia, the Australia Street Company in recent years has roved far and wide across rural and regional New South. In that time we've worked on a wide range of projects with enthusiastic communities with big visions for the cultural development and economic development of their areas – in some areas the local council is the driving force, in some it's a small team of dedicated and enthusiastic locals, sometimes it's a cultural organisation and sometimes it has been a local business with an eye on the main chance.

However our Coolamon experience demonstrated the positive impact that integrated partnerships can have on communities. Partnerships are possible and they can make a difference when visions are shared and collaborative links are forged and fostered between diverse agencies and organisations with a common aim. It's early days in Coolamon but clearly the building blocks of social and cultural capital are also the ingredients of regeneration and economic development. ■

— Sue Boaden, Director, Australia Street Company