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Beyond the Great Divide:

Population Issues in Rural and Regional Australia

**Population Decline in Rural Regions:
A Fair Indicator of Community and Economic Wellbeing?**

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The common picture of rural and regional Australia, at least in the metropolitan media, is of farmers walking off – or being forced off properties, of towns in decline as services are relocated and of people leaving, particularly young people. The image is of a sharp division between metropolitan and rural in our social, economic and cultural landscape. Our large cities are where people want to be, while life in ‘the bush’ – a frequently used media term taken up by many commentators and politicians and used at times as a term of derision, is an image of backwardness and almost contempt. The divide for many between the city and the rest has never been starker. While these images persist and in some respects become sharper, the reality in terms of population growth or decline and economic performance in rural and regional Australia is highly complex. Some rural and regional areas have experienced a long boom, others have continued a decline that appears almost like a ‘free free’ particularly if we look at population figures. The extent and depth of the current drought exacerbates the decline in some areas and certainly sharpens the media image.

The small size and narrow range of economic functions in towns appear to set a particular agenda. It is an image of a slower pace of life with people meeting each other in shops and conversing in the main street. Small country towns are often stereotyped as slow to change. Residents see their towns as places that are quiet and natural, a symbol of peaceful ambience. Residents see small towns as safe places for families with extended social networks.

A continuing stream of media stories of decline and despair associated with rural and town life have shattered some of the romantic illusions associated with country living. The contemporary media frequently profiles small country towns as places in decline, recounting stories of lost services and the flight of young people. A profile is given of closed businesses and of residents who can remember how good life once was.

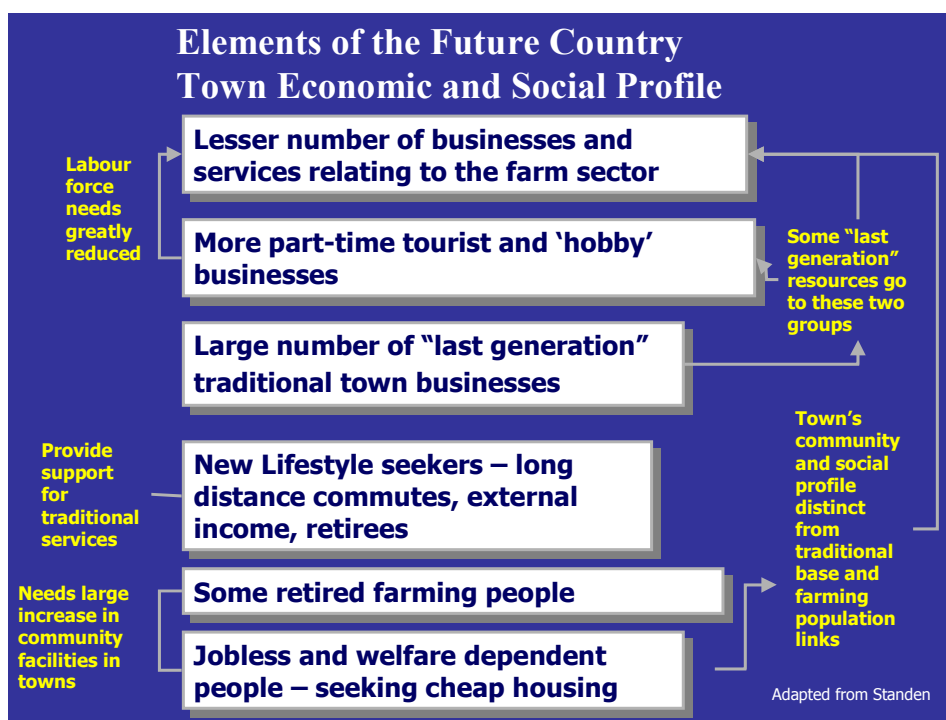
Understandably pragmatic matters dominate the agenda of most country towns.

- Jobs for young people to keep them in their community,
- retention of services and facilities,
- attracting new investment,
- asserting local autonomy,
- maintaining social and recreational functions,
- using local networks as a basis of decision making,
- preserving a way of life, and
- safeguarding community values, are all viewed as critical matters

Towns often must struggle against a vicious circle: they do not have enough people to strengthen existing businesses or attract new business, retail and service establishments, nor do they have the financial capacity

to construct adequate infrastructure thought necessary to attract manufacturing firms. The reality that high hopes will not be realised takes some time to get used to.

The trends and forces acting upon towns also relate to the changing nature of agriculture that is seeing larger holdings, reduced employment and a more mobile population in terms of employment. Low cost housing options in small towns make them attractive to some new residents some of whom are heavily dependent on welfare services and do not necessarily hold a strong self help and volunteer culture which has traditionally been represented in country towns and their rural communities. These trends and changes are partly represented in the following diagram



The community in each town is complex and there are different forces at work in respect to power and control. While the values and social structure of any town may not be immediately obvious they are often all pervasive in decision making and in understanding the town's development and the way it views the world and functions. Communities have different ways in which they operate in terms of engaging the public, in fostering involvement and in consultation processes. New developments may be welcome or resented, they may chart new courses that excite or deeply concern the town's community.

It is critical to understand the fundamental agenda of small towns. That agenda revolves around

1. securing and expanding the economy of the town,
2. maintaining and securing key services, facilities and institutions as viable ongoing concerns, and

3. keeping a way of life which is based on a number of elements, such as security, safety and the preservation of widely held community values.

A new paradigm is needed one which embraces a system of planning and action which integrates economic development and community capacity building within the context of the fundamental social, economic and community values and goals of the community. It is essential to understand the roles and functions of small country towns and how their communities make decisions. The particular interests and needs of those who reside in such towns create an agenda that is distinct for each town and in the rural community that relates to the town. There is a need for a more extensive study of the issues and soundly based research.

The community and media image of rural regions and their towns is generally formed from some fairly shallow analysis and superficial evidence. Population growth (or decline) is used in the metropolitan media as a simple reliable measure. Other readily available measures include housing starts, jobs created and property values. On any of these measures much of rural and regional Australia stands in stark contrast to the nation's metropolitan areas, a small number of regional centres and some coastal areas. The application of such measures to regions whose economy is particularly reliant on dryland farming such as the wheat-sheep areas, demonstrates a bleak performance; a picture of continuing population loss, little building activity, job losses and property values static or in decline. The media images backed with these basic performance indicators are pervasive and persuasive. It is not surprising that in the world of the government adviser these areas are seen as 'basket cases', the allocation of resources particularly to prop up or retain services is seen as throwing good money after bad. How does government policy respond to these areas? In the United States midwest the term 'smart decline' has been coined as a contrast to smart growth.

In this paper I will examine one region – the Wimmera in Western Victoria, and one town in that region - Murtoa. I am not suggesting that the region or the town is typical or representative and that their experience is necessarily translatable. However, at both levels there are important stories to tell which certainly indicate that simple measures such as population decline do not reflect the complexity of change that is occurring or the response to it at the regional or local level. These are real regions and places with real people and the maintenance of the core infrastructure of these areas is an important national investment to support positive economic, social and environmental outcomes.

The story of population decline in the wheat-sheep regions has been well told. In respect to the Wimmera population decline persists as the recent release of the 2001 census data illustrated in Table 1 continues to show.

Table 1 Estimated Population 1976-2001 by local government areas

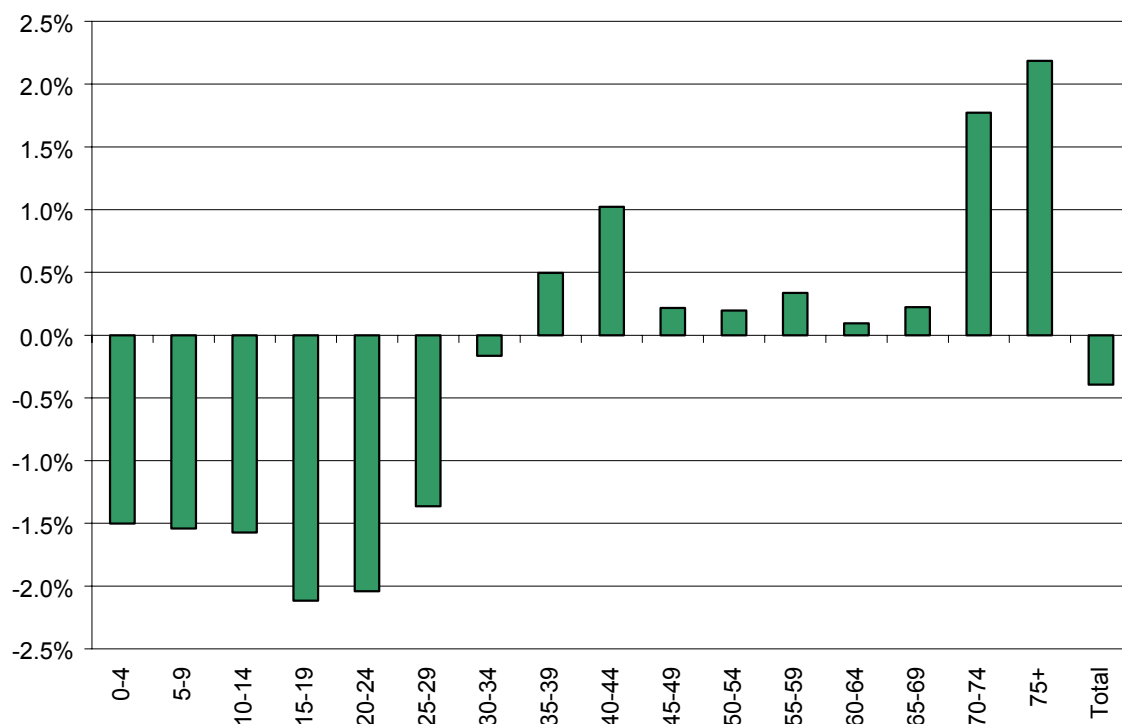
	1976	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001	<i>Average Annual Change 76-01</i>
Hindmarsh	8550	8171	7825	7324	6864	6523	-1.1%
Horsham	16990	17246	17658	17800	17939	18584	0.4%
N. Grampians	13151	12951	13531	13845	13292	13110	0.0%
West Wimmera	6862	6294	5921	5585	5187	4860	-1.4%
Yarriambiack	11099	10507	9882	9558	8922	8262	-1.2%
Total	56653	55169	54817	54112	52204	51339	-0.4%

ABS Estimated Residential Population

The observer is led to ask with the release of each successive census - surely the figures must show signs of 'bottoming out' soon, but it seems that we will have to wait longer. Below the level of the region it is clear that the Rural City of Horsham – the one regional centre in the Wimmera, continues to play its 'sponge city' role. Its modest growth based on both urban and peri-urban development stands in stark contrast to the continued and substantial loss of population throughout most of the rest of the region. It is notable that across the whole of western Victoria the network of major regional centres that support and are dependant on farming have now clearly rationalised themselves around five centres Ballarat, Bendigo, Horsham, Mildura and Warrnambool who continue to grow at the expense of most of the rest of western Victoria.

In population terms the Wimmera is a region that has failed the 'population growth is good' test. Population forecasts prepared by Victoria's Department of Infrastructure give little comfort for the Wimmera and in fact mean that on this measure the region is the worst performing in the State. Each time these forecasts are prepared and released there is a new howl of protest from the Wimmera because it further condemns the region at least in the eyes of the media. To the Wimmera it's a bad news story that must be opposed. The change in the age structure as shown in Figure 1 reflects the strong loss of young persons pointing to further population decline in the future.

Figure 1 Average Annual Change (by Age Group) Wimmera Region, 1976-2001



ABS Estimated Residential Population

The increasing likelihood that condemnatory future forecasted population levels would be reached can be highly influential in the way in which government looks at a region. The long term reduction in public services and facilities appears justified. The private sector will certainly examine its investment in a network and delivery of services.

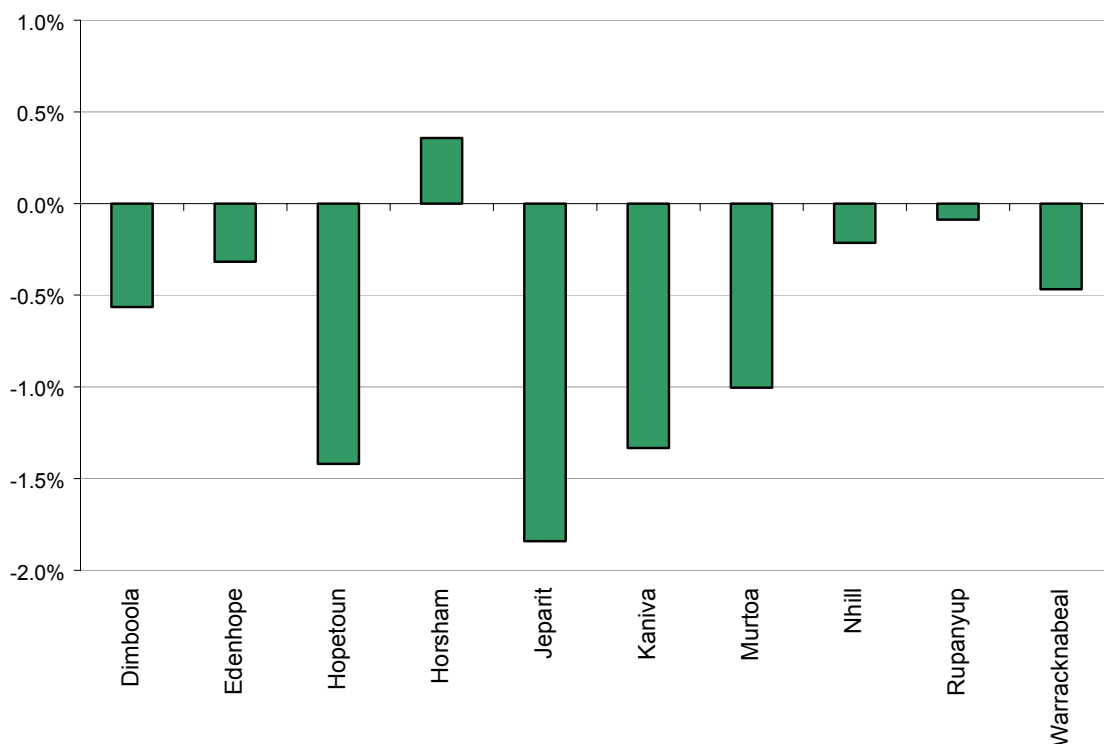
At the local level Murtoa is one of a number of small towns in the region. Murtoa is 35 kilometres east of Horsham and at the 2001 census had a population of 773. As table 2 shows it too has been in population decline. As figure 2 illustrates it has not been alone among the towns in the Wimmera in experiencing sustained population loss.

Table 2 Population and Households: Murtoa, 1981-2001

	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001	Average Annual Change 81-01
Population	946	863	878	839	773	-1.0%
Households	323	338	341	349	332	0.1%
Average Household Size	2.93	2.55	2.57	2.40	2.33	-1.1%

Source: ABS Census

Figure 2 Average Annual Population Change 1981-2001 Wimmera Towns



Murtoa's age structure (table 3) indicates some variation from the simplistic pattern that all small country towns have a pronounced ageing population. But the continuing loss of younger persons from the town is clearly evident.

Table 3 Age Structure: Murtoa, 1981-2001

	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001
0-4	8.5%	5.2%	6.5%	4.1%	7.1%
5-17	23.2%	21.8%	20.1%	16.9%	23.8%
18-24	7.5%	8.2%	4.9%	7.5%	6.3%
25-34	12.2%	11.8%	11.5%	10.7%	11.7%
35-49	15.4%	17.1%	20.4%	21.8%	18.0%
50-59	11.3%	10.8%	11.3%	11.0%	12.1%
60-74	15.4%	15.6%	17.1%	19.7%	14.0%
75+	6.6%	9.5%	8.3%	8.2%	6.9%

On the simple population measure both the Wimmera and Murtoa look fairly bleak. With the exception of Horsham experiencing about 80 new houses being built a year there is little new housing activity in the whole region. Property prices – again with Horsham being the exception, are flat. The situation is starkly revealed in the town of Edenhope on the region's western edge where an enterprising local citizen decided to give away

township allotments that he owned to stimulate some interest. As the figures for Murtoa show housing is not an indicator of activity.

The region is still very productive in terms of agriculture. The total value of production at the farmgate is in excess of \$600million. A weakness of the regional economy is that much of the region's production is not processed or value added in the region. The regional economic development board can point to some considerable local success. Stories such as Lowan Whole Foods, a product brand in all the major national supermarket chains coming out of the small town of Nhill, but the reality is that the region is an exporter of raw product. The strong traditional reliance on wheat has been broken with an enormous variety of product being grown. The region is now at the centre of the second largest concentration of oilseed production in Australia. It is at the core of products like field peas and pulses. The region has Australia's largest olive plantation in terms of oil production, while that will be overtaken because of plantings in other regions, the Wimmera will continue to be a major producer based on extensive new plantings. Despite this diversification and the growth in the planting of grapes, of timber in the higher rainfall southern areas of the region and of harvesting native wildflowers, the region's commodity future is narrow compared to many other well watered regions. The prospect for substantial processing or value adding is considerable when comparing the region's performance against the its past performance, but when compared to many other regions it is modest. Even the recent hopes that the State's largest mineral sands and mining project located in the region would lead to job and population growth have been dashed because the region will no longer have the processing plant which is going to Hamilton south of the Wimmera.

The region's prospects in terms of the traditional measures of population and jobs growth look bleak. However, it's often from adversity that comes action and a realistic approach to problems. After having recently undertaken a national project examining the role of local government and regions in responding comprehensively (that is enhancing economic, social and environmental factors as an integrated strategic response) to natural resource management the conclusion by our firm is that the Wimmera region is leading the State and probably the nation. Individual local governments or regions in other parts of Australia may be leading on particular indicators but taken as an holistic approach to the future the region is a standout. Let me illustrate this assertion with two examples of how an integrated regional approach has been embraced in the region.

In a structural sense the region has effectively integrated its regional economic development board and its long term strategic economic development plan into the region's Catchment Management Authority – which is a statutory body, and its catchment strategy, which when it receives Ministerial endorsement in early 2003 will be leading edge in Australia. Virtually every aspect of regional development in the Wimmera is framed to be supportive of the region's natural resource management strategy. Traditionally throughout rural and regional Australia local and regional economic development bodies have not wanted to go anywhere near environmental or natural resource management strategies and even more so have anything to do with seeing

social or community outcomes as drivers of economic development. The great strides made by the Wimmera in its approach to such issues are illustrated by the outcomes of a major meeting held in Horsham some two years ago.

Eighty of the region's industry and business leaders were brought together to identify and agree on the major initiatives and strategies to be pursued over the next ten to twenty years. Three of the eight nominated strategies including the top two were social impact - community capacity building initiatives. The region's business leaders had mentally made the link between community futures and economic development. It stands in stark contrast to the frequent response at such forums in other regions. Although in some other projects I observe similar realisations it does not have the widespread support I see in the Wimmera. This holistic, integrated, strategic long term view of the way regions, particularly those in adversity must operate, has been long espoused but the evidence for its take up is sparse. While these are broad and in some senses very conceptual ideas they are critical for a region in terms of its long term capacity to effectively face a series of global and national trends and to respond to a new policy agenda.

It is at the local level, in the town of Murtoa, that I want to focus because it is a story that shows how the raw population figures tell us little in terms of social and community gains. There are many recent examples of towns self-rejuvenating, of having discovered themselves, of reinventing their role. A recent publication profiling successful towns has been highlighted by a federal government initiative that built on the work of Peter Kenyon Australia's best known promoter of small towns helping themselves. Nothing so dramatic has happened in Murtoa – although what has happened shows the value of understanding the story and building on the cards that are dealt – there are lessons for many towns in the Murtoa story. Importantly it shows that traditional measures cannot be relied upon to provide a full picture. Murtoa was chosen by the Wimmera Development Association as a case study town – our firm undertook the research. Murtoa was chosen because in the late 1980s it had been the subject of an intense study, one of six towns used as a case study in a project "Small Towns Study" by Henshall Hansen economist and planners for the Victorian Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs. By revisiting the town and repeating much of the study we were able to observe what had happened over a ten year period. Superficially at least the town could be described as still a sad little place. The halcyon days of its central place role witnessed by the lost activity of the main street stood out, as did the aging nature of much of its housing stock, however beneath this exterior was a story to tell. The social stability of small towns meant that we were able to bring together many people who had played a strong role in informing the 1990 study and compare Murtoa a decade later. Consultation was also possible with those who had moved in – and interestingly later with some whom had moved out.

Murtoa at the beginning of the 1990s was a town racked with self doubt and uncertainty, to some at the time it seemed as though the town would not survive. At the time of the Small Towns Study about 100 jobs were in the process of being lost to the town. A whole series of government jobs, federal, state and regional were to go through massive downsizing or complete removal. Secondly, the secondary school, a town backbone, which

served not only the town and the surrounding rural areas but also the 'rival' towns of Minyip and Rupanyup was in decline with student numbers, through population loss and parents choosing to send their students to the larger Horsham schools. The Education Department had the school on notice that numbers had reached a critical level. Despite these problems in terms of the long term strategic positioning of the town the largest single issue that the town was facing in 1990 was that the prospect of residents commuting to Horsham for work was overtaking its role as a local service centre. While it was about to lose a hundred local jobs the town's hope was that the workers would remain in Murtoa and commute to Horsham. This growing level of dependence on Horsham was a hard and resisted concept. It was not a future that the town wanted to pursue.

A decade later how is the town faring. Population numbers indicated a population loss of just over 100 people in the 1990s. However, below that simple measure there was a much more vibrant town, much more confident and secure in its role and its future, clearer about what it wants and with a series of strategies in place to provide a greater degree of certainty.

The one hundred public sector jobs lost in the early 1990s have been replaced by one hundred new private sector jobs, primarily in three areas. The privatisation of grain handling has seen Murtoa become a much more significant regional centre – the largest in the State, the grain trucking industry has expanded enormously with bigger farms and bigger yields and one local transport company has been very successful. A local cabinetmaker has secured cheap redundant buildings and built one of the largest cabinet making businesses in the region. These three industries have added one hundred jobs to private sector employment. The town says it has a healthier economy because it has cut its reliance on public sector employment. Significantly though not all these employees live local, the town is now an importer of labour.

Secondly, the secondary college has reinvented itself. Ninety students who are bussed daily from Horsham have boosted its numbers. A dedicated group of Horsham parents are paying about \$900 annually each for their children to be taken daily to school in Murtoa. Murtoa is the practical alternative for students who find they cannot cope with the large anonymous nature of the Horsham secondary schools. Parents looking for smaller class sizes, greater one to one attention from school staff, long term stability in staff and a range of activities by a school that are more community inclusive. The Murtoa Secondary College is not allowed to market itself along these lines but the very different education it is providing to that provided in the government sector in Horsham is well known and sought out.

In the most important aspect, the town's role in respect to Horsham, there has been a considerable change. The commuting role is now welcomed and promoted. Murtoa is an alternative living opportunity to Horsham, housing is cheaper particularly older Victorian style properties, and the characteristics of small town living are seen as virtues. The town's future is clearly seen now as a supplement to Horsham's growth. The issues for the town are now around commuting; transport arrangements for young people, and for aged people no longer able to drive themselves. This change has been important. But the town still loses its young people every year

to higher education, to training and to work opportunities and to the need for a wider social experience all found largely outside of the region.

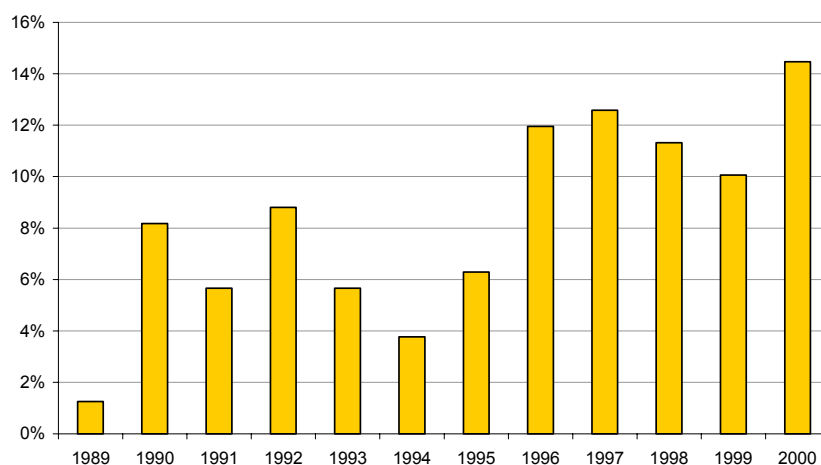
There was a greater realisation of the importance of the quality of life of the town. The development of the lake, increasing recognition of the town's character and the main street, the complimentary role of Murtoa as a commuter town to Horsham, growing recognition of tourism and the marketing of tourism assets had all contributed to a stronger feel about the town. There is a more positive feel about the town. The community has put a lot of effort into key facilities. While there are concerns that more could be done to strengthen the community and to support local initiatives, the overall approach of the town is sound. The single most significant initiative is the development of the role of the Co-ordinator of the 'Neighbourhood House' effectively into a Community Development Officer. This role has developed because the incumbent has taken on that role although it is beyond her paid duties. There is widespread recognition that such a role is now an essential component in a town. More importantly than the role or title is the attitude and approach of the person and her capacity to take on duties beyond the job description.

The town accepts that it will lose its young people but it has realised that three initiatives are critical. Firstly, maintain contact with the town's young people those who have left, secondly provide reasons for people who have left to come back on a regular basis and thirdly maintain the older generation in the community because they are a critical reason why younger people will keep coming back. If young people regularly come back that it increases enormously the chances of such persons permanently returning to the town or at least the region. The town has put a lot of effort into regularly running events which provide social community functions such as the Murtoa Races, mini 'back too's'; the Agricultural show the football and so on to provide lots of reasons to return and keep in touch. That program of linking with young people was so strong that as part of the study it was possible to organise a mail out survey to nearly every student who had left the Murtoa Secondary College in the last 10 years. The survey sought to identify what the students had done, where they were, how they viewed Murtoa and district and would they consider returning.

The survey included questions relating to employment and education since leaving MSC, ongoing links to Murtoa (if any), family circumstance and preferences and drivers of locational choice. The aim of the survey was to determine any relationships that might exist between these characteristics and to explore possible actions to enhance the attraction of Murtoa to past residents.

The survey was conducted during early 2002. In total 440 surveys were distributed to past students who's final year at MSC was between 1990 and 2000. In total 159 responses were received which can be considered to be a reasonable rate of return. In general, recent students were more highly represented than those who had left the school prior to 1996.

Figure 3 MSC Survey Respondents: Final Year at MSC



Of the respondents, almost 75% had completed Year 12, while 11% had left at the end of Year 11. The remainder had left Murtoa SC prior to Year 11. Over 60% of respondents were females, 76% of all respondents were single, less than 10% had any children. Over 95% of all respondents had some family still living in Murtoa and district. Currently, 29% of respondents reside in Melbourne, 10% in Murtoa and 30% elsewhere in the Wimmera.

Table 4 MSC Survey Location of Respondents

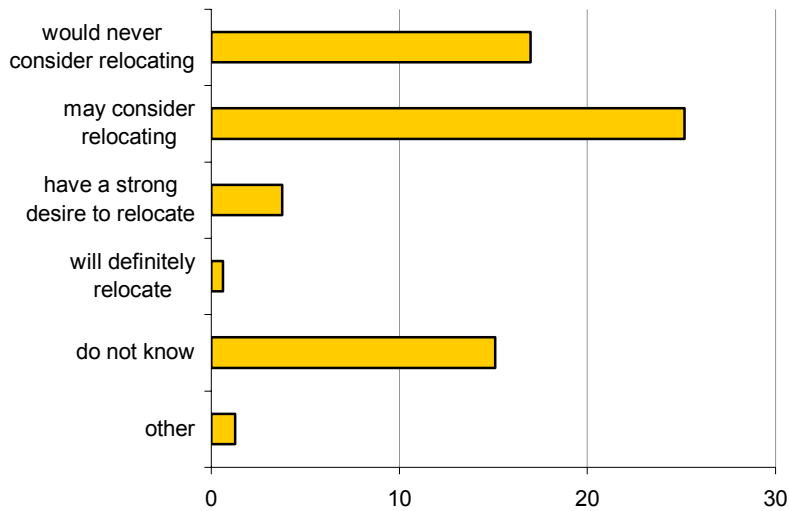
	Number	Proportion
Murtoa	17	10.8%
Melbourne	45	28.7%
Wimmera	47	29.9%
Other Regional Victoria	32	20.4%
Interstate Regional	8	5.1%
Interstate Metropolitan	8	5.1%
Total	157	100.0%

Of the respondents, 86% had obtained some post secondary qualifications. Over 86% of respondents commenced further education immediately after leaving school, 11% commenced employment within agricultural and related sectors.

Of those respondents living in Murtoa and the Wimmera, the majority nominated employment (20%) and family (16%) as the main reason for remaining. Of those respondents living elsewhere, employment was the main driver (28%), while a range of *other* reasons (including education) were nominated.

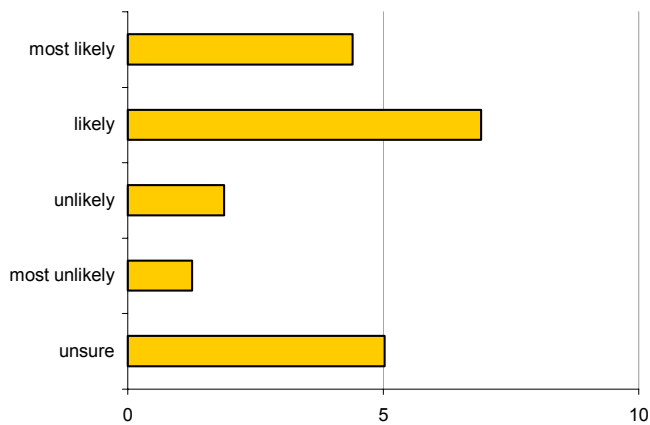
Of those living elsewhere, 17% stated that they would not consider returning to the area.

Figure 4 MSC Survey Attitude to Relocating to Murtoa



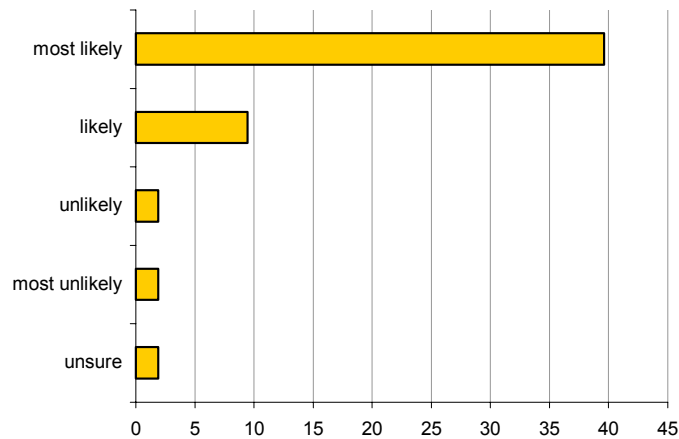
There is no meaningful relationship within the survey results between the age/year of leaving and the preference for returning to the area. Of those respondents still living in Murtoa, likely/most likely to remain in the area was the dominant response. Respondents living within the broader Wimmera Region showed a similar pattern.

Figure 5 MSC Survey: Attitude of Murtoa Residents to Remaining in Murtoa Area as a Proportion of the Total Respondents



For those residents living elsewhere the preference was to continue living in locations other than the Wimmera.

Figure 5 MSC Survey Attitude of Residents Living Elsewhere to Remaining 'Elsewhere' as a Proportion of Total Respondents



In relation to the basis for locational decisions, employment was the primary basis of decisions relating to location. This was the case regardless of where respondents live. Employment as an influence on location was only slightly more important among those living outside of the region, compared to those remaining. This was the primary influence regardless of whether family members remained in the region or not. Family was a lesser influence among those living elsewhere. In relation to those living in the region, family (48%) was only slightly less important than employment as an influence

The scope and diversity of employment and higher educational opportunities were the issues most raised within the general comments on the survey forms. The range and type of social, commercial and recreational opportunities were also noted as a limitation to returning to the area. Conversely, some of those living in the region noted the range of employment and activities available, as well as the lifestyle benefits of the region. Interestingly, some respondents noted that the very aim of MSC is to develop and encourage students to pursue careers unavailable in the region. Some respondents noted the importance of the concept of relocating to the Wimmera to be near to family (especially for young families). However, it was not a dominant consideration.

The scope of the sample, in particular the age of respondents needs to be considered. With 1989 being the earliest date for leaving, very few respondents were likely to be at a point within their life cycle where the establishment of a family is a key issue. This may reveal some key differences. Reviewing the characteristics of non-respondents, specifically their current address and whether any known family links in Murtoa remain, may be of some benefit in understanding the overall findings

The school is considering extending the survey to cover student leavers from the 1980s. The survey results were mixed and probably fewer persons would consider returning than had been hoped although the school was always realistic in that a handful of returning students would be significant for the town. The survey has generated widespread interest in the region and beyond and a number of schools are considering undertaking a similar survey.

The regional and town profile and the research undertaken do not provide any 'solutions' to the population decline of rural regions and small towns but it goes some way to dispel the simplistic view that policy responses can rely on simplistic measures. Each region and each town has a story to tell. Towns and regions travel in cycles of economic performance, of social; change and of community capacity. It is important to know at what stage a community is at in order to work with such communities and to implement policy and programs.

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