

21.02 MUNICIPAL OVERVIEW

The Murrindindi Shire extends over an area of 3,881 square kilometres and is located in the north fall of the eastern section of the Victorian highlands. Approximately 48% of the Shire is Crown land including substantial forested areas. The Shire incorporates the major towns of Alexandra, Eildon, Marysville, Kinglake and Yea and a number of smaller townships and localities including Strath Creek, Molesworth, Flowerdale, Glenburn, Toolangi, Narbethong, Buxton, Taggerty, Thornton, Yarck, Terip Terip and Highlands.

The major industries of the Shire are primary production (incorporating broad acre and intensive agriculture), outdoor education, forestry, tourism (including a significant holiday home sector), light manufacturing and the services sector. The economy of the Shire of Murrindindi relies heavily on the natural environment that provides the basis for primary production, tourism (including the lifestyle/holiday home sector), outdoor education and forestry industries.

The southern boundary of the Shire borders the outer metropolitan municipalities of Yarra Ranges, Nillumbik and Whittlesea, and as a consequence, represents the highest population growth area of the Shire. The Murrindindi Shire is located strategically between Melbourne and the High Country, within a one and a half hour drive from Melbourne. The major access routes to the Shire include the Maroondah Highway (from the east of Melbourne), the Melba Highway (from the east and north-east of Melbourne), the Whittlesea – Yea Road (an alternative route from the northern suburbs of Melbourne) and the Goulburn Valley Highway (from the Hume Freeway).

Environment

The Murrindindi Shire encompasses a host of significant landscapes, including forested hills and mountains, wetlands and lakes, agricultural plateaus, river valleys and the high lands. Access to the Murrindindi Shire is strongly influenced and restricted by the form of the Great Dividing Range.

The Shire is located almost entirely within the catchment of the Goulburn River Valley. This catchment drains to the north via the Rubicon River, the Acheron River, the Yea River, and the King Parrot Creek and then to the west along the broad valley of the Goulburn River downstream from Lake Eildon. Although the Goulburn River catchment comprises only 2% of the Murray Darling Basin's land area, it generates 11% of the water, reflecting the significance of the Shire's waterways.

These environmental assets are vital to maintaining the region's fertile farming land, timber production, outdoor education and tourism industry.

Settlement

The population of Murrindindi Shire is currently estimated at 13,779. Population growth in the area has been modest with an average rate of 1.1% between 1996 and 2001.

The overall age structure of the Shire is relatively young with 27% of the population aged 17 years or less and a further 18% aged between 18 and 35 years. Approximately 23% of Murrindindi's overall population is aged over 50 years; however this proportion is much higher in some of the townships. For example, in Yea, 35% of the population is aged over 55 years - significantly higher than the Victorian average of 21%. Yea has experienced a 65% increase in the number of 50-59 year olds, and a 44% increase in the number of people aged over 75 years. Similarly in Eildon, there has been an increase in the proportion of residents aged more than 55 years since 1996. In regard to people living on farms, the proportion aged 50 years or more is higher than the Shire overall.

The desirability of living in the municipality is reflected in the increase in residential property values. These have increased each year since 2000 by at least 10%. In 2003,

residential property values rose on average by 18% across the Shire – the highest growth rate in the region.

Historically, Murrindindi Shire has been a popular holiday destination, with many holiday homes located in the traditional tourist areas of Marysville and Eildon. In recent years, Murrindindi Shire has become increasingly popular as a rural retreat for Melbourne residents. An estimated 25% of the Shire's dwelling stock comprises holiday homes/lifestyle properties. This has had the effect of increasing the diversity of housing types around the townships including rural living and low density residential properties.

The southern boundary of the Shire is close to the growth corridors in the Cities of Whittlesea and Hume and Mitchell Shire. These growth corridors will accommodate an additional 40,000 people within the next 10 years – within one hour's drive of the major towns in Murrindindi Shire. Historic population growth rates are not a reliable indicator of future growth rates so it is difficult to determine the extent of zoned residential and rural residential land that will be required for future development over the long term. However, as a sign of accelerating growth, building approvals have increased markedly in recent years. The major towns of Alexandra, Yea and Eildon have a supply of existing residential land to cater for historical growth rates for the next 20 years. These major towns within the Shire however lack a diversity of dwelling types, in particular medium density housing, rental accommodation and aged accommodation.

Economic Development

The economic strengths of the Murrindindi Shire include tourism, primary production, outdoor education and forestry. There is also a light manufacturing and services sector concentrated in the major towns.

Murrindindi's tourism industry comprises day trip and overnight visitation from people living outside the Shire, as well as regular overnight visitation from people owning lifestyle properties and holiday homes who also live outside the Shire. The Shire's tourism industry generates \$128 million per annum and visitor expenditure is a growing contributor to the Shire's economy. Murrindindi receives approximately one million visitors per year. The industry employs more than 16% of Murrindindi's working population – more than any other industry. The Shire's primary tourism product strengths are based on the region's excellent natural attractions, scenic beauty and emerging agricultural industries. Key natural attractions include Lake Mountain, Lake Eildon, Cathedral Ranges, Goulburn River, Rubicon State Forest and Kinglake National Park. Food and wine tourism in the Shire is growing, in conjunction with the development of intensive agriculture. Farmgate sales, cafes, restaurants, visitor accommodation and produce outlets are increasingly being developed to add value to the intensive agricultural enterprises.

Primary production still forms a major part of the Shire's economy and the sector produces commodities to the value of \$28 million per annum. The primary production sector comprises 504 business locations in Murrindindi Shire, accounting for 46% of all businesses and employs approximately 14% of Murrindindi's labour force. Primary production in the Shire comprises the traditional activities of meat and wool production as well as intensive agricultural production. Low commodity prices in recent years have forced farmers to look for alternative sources of income by diversifying into farm forestry, horticulture and off farm sources.

Intensive agriculture activity is growing significantly and includes vegetables, stone fruit (cherry production has more than tripled between 1995-2001 and nectarine production has increased from 35 tonnes per year in 1995 to 193 tonnes in 2001), strawberry plants (95% of Australia's production), wine grapes (production was 10 times higher in 2001 than it was in 1995), green tea, nurseries, flowers and cultivated turf (the number of business locations for these activities has increased from 3 in 1995 to 23 in 2001), egg production and animal genetics.

Around 1,200 tonnes of fresh water trout per annum are produced in the Murrindindi Shire (approximately 80% of Australia's total trout production).

Forestry is also a core industry of the Murrindindi Shire with an output of approximately \$48 million per annum. This industry is responsible for employing 8% of the Shire's labour force in either harvesting or wood manufacturing. Murrindindi has 7,615 ha of softwood plantation and 749 ha of hardwood plantation. The current sustainable yield for hardwood is set at 144,000 cubic metres net per annum and the industry is harvesting 129,000 cubic metres. Under the Private Timber Strategy, the North Eastern region is expected to triple private timber production in the next 20 years. Forestry will play a greater role in the economy of the region as a consequence of this strategy. Murrindindi contributes 11.8% of softwoods and 22.8% in hardwoods from Victoria's North Eastern timber production. Murrindindi's saw milling facilities also offer opportunities for future value added expansion (including furniture-grade products). There are growing links between forestry and tourism including the development of trails, community support, festivals and events.

There is a significant cluster of outdoor education providers in the Shire that offer corporate training, education programs, motivation, leadership and adventure activities. These include a number of outdoor education groups, school camps and other lodges, hostels and camps.

Industrial development within the Murrindindi Shire is currently limited to light manufacturing, storage and service industries that primarily service the local population. The Shire's largest enterprise, a timber milling and processing plant, is located in Alexandra. There are also smaller industrial enterprises that are scattered across the Shire, many of which are associated with agricultural production and located primarily on rural land.

Murrindindi's services sector comprises Government services, Council services, schools, health facilities and retail businesses.