

Graham Costin – Candidate for Colac Otway Shire
Colac & District Chamber of Commerce & Industry
Request for Information on COVID-19 Response (12 Oct 20)

Message to Colac Otway Businesses & Industry

The COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on gatherings, travel and tourism has presented many challenges not only to communities, commerce and industry, but also to the complex \$32 million p.a. business of Colac Otway Shire. Council is navigating through uncharted waters but has a key role in providing the extra support that everyone needs to get through the pandemic's economic and social impacts until we arrive at a "new normal".

"The only thing we know about the future is that it will be different."¹

This draft COVID-19 Support and Recovery Roadmap is based on my still evolving understandings. The actions proposed are in addition to those included in the recently updated 2017-2021 Council Plan. It may contain errors or omissions as it has been prepared without the benefit of Council staff support or broad stakeholder consultation.

A suggested COVID-19 Support & Recovery Roadmap

Council's accommodation, food services, arts and recreation sectors have been hit hard by the pandemic. There is little doubt that a robust, but flexible, Roadmap is needed to guide the Council actions needed to assist these sectors and others.

This draft roadmap is intended to supplement Council's 2019 Economic Development Strategy and provide additional guidance for communities, businesses, industry and Council staff.

The Roadmap objectives are three-fold i) short-term business survival, ii) medium-term economic recovery and iii) longer-term economic resilience to future shocks.

It is most likely this Roadmap will need adjustment over time, whether to respond to another wave of COVID-19 restrictions, emerging State and Federal grant opportunities or to other as yet unknown threats and opportunities.

The following actions are loosely grouped in the timeframes used by a number of economic modellers. However, these timeframes should not be viewed as predictions, but only as one basis for mapping out Council's future support and assistance activities.

1. **Shock impact phase** (social distancing and border closure policies remain in place, next 12 months? business survival objective)
 - a. Immediately close Council customer service facilities and move online²
 - b. Close Council venues that may act as transmission venues e.g. libraries, COPACC, ...²

¹ Peter Drucker

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- c. Waiving of new fees for food business, accommodation and outdoor dining street furniture registrations and permits until June 2021; and refunding fees already paid since the start of 2020²
 - d. A rebate of \$1000 (subject to Council decision) for all commercial food service and tourism-focussed business properties in 2020/21.
 - e. Waiver of penalty interest on outstanding rates and debts (except fines and infringements) since the start of 2020
 - f. Waiver of rent for tenants occupying council buildings
 - g. Providing more outdoor dining space required due to restrictions on indoor dining and outdoor seating density quotient (currently 2 sqm per person)³ (utilise carparks and/or foreshores), fast-track approvals and permits required and waive fees
 - h. Establish a Community Support Team with sufficient funding and social support skills for rapid response to individual and family emergency needs (\$25,000?)
 - i. Prepare and implement a COVID-19 Hardship policy to provide interest-free rate payments plans up to the end of 2021/22, with an option for partial rates waiver subject to approval by Council
 - j. Establish an Economic Support Team with sufficient funding and mentoring skills for
 - i. business restructuring (e.g. move to online niche markets for already established customers such as sale of women's footwear)²
 - ii. larger community-led social recovery projects or activities²
 - iii. public art and small arts grants for local artists²(1:1 grant or similar for business and community, \$250,000?)
 - k. A targeted marketing campaign to attract domestic tourists²
 - l. A "Buy Local" campaign for whole shire²
2. **Stimulus phase** (State and Federal government implements a recovery program including significant financial stimulus combined with a staged re-opening of social and economic activity, crowding of domestic tourism market, to end FY 2021/22? medium-term economic recovery objective)
- a. Streamline Council subdivision, planning and building permit processes (i.e. reduce red tape) to bring forward economic development and create jobs
 - b. Fostering the development of local artisan products that will differentiate Colac Otway from other domestic tourism markets e.g. speciality cheeses

² Same, or similar to, existing COS initiative

³ Vic Gov, 2020, *Industry Restart Guidelines – Hospitality*, Sept 2020

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and other milk-based products, speciality meats (grass-fed, organic, ...), locally made furniture using local timbers, and similar

- c. Future event guidelines to inform future planning for events such as Apollo Bay Seafood Festival, Birregurra Festival and Arts Show, Gellibrand Blues and Blueberries Festival, Otways Odyssey, Warrion Arts Show, WinterWild to name but a few – will need regular updating²
 - d. Fast track approvals for already funded infrastructure projects to create jobs during construction and differentiate Colac Otway from other domestic tourism markets, such as:
 - i. Apollo Bay Harbour, Skenes Ck Trail and Kennett River traffic projects will potentially give a \$19 million boost to the local economy and deliver lasting economic benefits
 - ii. Other similar major projects located around Colac and surrounding?
 - e. Seek State or Federal funding for medium-size infrastructure projects that will provide jobs during construction and differentiate Colac Otway from other domestic tourism markets, such as:
 - i. Youth sports facilities e.g. pump tracks, ...
 - ii. Lake Colac or coast foreshore sculptures and trails similar to Geelong foreshore or Lake Burley Griffin
3. **Recovery phase** (*stimulus is less “emergency” and focusses on major infrastructure and productivity investments, to end FY 2023/24? longer-term economic recovery objective*)
- a. Bring forward the preparation of already identified or planned, but unfunded, infrastructure projects to create a pipeline of “shovel-ready” projects for grant applications. Drawing on priority projects from the 2020/21 budget and existing studies such as:
 - i. Colac Otway Tourism and Traffic Study Implementation
 - ii. Colac Civic and Rail Precinct Master Plan (in preparation)
 - iii. Community Infrastructure Plan, Apollo Bay - Marengo - Skenes Ck
 - iv. Apollo Bay Trails Study
 - v. Lake Colac Foreshore Master Plan
 - vi. other?
 - b. Seek funding and fast track business cases or feasibility studies for other community-driven Lake Colac proposals and progress to “shovel-ready” for future grants if found to be economically beneficial and feasible. Projects might include:
 - i. Trail links from central Lake Colac Foreshore to the east (Meredith Park) and west (Cororooke township)

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- ii. Other??
4. **“The New Normal” phase** (economy and society are considered “back on its feet”, roughly 2024/25 and beyond, future resilience objective)
- a. Generally, advocate, encourage and support local economy diversification to avoid the risk of reliance on single source income such as has occurred with coastal tourism. Diversification examples include:
 - i. Community-driven (Surf Lifesaving Club & Apollo Bay P12 School) Blue Ocean Safety Skills Centre initiative expected to deliver \$23 million net benefit and 48 jobs
 - ii. Potential for University or TAFE off-shoot centres specialising in agriculture, manufacturing, forestry, tourism or marine science
 - iii. Other??
 - b. Work with the private sector to ensure work-from-home support infrastructure is widely available throughout the Shire i.e. reliable electricity, telephone and high-speed internet.

Resourcing: Council has limited resources to implement this Roadmap. It will most likely require additional financial resources and staff (if redeployment options are not available). It may need to engage specialist staff or contractors to implement the various activities proposed.

Council will need to revise its recently adopted budget for more substantial deficit than the forecast \$0.55 million. It should plan for future financing of 2-3 future COVID-19 impact duration / reduced revenue scenarios.

If Council has inadequate financial reserves to finance this Roadmap, Council may need to increase its borrowings. It is possible State or Federal governments may offer substantial grants or “soft loans” to local government to implement “approved recovery roadmaps”.

Monitoring and evaluation. To ensure the Roadmap continues to meet the needs of business and industry over time, it should be monitored during implementation and reviewed frequently (bi-monthly?) and updated as required.

Particular attention should be given to any emerging communities, businesses and industries identified as needing additional support, and to ensure that support and assistance is provided.

* *Graham Costin is a member of the Apollo Bay Chamber of Commerce.*