

Stephen Hart
4925 Great Ocean Road
LAVERS HILL VIC 3238
E-mail: lavershill7@gmail.com
'Phone: 0447 844 497

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Response to questions from the Colac Chamber of Commerce

Dear Mark,

Thanks for the opportunity to address your members.

My ideas to help Colac Otway businesses recover from the covid 19 pandemic and to build a stronger, more resilient local economy include:

1. Extend the rates interest rate waiver to at least 30 June 2021. This will provide 'breathing space'.
2. Council needs to actively listen to business owners and the respective Chambers of Commerce – Colac and Apollo Bay - to develop strategies that will meet their immediate needs. Marketing the region, both as a destination to visit and as a place to live and work, is part of the solution.
3. Council needs to work with the municipal Valuers to ensure rate valuations are based on the most up to date information. It is unfair to commercial property owners and their tenants if rate values are based on sales in 2019, before the pandemic. The drop in business revenues caused by the pandemic must be reflected in rates valuations.
4. Where the use of a house outside of Colac has changed from a short term holiday rental to a permanent residential rental, the owner may already be eligible for a lower, residential, rate. Council needs to communicate this potential saving to eligible property owners.
5. The planning scheme needs to be changed so that there is more flexibility in the use of properties, particularly shop fronts. Such changes need to consider public input.
6. We need a cultural change in the Shire organisation, from being "enforcers of the rules" to being "facilitators."
7. There are opportunities arising from the need to address climate change. Colac could be a renewable energy hub. Education for both installers and maintenance crew of renewable energy systems; health workers and other industries could take place in the training centres in Colac. The Forrest Gateway project is an opportunity to host such education and research.
8. Carbon offset payments, hosting wind generators and solar farms could be an additional source of income for local farmers.

Unfortunately, Colac has missed out for years on opportunities to diversify the local economy with industries addressing climate change as some civic leaders have used such suggestions as a means to divide the community. Strong Civic leadership would highlight and promote the many opportunities that exist from helping to address climate change. As a Councillor, I see my responsibility as promoting these opportunities rather than promoting division.

Stephen Hart.