

INSIGHT

Special edition

March 2019

Review of Visitor Information Services

Background

Council is carrying out a review of how visitor information services are delivered in the Shire. This encompasses a review of the best model for delivering these services and the best location (building) to deliver the services from.

The distribution of this special newsletter is the first step in a comprehensive community consultation and engagement process designed to seek feedback from across the community.

Management of the Bridgetown-Greenbushes Visitor Centre has been the responsibility of the Shire since 2005. Prior to 2005 the visitor centre was run by volunteers under an industry/community model, the last being in 2004 under the management of the then Bridgetown Greenbushes Tourism Association.

The visitor centre has been housed in its current building on Hampton Street for a considerable period of time. The building currently accommodates the information and retail services of the visitor centre at the front, a museum in its middle section and the Brierley Jigsaw Gallery in the rear.

The Bridgetown Historical Society intends to relocate the museum to the former Shire archives shed

located behind the Police Lockup/Old Gaol with this relocation to occur once the Shire vacates the shed.

The review of visitor information services, both the determination of best management model and the preferred location (building) is based on the visitor centre continuing to provide local visitor information services and housing the Brierley Jigsaw Gallery. It is not considered necessary for the visitor centre to continue to have a retail shop element as there are many other businesses in the Shire that can retail the same type of products and items.

Although not included in the floor area of the visitor centre, elsewhere in the existing building office space is provided by the Shire to Blues at Bridgetown and Bridgetown Greenbushes Community Landcare/Blackwood Biosecurity. In the event of the community consultation/engagement process determining a different site (building) for housing visitor information services Council would review, in consultation with those tenants what other buildings may be suitable for them to relocate to.

Why is Council Reviewing Visitor Information Services?

In January, Council, after receiving some feedback from members of the public resolved to discontinue any further

investigation into the possibility of co-locating visitor information services at the Bridgetown Library. No work on this proposal had commenced and it had been Council's intention to conduct full community consultation once conceptual plans had been prepared (showing how the two services would co-exist in the same building). Nevertheless in January Council accepted the strong views expressed by some people that moving visitor information to the library was not an appropriate model.

Notwithstanding that decision, Council is reviewing its model for delivering visitor information services commencing with a comprehensive community consultation/engagement program to discuss some options for different management models and locations (including the existing visitor centre building) for delivering visitor information services.

Council's reasons for reviewing how local visitor information services provided are two-fold. One is to ensure that the functions and services of the visitor centre don't conflict with those of the recently established 'Southern Forests Blackwood Valley Tourism Association' (SFBVTA). The other reason is to arrest the declining financial performance of the existing visitor centre that is funded by the Shire (and thus



the ratepayer).

What is the Southern Forests Blackwood Valley Tourism Association (SFBVTA)?

The SFBVTA is a brand-new industry led local tourism organisation (LTO) which has been progressed by the Warren Blackwood Alliance of Councils to represent the Shires of Bridgetown-Greenbushes, Manjimup and Nannup.

The SFBVTA will market, promote and package the region as a whole to increase overall visitation and visitor satisfaction. Visitor Centres remain a key to the success of the model as visitor servicing hubs. Regional marketing, regional grant submissions, membership relations, website and online bookings would be managed and facilitated by the SFBVTA.

The SFBVTA will partner with 'Australia's Southwest' in its role of representing, marketing and promoting Western Australia's South West along with the other three south west tourism organisations being: Margaret River Busselton, Bunbury Geographe and the Great Southern.

The establishment of an LTO for the Warren Blackwood Region was initially proposed at a tourism forum held in Manjimup in 2013 and attended by over 100 operators and business persons representing tourist businesses in the region. The view expressed by most of these tourism representatives was that there needed to be better coordination of marketing and promotional campaigns to get more tourists to our region rather than the individual towns in the region trying to compete against each other.

The Shire of Boyup Brook declined to participate in this project hence the LTO investigations focused on the Shires of Bridgetown-

Greenbushes, Manjimup and Nannup.

Between 2013 and 2018 the Warren Blackwood Alliance of Councils progressed investigations into the establishment of an LTO including determination of an appropriate model and budget. A steering committee comprising equal representation of tourist operators/proprietors and Shire personnel from each of the three local government areas was formed and this committee developed the final model including the name 'Southern Forests Blackwood Valley Tourism Association.

The objectives of the SFBVTA are:

1. Act as a peak body for all tourism stakeholders in the region;
2. Create a sustainable, prosperous and healthy tourism industry;
3. Attract more visitors to the region;
4. Boost return on investment for its members;
5. Celebrate the region's culture;
6. Offer a quality visitor experience;
7. Enhance and further develop the profile of the region;
8. Promote the region as a desirable tourism destination to local, inter-state, intra-state and international markets;
9. Connect with visitors, investors and trade; and
10. Respond to the specific needs, opportunities, products, experiences and resources of our region.

A Board has been appointed for the SFBVTA. The tourism industry members of the newly appointed Board from Bridgetown-Greenbushes are Ms Anita Iretigh and Mr Geoff Herbert. The Shire CEO Mr Tim Clynch is also a Board member representing the Warren Blackwood Alliance of Councils.

Recruitment of an Executive Officer is currently under way with an appointment to be made in early April 2019.

The role of visitor centres will change with the establishment of the SFBVTA. No longer will they have members or sell accommodation and other tourism packages therefore there will be a considerable loss of income for them. The visitor centres will have to modify their role to that of directly servicing visitors at the local level.

How is the Southern Forests Blackwood Valley Tourism Association (SFBVTA) Funded?

The establishment of the SFBVTA is being completely funded by the three participating local governments. The local governments will also continue to be a major financial contributor to the operations of the SFBVTA, contributing 61.4% of the SFBVTA's income in Year 2 (2019/20), and 48.4% in Year 3. By Year 5 (2022/23) this is expected to be reduced to 23% of overall income as the SFBVTA generates income from membership and website booking commissions.

A 5-year budget has been developed for the SFBVTA model. This budget shows that the three local governments will contribute the following sums over the 5 years:

- Shire of Manjimup
\$293,468
- Shire of Bridgetown-Greenbushes
\$195,705
- Shire of Nannup
\$122,317

The financial contributions by the Shire of Bridgetown-Greenbushes for the first 5 years of the SFBVTA are:

2018 – 2019 \$30,800
2019 – 2020 \$45,320
2020 – 2021 \$52,819
2021 – 2022 \$39,852

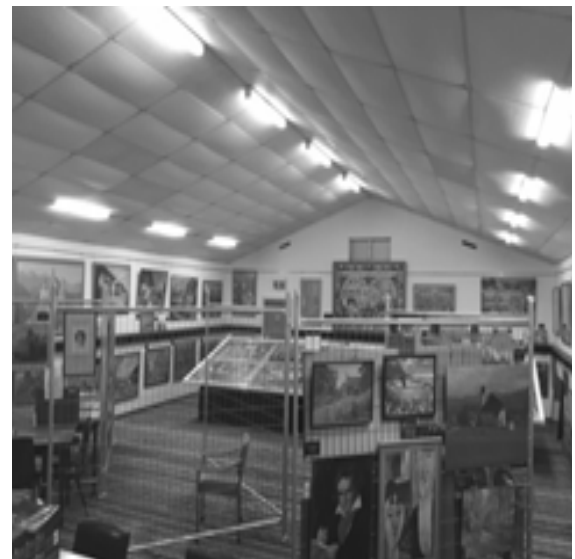
Existing Visitor Centre External View

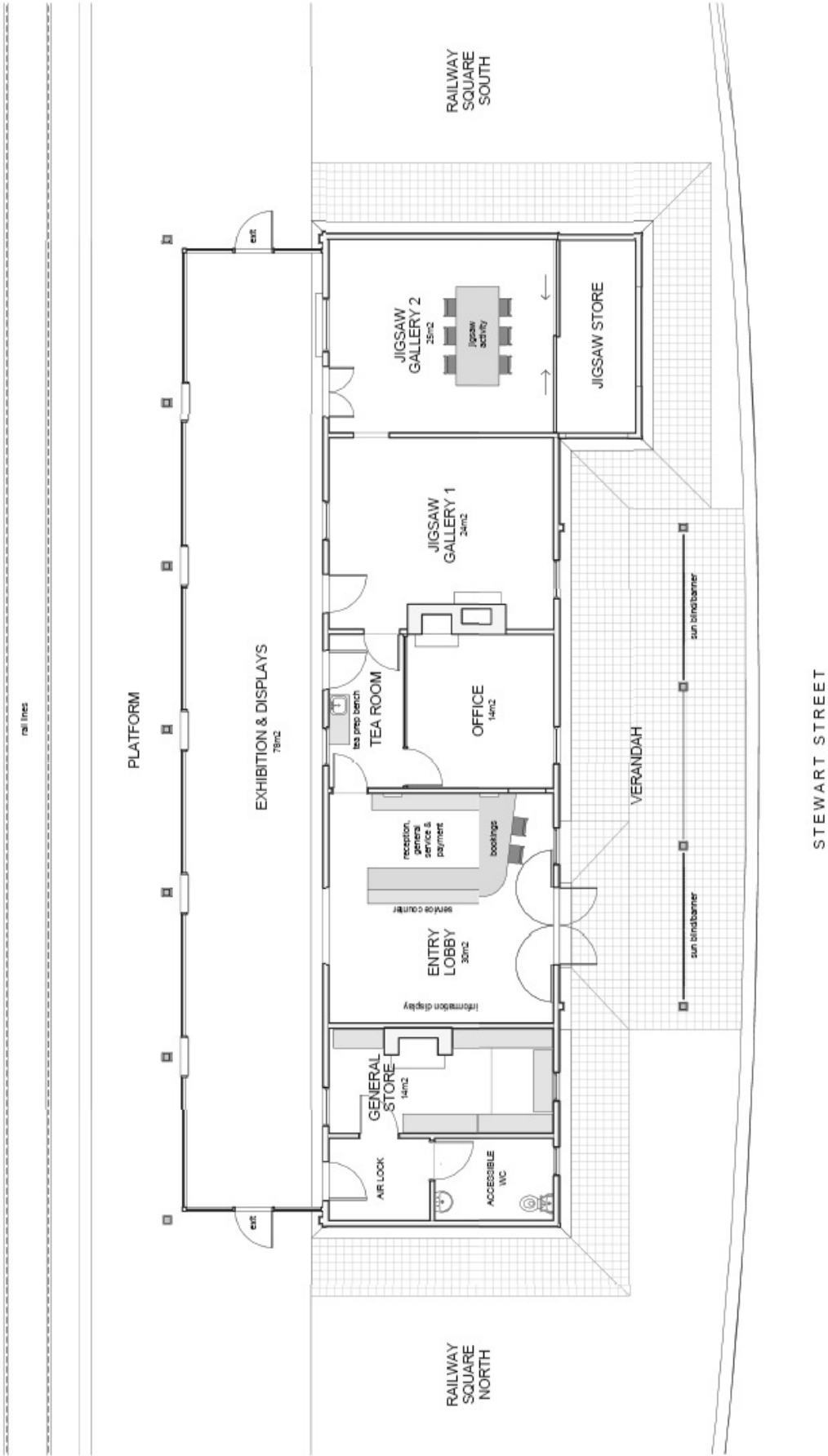


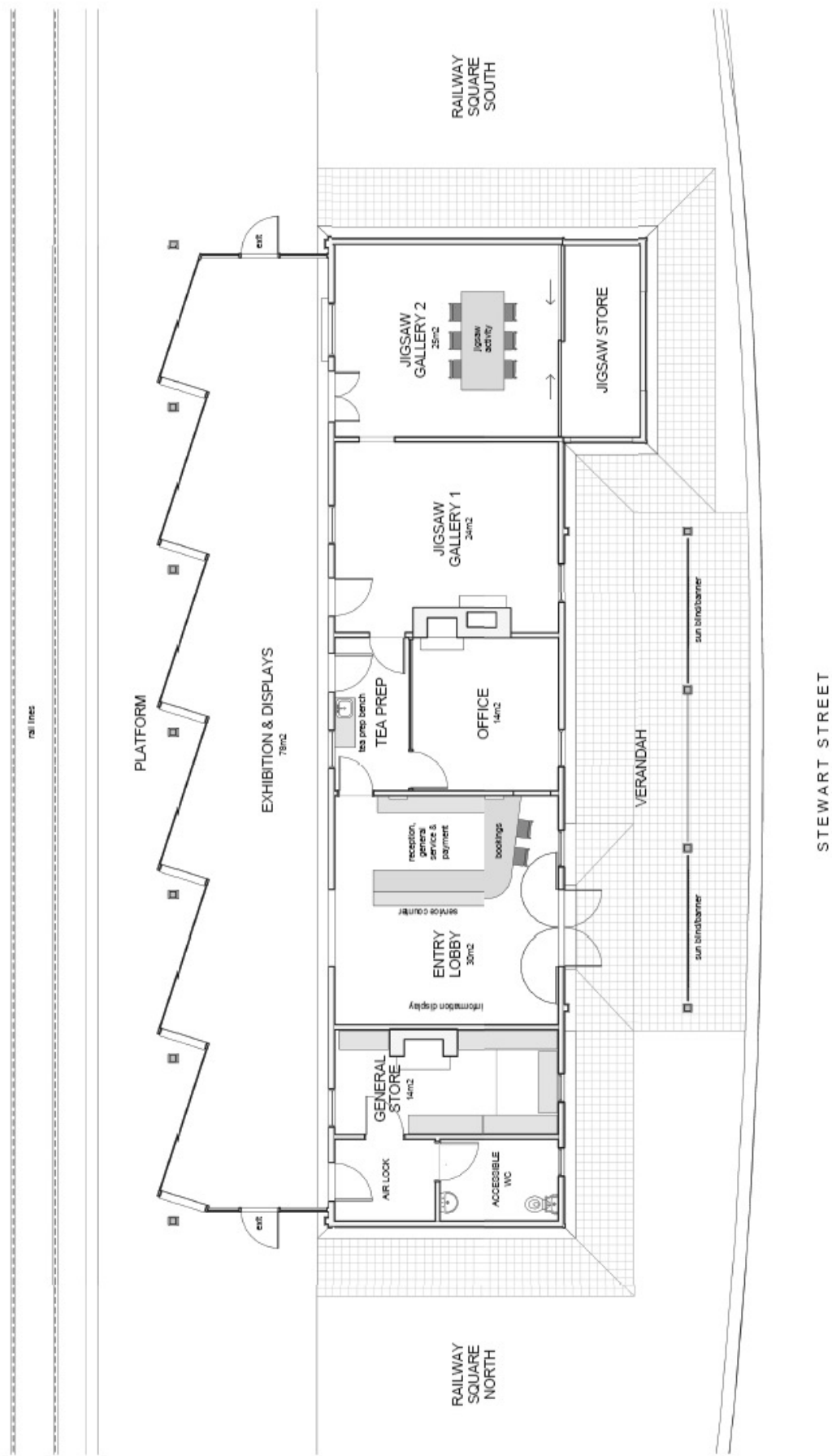
Existing Visitor Centre Retail/Information area



Existing Visitor Centre Jigsaw Gallery







The total cost to the Shire of Bridgetown-Greenbushes to fund the LTO over 5 years is \$195,705. Council has determined that its annual contribution towards the SFBVTA needs to be funded by equivalent savings from its visitor centre budget.

Financial Performance of the Bridgetown Greenbushes Visitor Centre

The financial performance of the visitor centre has been declining in recent years, as illustrated by the following statistics:

- For the 5 years from 2013/14 to 2017/18 operating income at the centre decreased by 33% (from \$98,543 in 2013/14 to \$65,723 in 2017/18) whilst for the same period operating expenditure increased by 3.3% (\$190,375 to \$196,665).
- Accordingly the cash subsidy (operating expenditure less operating revenue) for the running of the centre increased by 42.5% between 2013/14 and 2017/18. This was an increase in the operating loss/subsidy from \$91,543 in 2013/14 to an operating loss/subsidy of \$130,942 in 2017/18.
- The significant increases in operating loss/subsidy at the centre is due to reductions in revenue with examples over those 5 years being a reduction of 40% in stock sales, a reduction of 49% in accommodation commissions, a reduction of 33% in bus ticket commissions, a reduction of 37% in display fees and a reduction of 12% in membership fees. These will decrease further when the SFBVTA commences operation due to further reduction (eradication) of ability of visitor centres to generate accommodation commissions and membership fees under the LTO model.

Council feels that it is important to convey this information in order to put some context into discussions occurring in the community about the future of the visitor centre. The role that the visitor centre plays is valued however with the changing circumstances brought about by the creation of the SFBVTA and the declining financial performance of the visitor centre in recent years Council believes it is timely to review how local visitor services are delivered including from where they are delivered from.

Preliminary Assessment of Visitor Information Service Delivery Options

Rather than engaging the community with a blank sheet of paper on this issue the Council determined that it would be better to initially assess a number of options and then shortlist a few for specific community consultation.

Eight options were initially explored, being:

1. Continue to deliver visitor information service provision from the existing facility, on a reduced scale to allow for the additional expense of funding the SFBVTA.
2. Progress the proposed redevelopment of the Railway Station (sell the existing Visitor Centre facility to fund redevelopment) and relocate visitor information servicing to the Railway Station. Noting that preliminary indicative costs to redevelop the Railway Station are in the vicinity of \$700,000 - \$800,000.
3. Co-locate the visitor information service provision with a main street trader (to avoid shop front/stock duplication).
4. Co-locate the provision of visitor information services with library service provision in the library facility (with some building modifications to allow for the Jigsaw Gallery).

5. Co-locate the provision of visitor information services with an agency such as the Community Resource Centre.
6. Provision on touch screen technology based visitor information services delivery via website access, online maps, apps – no shop front/customer service (touchscreens located through townsite).
7. Council re-consider the purchase and development of the Packing Shed to house the VC; Jigsaw Gallery; Museum (requires development of business case, building assessment, conceptual design/costings developed and detailed design/costings). This is likely to be a significantly more expensive option than Option 2 due to scale/size of buildings.
8. Explore possibility of a community managed model (possibly with Bridgetown Greenbushes Business and Tourism Association).

Shortlisted Visitor Information Service Delivery Options

During the assessment of the 8 preliminary options Council determined that there were 2 key issues affecting the future of visitor information service provision, being:

- What Management Model will be used?
- What is the preferred location to provide visitor information services from – existing visitor centre or new location?

In considering these two factors Council identified 3 potential management options and 2 potential location options to seek community feedback.

The 3 Management Models are:

1. Shire managed model – the Shire would retain sole management/ownership to provide visitor information services.

2. Agency managed model (i.e. Community Resource Centre managed) – the Shire would outsource (by paying a fee) the management of visitor information service provision to a prescribed and agreed to level of service.
3. Community managed model (i.e. Bridgetown-Greenbushes Business & Tourism Association) - the Shire would outsource (by paying a fee) the management of visitor information service provision to a prescribed and agreed to level of service.
4. Community managed in refurbished Railway Station – the BGBTA would manage delivery of local visitor information services (including the Jigsaw Gallery) in a redeveloped Railway Station.

It is important to note that part of the consultation process requires meeting with identified agencies and associations to determine the viability of entering into any outsourcing arrangement/agreement. The terms of that arrangement/agreement cannot be known until those meetings have occurred.

The two location options are remaining at the existing Visitor Centre building or relocating to the Bridgetown Railway Station building.

Combining the above management and location options, four models have been shortlisted:

1. Shire managed in existing location – service provision would continue within the existing Visitor Centre building on Hampton Street.
2. Shire managed in a refurbished Bridgetown Railway Station – the Visitor Centre (including the Jigsaw Gallery) would be relocated to a redeveloped Railway Station.
3. Agency managed OR Community managed in existing location – either the Bridgetown Community Resource Centre (CRC) or the Bridgetown Greenbushes Business & Tourism Association (BGBTA) would manage

delivery of local visitor information services (including the Jigsaw Gallery) in the existing visitor centre building. The Shire would fund an agreed contribution towards the costs of providing this service.

4. Community managed in refurbished Railway Station – the BGBTA would manage delivery of local visitor information services (including the Jigsaw Gallery) in a redeveloped Railway Station.

In September 2012 Council appointed local architectural firm 'Next Practice' to undertake preliminary design work for the potential relocation of the Bridgetown Visitor Centre to the Bridgetown Railway Station building. Officers liaised with key stakeholders including the Public Transport Authority, State Heritage Council, heritage consultants and the architect during the preliminary design process. Two concept plan options were identified by Council revolving around one differing design component – straight glass or angled glass wall on western side of building.

The architect's preliminary costings report reveals that a project budget in the range of \$600,000 - \$800,000 is suggested to develop the Railway Station into a suitable space for the Visitor Centre. The indicative costing summary reflected a sum of \$680,000 however the degree of variability in accurately quantifying much of the works reflects the need for the suggested budget range.

Key identified areas of variability affecting the total cost include:

- sub floor
- platform edge
- lack of sufficient stormwater system/drainage
- effluent treatment system (mains sewer connection)
- The staggered wall alternative is expected to be in the vicinity

of (an additional) \$20,000 (this option was considered effective to assist mitigate the effect of sunlight on displayed art and jigsaws)

Why the Bridgetown Railway Station as a Shortlisted Visitor Centre Relocation Option?

The Shire of Bridgetown-Greenbushes leases the Bridgetown Railway Station from the State Government's Public Transport Authority. It is on the same lease as the railway car park, town square, railway goods shed and Ashbil Community Garden. Under the terms of the lease the Shire is required to maintain the railway station building. Whilst Council could seek to extinguish the lease and give the building back to the Public Transport Authority it would have to forfeit the whole lease including the car park, etc. This is not considered to be an option therefore the railway station building will have to remain under the control of the Shire.

Council has approached the public transport authority about excising the railway station from the railway reserve in order to create a separate lot in the Shire's name.

The railway station was built in 1898, is listed on the State Heritage Register and is one of the most important heritage buildings in Bridgetown. In recent years the Shire has fenced the building and platform off due to safety concerns but is committed to restoring the building and finding an appropriate community use for it.

To simply restore the building and platform has a broad cost estimate of between \$250,000 and \$350,000. To expend this type of money as well as funding the development of a visitor centre at an alternative location would be beyond Council's current financial capacity

therefore the railway station has been chosen as a shortlisted site for an alternative visitor centre location noting that remaining at the current visitor centre site is also a shortlisted option.

If the railway station was to be selected as the preferred option to house the visitor centre the existing visitor centre building could be sold with the proceeds being put towards the costs of redeveloping the railway station.

Council accepts there may be concerns raised about the potential moving the visitor centre off the main street (Hampton Street) and acknowledges that several tourism studies suggest that moving a Visitor Centre from the main street can negatively affect visitation. Tourism reports also identify that accessible parking including caravan bays, high levels of signage, access to potable water and dump points are factors that can positively affect visitation. The "Town Square" car park area (adjacent to the Railway Station) does afford potable water, has been identified as the site for the installation of a dump point, provides caravan bays as well as a significant number of car parking bays and also offers the recharge station for electric vehicles. Utilising the Railway Station as a Visitor Centre would also offer 'ease of pedestrian access to the 'heart of town' via the ramp and pathway that traverses through the car park next to the bakery providing access to Hampton Street.

Why is an Agency or Community Management Model being Considered?

Up until 2004 the visitor centre was community managed with a membership based group (Bridgetown Greenbushes Tourism Association) operating the facility. A community managed model would allow the local tourism industry to

have real ownership in the operations of the visitor centre and would see the visitor centre structured on a predominantly volunteer model instead of a paid employee model.

An agency management model would see an agency such as the Bridgetown CRC provide visitor information services together with all the other services it currently provides. The CRC already has a structure in place and the provision of visitor information could be done in conjunction with its other functions and services.

Council would significantly assist in funding the operations of the visitor centre under either a community managed or agency managed model.

Conclusion

In providing the community with these options Council is also interested receiving feedback and other ideas from residents on potential options and models of preference.

This newsletter is the initial stage of informing the community regarding important background information of the need to review visitor information services. Opportunities for you to provide feedback through engagement with Councillors and Shire officers are as follows:

1. This newsletter providing information on the 3 management options and the 4 location options.
2. Community survey, via Survey Monkey with provision for hard copy responses or support for people unfamiliar with online surveys.
3. A display and feedback opportunity will be conducted at the Hampton Street Community Stall on Thursday 28 March between 10.30am and 2.30pm.

4. A display and feedback opportunity will be conducted at the River markets on Sunday 7 April.
5. A number of key community groups will be approached to co host consultation sessions with their members
6. Display in foyer of Shire Administration Office and Visitor Centre.
7. A community meeting will be held in Bridgetown on Thursday 2 May commencing at 6pm.

Community Engagement Dates and Report of Findings

The community consultation/engagement will be completed by 30 June 2019. At the conclusion of the community engagement processes a report will be prepared and presented to Council with an overview of the findings of the various forms of community engagement.

To access the online community survey go to:
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/CYNV7Z8>