**Corowa Shire**

**Integrated Planning and Reporting**

**Community Engagement Summary Report**

**February 2012**

**Prepared by Indite Consulting**



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| **1. INTRODUCTION** |

Indite Consulting was engaged in May 2011 to undertake a community engagement process for Corowa Shire Council as part of the Integrated Planning and Reporting legislative requirements in place for all NSW Councils. Indite Consulting was also engaged to support Council in the development of their Community Strategic Plan, Delivery Program and Operational Plan.

The consultation process was to focus on the following points:

* What does the community see as the most significant challenges facing the shire over the next 10 years?
* What are the community’s priorities for the future?
* What is the community’s vision – what is important to them and where would they like to be as a community in 10 years time?
* How will the community, stakeholders and other agencies and organisations be involved in the response to priorities?

The following report outlines the process that was undertaken to gather information on the above points, and outlines that information that was found.

*“I would love to see a vision of 'dream the possibilities, overcome the barriers and embrace the people.'”*

*Community survey comment*

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| **2. METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPATION** |

The following community engagement activities were employed to gather information from a range of stakeholders, user groups and community members. The methods were chosen to facilitate participation from a wide range of community members as well as allowing a choice in the amount and type of input people contributed.

The structure and response of the community engagement was as follows:

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| **Activity** | **Date** | **Location** | **Response** |
| Community Comment Boards | May 2011 | Corowa Racecourse | 150 comments received |
| Community Survey | August – September 2011 | Posted to all households, available on-line and also distributed throughout Council facilities | 230 surveys received |
| Young People Focus Groups | June 2011 | Corowa – with young people from throughout the shire | 45 young people |
| Youth Survey | June 2011 | Distributed to young people throughout the shire | 95 surveys received |
| Primary school consultations | Sept – Oct 2011 | Workshop material sent to schools and completed by students | Over 150 students participated   * South Corowa * Mulwala Primary * Howlong Primary * Corowa Primary |
| Preschool consultation | September 2011 | Workshop was conducted with Corowa Preschool students | 25 children participated |
| Stakeholder Workshops | A number of stakeholder workshops were held covering the areas of:   * Community * Health * Aged services * Children and young people * Sport and recreation * Business | The workshops were held throughout Corowa, Mulwala and Howlong | Over 100 people attended the workshops |
| Business Surveys | August 2011 | Surveys completed by businesses on line. Selected businesses were targeted for phone interviews. | 82 surveys completed |
| Community Action Meetings | September 2011 | Corowa, Howlong and Mulwala | 54 people attended the three meetings |

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| **2.1 Community Survey Responses** |

There were 230 community surveys received for the community survey. The surveys allowed completion by both individuals and families.

**2.1.1 Age**

165 people completed the question asking for their age group.

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| **Age** | **% response** |
| Under 15 years | 0.6% |
| 15 – 30 years | 3.0% |
| 30 – 50 years | 10.3% |
| 50 + years | 70.9% |

**2.1.2 Families**

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| **Family Type** | **Number** |
| Couple | 99 |
| Family with young children | 29 |
| Family with adult children | 15 |

**2.1.3 Community**

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| **Community** | **%** |
| Corowa | 59.0% |
| Howlong | 19.4% |
| Mulwala | 17.1% |
| Savernake | 0.5% |
| Rennie | 1.4% |
| Balldale | 0.5% |
| Coreen | 0.9% |
| Daysdale | 0.5% |
| Buraja/Lowesdale | 0.9% |

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| **3. OUTCOMES** |

The outcomes of the consultation have been grouped into three main areas:

1. Challenges that are facing the community now and into the future
2. Priorities for the future
3. Council Focus

As the consultation was primarily conducted in a qualitative manner, the information below has been presented to highlight the most significant themes that arose from the several thousand comments that were received from surveys, workshops, and meetings.

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| **1. Challenges** |

The following is an overview of the most significant challenges that people, businesses and stakeholders considered to be facing Corowa Shire now and into the future.

The list below relates to challenges that will face individuals, families, communities and Council. Many of the challenges are not specific to Corowa Shire and are relevant on both a regional or national level.

**1. 1. Rising costs and economic downturn**

Throughout the consultation many community members commented on the rising costs of living for families and individuals. Factors such as increasing fuel costs, increasing utility costs and increasing costs relating to education were all mentioned throughout the process as factors that were impacting on families within the shire.

Rising costs we also considered as significant challenges for local businesses. Increases that have already been experienced in fuel and utilities could potentially continue, further decreasing the profitability of businesses. In particular small businesses felt this was likely to affect them and impact on their long term sustainability.

There was also concern expressed throughout the consultation about the global economic down turn and the impact it would have on our community. Concerns relating to job losses, decreases in tourism and decreasing house prices were all considered potential challenges that would affect our community and families.

**1.2. Meeting the needs of an ageing population**

As a community with an ageing population there were many comments made throughout the consultation that highlighted challenges that this demographic could mean for our community.

In particular many people felt that the provision of adequate health and community services to meet the needs of an older population was a concern.

*“Our aging population will have an impact upon services that meet their needs. As these residents age they will be less able or inclined to be involved in the community, volunteer groups etc that they may presently be involved in.”*

*Community survey comment*

Other issues identified for our older residents included challenges such as transport options, isolation, housing and social opportunities.

**1.3. Young people leaving our shire**

Coupled with concern regarding the challenges of an ageing population, many people within the Shire were concerned about our inability to attract and retain young people in the area.

Many people felt that the drift of young people away from the area was primarily linked to the lack of education and professional employment opportunities available within the shire, lack of social and entertainment opportunities and competition from neighbouring shires that present as more ‘dynamic’ places to live for young people.

*“Inability to provide adequate jobs, education and training will see young people and their families move from the area”*

*Community survey comment*

Young people themselves reported that a significant number of them had plans to leave the area at the completion of secondary school (41 out of 45 young people) – whilst this is not uncommon for regional and rural areas it does pose significant challenges that need to be considered in long term planning for the area.

Having a smaller proportion of young people within the shire was a concern for the community for many reasons, most significantly:

* Skill shortages; most significantly in the health and service sectors which would be compounded by the demands placed on these sectors by our growing ageing population.
* Lack of community volunteers; from community groups to local government, people are concerned about the potential lack of young people available to play key roles within the community.
* Attitude and direction; young people can add new and innovative ideas to community discussions and leadership. Many people felt it was important to ensure that young people play a role in setting the direction and priorities of the community.

**1.4. Business attraction and retention**

Attracting and retaining businesses within the shire was considered a long term challenge by not just business owners but also by the wider community. It was acknowledged that as a shire, our ability to compete in the attraction of business and industry would impact on our ability to provide jobs, to support tourism and to encourage population growth.

Throughout the consultations it was highlighted that our ability to attract and retain business was linked to several key factors, all of which could be potential challenges for our community in the future – there challenges are:

* Our ability to provide a skilled and experienced workforce
* Our ability to encourage shoppers locally, especially considering our competition from large regional centres within close driving range
* Our ageing population

**1.5. Access to services**

As a rural community our ability to access services is a significant concern, and many community members are concerned that this challenge will only increase into the future, especially given the increase in demand our ageing population is likely to place on our services.

In particular the long term ability of our community to access quality health and emergency services was highlighted as a potential challenge.

**1.6. Attracting funding for projects**

**1.6.1 Civic projects**

It was raised as a concern throughout the consultation that significant community and civic projects may potentially struggle to attract the necessary funding to allow their implementation.

The most significant projects that the community were concerned about include:

* Corowa Shire Civic Centre
* Corowa Swimming Pool
* Mulwala – Yarrawonga bridge
* Bike trail – Mulwala to Corowa

**1.6.2 Community projects**

It was also raised throughout the consultation that a potential challenge for the community in the future could be the attraction of funding for community based projects – projects set as priorities for community groups, sporting clubs or services groups.

**1.7 Water security**

Water security was raised as a significant community challenge throughout the consultation. Water security, water allocations, rain fall (drought) and the potential impacts of the Murray Darling Basin Plan were all recognised as factors that would not only impact on our agricultural sector but also our tourism industry, our industries and our wider community.

Long term water security was also recognised as an important factor to consider in the growth of our communities into the future.

**1.8. Environmental protection**

The environment was identified as an important part of the community’s identity, the social connections, the recreation opportunities and also the economy – both from an agricultural and tourism perspective.

*“The environment and protection of the river, weed control, pollutants from runoff, impact on river species (fish, frogs, micro organisms), erosion. We need whole community support.”*

*Community Survey comment*

The ability to utilise and still protect the environment was identified as a challenge the community would face into the future. Environmental concerns included protection of our native flora and fauna, protection of our river and waterways, water conservation and weed and pest control.

**1.9. Maintaining and improving community infrastructure**

The Corowa Shire Community recognises that with significant amounts of community infrastructure – in particular an extensive road network – the ability to maintain it long term will be a significant challenge.

*I think that making improvements in the roads, drainage, footpaths and other infrastructure in an area with a relatively low population is the biggest challenge.*

Community survey comment

As the infrastructure and community assets within the shire continue to age it is expected that the costs in maintenance will continue to rise.

It was also recognised that some improvements in existing infrastructure need to be implemented. It was expected that funding these improvements – especially major drainage works – would be a challenge.

**1.10 Embracing change and progression**

Throughout the consultation it was identified that there is the perception that Corowa Shire, and the community within the shire, can be limited in its progressive and innovative thinking for the future.

*“Corowa Shire needs to be more proactive, not stuck in the dark ages. We need new, young communities.”*

Community survey comment

Many community members felt that in order for the shire to reach its potential, as a place to live, a place to visit and a place to do business; a more progressive approach to planning would need to be adopted.

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| **2. Priorities** |

The community priorities have been broken into 5 areas;

* Community
* Environment
* Infrastructure
* Economy
* Government and Services

For each area the top priorities have been listed. The order of the priorities listed under each area reflects the focus the community placed upon them. The list is not exhaustive but gives an indication of the areas most commonly identified by the community.

These priorities have been gathered from the information obtained via the community, business and young people’s surveys; through workshops, meetings and focus groups that were held throughout the shire; from comments community members made throughout the comment board process; and from the drawings and feedback we received from our community’s children.

**2.1 Community**

**2.1.1 Events, festivals and activities**

People throughout the consultation identified that having safe, well run and exciting community events was important not just for the residents of the shire but also for our tourist and visitor attraction.

*“More festivals and events that are targeted at family entertainment”*

Community survey comment

It was highlighted that a variety of events that provided diverse activities, age attraction and were delivered throughout different locations, was a priority.

**2.1.2 Increased utilisation of the River/Lake**

The river area in Corowa and Howlong and the lake in Mulwala were identified as significant community assets and resources within the shire. Better utilisation of these areas from a recreational, tourism and community perspective was identified strongly throughout the consultation as being a significant priority.

*A lot more emphasis on river based tourism and recreation. Better boat ramps and BBQ/picnic facilities. Children’s parks near river with shade areas and adventure equipment for kids and teenaged children. Dedicated skiing areas with good riverbank access. Separate fishing areas with signage and year round ramp access.*

Community survey comment

In particular, young people identified the River as a place they identify with strongly. It is an area where they would like to see an increased focus.

**2.1.3 Growing the population and attracting young families**

Whilst the community acknowledges that Corowa Shire has long been considered a great place to retire, many people feel that there is a need to balance this growth in the retired population with an ability to attract young families to the area as well.

Attracting young families was identified as a priority as it addresses potential future community challenges, especially our ability to provide the workforce and services to support our ageing population into the future.

**2.1.4 Supporting our children and young people**

*“More support for youth organisations like scouts, guides and sport.”*

Community survey comment

Enabling our children and young people to grow up in a community that supports them and provides them with opportunities and skills was a significant priority for the community.

Many people also recognised that it is important to facilitate positive opportunities for families of all ages throughout the shire, through the implementation of appropriate services, programs, activities and facilities. A continued focus on supporting sport and recreational opportunities for our children and young people through the delivery of appropriate facilities and infrastructure was considered important.

**2.1.5 Support for our rural communities**

As a shire with three larger towns, several smaller outlying rural communities and significant rural (farming) areas, it was identified throughout the consultation as being important to balance the needs and prioritise of both rural and town communities.

Whilst in was acknowledged that many people within the rural areas utilise and benefit from the services and facilities provided within the larger townships, the unique needs and priorities of the rural community need to be considered in long term planning.

**2.1.6 Vibrant and thriving communities**

*“At the moment there is a lack of sustainable, strong planning and vision for the community. The community is a very generous and motivated community but at times it doesn’t seem like there is much support or encouragement for groups that work hard in the community and are vital for community sustainability.”*

*Community survey comment*

Being progressive and innovative was identified as a priority for the future throughout the consultation. It was considered that being able to realise our potential as a dynamic and vibrant community would facilitate growth in both our residential and business communities.

It was also identified as a priority to have communities that are active and engaged. Strong community groups, high levels of volunteering and increased focus on community driven projects were all identified as priorities for the future.

**2.2 Environment**

**2.2.1 Protect the river/lake**

Whilst the utilisation of the river and lake was repeatedly mentioned throughout the consultation as being a priority, from an environmental perspective it was considered imperative that this usage is balanced with protection and respect for the environment.

Protection of the water quality, the aquatic wildlife and the land surrounding the river and lake were all identified as priorities for the community.

**2.2.2 Weed eradication**

The control of and protection from weeds throughout the shire was a priority that was raised most significantly by our rural communities. The impact of weeds on the agricultural sector can be quiet significant.

**2.2.3 Rubbish and littering**

Keeping our communities clean and free from rubbish was a priority raised throughout the consultation. In particular the increased amount of litter that is experienced in our townships throughout the tourist season was a concern.

**2.2.4 Innovative energy solutions**

Identify ways in which the communities within the shire can develop sustainable environmental practices was identified as a priority – especially in light of the number of significant high level environmental policies under community review at the time of the consultation; including the Murray Darling Basin Plan and the Federal Government’s Carbon Tax Policy.

* 1. **Infrastructure**

**2.3.1 Roads – town and rural**

The quality and standard of roads throughout the shire was the most significant infrastructure priority raised throughout the consultation. In particular the quality of the shire’s rural roads was most often raised. Whilst the consultation did highlight some roads that were repeatedly identified as significant areas of concern (such as the Corowa/Berrigan Rd), the community more broadly identified the general priority to have consistently well maintained roads throughout the shire.

Roads were most often raised as a priority in responses received from community members from rural areas of the shire.

**2.3.2 Swimming Pool**

The Corowa Swimming Pool was raised as a priority from community members throughout the shire. The long term future of the facility has received significant community attention over the last several years and this was reflected throughout the consultation.

Community comments were varied on the pool, with some identifying the priority to have the site and facility secured in its current form for long term use, others considered it a priority to explore upgrades such as an increase in size, heating the pool and undertaking significant upgrades to the supporting assets at the facility (such as waterslides, etc)

**2.3.3 Footpaths, bike tracks and walking paths**

*“Better pedestrian connectivity of street networks”*

Community survey comment

The ability to move around the shire via footpaths, walking track and bike paths was one of the most consistently raised priorities throughout the consultation.

From accessibility, health, tourism, youth and economic perspectives, people from all areas of the community identified the need to ensure that the path network throughout the shire was versatile, high quality and continually developed.

**2.3.4 Bridges**

As a border shire the bridges were identified as significant community assets. One of the most significant priorities raised by the Mulwala community was the upgrade of the bridge.

**2.3.5 Community Infrastructure**

Infrastructure and services such as water, sewage, guttering and drainage were consistently raised as priorities for the community.

It was a priority of the community that not only is the infrastructure maintained to a high standard now but that it is planned and developed to accommodate the future demands of a growing population.

**2.3.6 Playgrounds and open space**

The development of playgrounds throughout the shire was identified as a priority - in particular playgrounds that supported family interaction, with supporting community infrastructure such as toilets, shade, seating, etc.

A variety of sites and playground types were discussed throughout the consultation. It was identified that a community/business partnership could be a potential enabler of the development of a large scale playground within the shire.

**2.4 Economy**

**2.4.1 Tourist attractions/tourism**

The community within the Corowa Shire, including the business community, strongly recognise the importance and the potential of the tourism sector. Increasing the attractiveness of the shire for tourists and visitors was a significant priority and related to the following points:

* Increasing the trading hours of retailers within our CBD – especially on weekends.
* Increasing the variety and number of food and cafe vendors within the shire
* Increasing the number of events and attractions within the shire

**2.4.2 Vibrant and exciting CBD’s**

*“More shops open Saturday and Sunday. Alfresco dining for all streets of Corowa for ourselves and to encourage tourists. Better restaurants, music in the main street and recordings of what is coming up in our town.”*

Community survey comment

There were suggestions made and priorities identified for all three of the main streets within the shire – Howlong, Corowa and Mulwala. The general view was that the CBDs should be exciting places where people (community members and tourists) go to spend time, as opposed to just go to buy necessities.

The main streets of the towns within our shire are a significant community asset and it was strongly identified that they should be places with clear identities, character and appeal.

**2.4.3 Increased businesses and industry**

*“Re-invigorated economic growth that benefits the whole community into the future. This requires strong focus on industries & businesses that will grow strongly into the future to create employment & community benefit opportunities.*

*A much stronger emphasis on embracing change, developing tourism and value added opportunities should be part of the long term future.”*

Community survey comment

People throughout the consultation felt that increasing the amount of business and industry within the shire would have positive and long lasting benefits for our community. Most significantly people felt that an increase in industry would increase the job opportunities (both skilled and unskilled) available within the shire. It was also considered that an increase in business and industry would support our long term economic sustainability and viability as a community.

The priority of increasing the industry and business within the shire related not just to large scale industry, but also to supporting and encouraging a range of small and medium sized businesses within the shire. In particular supporting an increase in retail and hospitality businesses that would support our tourism sector was identified as a significant priority.

**2.4.4 Foreshore commercial developments**

Foreshore developments were raised consistently throughout the consultation as priorities – especially for the communities of Corowa and Mulwala. The use and promotion of the foreshore, and the potential to develop these areas into significant community and tourist areas was repeatedly raised as a priority. Comments relating to foreshore developments generally referred to the need to develop activities/infrastructure on the sites including:

* Retail – in particular cafe and restaurant development
* Children play areas/play grounds
* Seating
* Landscaping (similar to Lagoon area)
* Paths, tracks, etc

**2.5 Government and Services**

**2.5.1 Maintaining and increasing access to services**

As a rural area, the ability to access high quality services is important. It was recognised that the ability to access health, education and community services is not just incredibly important to our wellbeing and health but also to our long term sustainability and ability to attract new residents.

It was a high priority of the community that the ability to access services locally remains possible. In particular, the ability to access aged care services (health, housing and support services) and children’s services was important. Attracting and retaining General Practitioners was also identified as a priority for the community.

**2.5.2 Community engagement and consultation**

*“Utilisation of people in Shire - Clear communication with community members, and subsequent decisions that reflect that people have been heard will lead to increased community participation and support. We have some super people in our midst... we need to harness their enthusiasm and involve them in decision making. We need to also remember to build opportunities for people to come together eg central hub.”*

Community survey comment

This community engagement process highlighted the strengths that the community sees in their ability to meaningfully participate in planning for the future. It was consistently recognised that the ability for the community to communicate with Council and other levels of government on areas of concern, and key community projects would strengthen the outcomes for the community.

**2.5.3 Visible police presence**

*“We need improvement in police attendance in police station, to enable better community access to police.”*

Community survey comment

Maintaining a safe community for many people linked directly back to the ability to access police services. There were comments throughout the consultation that indicated that some communities would like a more visible police presence, especially at key tourist times.

Some community members felt that petty crime, vandalism and anti-social behaviour could be tackled in a more direct way with the input of available police.

**2.5.6 Cross-border relationships/partnerships**

Being a border shire means that there are significant cross border issues and anomalies that impact on the community – including differences in legislation, laws, and access to services. It was recognised that whilst the issue is primarily at a state level, it is a priority of the community that these challenges are continually addresses and responded to.

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| **3. Council Focus** |

The previous table shows the community’s responses to the survey question asking them to highlight how important they felt it was for Council to focus on each of the areas. As can be seen, the area with the highest proportion of people rating it in the ‘very important’ category was ‘retaining/improving access to health and medical services’ , followed by ‘maintaining and securing water’, then ‘attracting new business and supporting existing business’ and ‘education’.

The area that was rated in the ‘very important’ category least often was ‘Arts and Culture’ and then ‘History and heritage’.