Building Lives, Building Community

in South Morang, Mernda/Doreen and Whittlesea township growth areas
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1.1 Introduction

This is the second report of the ‘Building Lives, Building Community’ project and presents data from the City of Whittlesea/Plenty Road Growth Area. This project was funded by The Salvation Army, Crossroads Youth and Family Services and undertaken by the McCaughey Centre; VicHealth Centre for the Promotion of Mental Health and Community Wellbeing, University of Melbourne. The first report, released in August 2009, presented the findings from the project located in the City of Hume -Craigieburn/Roxburgh Park. This second report presents the findings of the project on South Morang, Mernda/Doreen and Whittlesea Township.

1.2 Why the study: context and rationale

This project is about the effect of population growth on communities and the social factors which influence how suburbs grow from small townships to larger suburbs. The project has its origins in the issues identified by Crossroads Youth and Family Services, a program of The Salvation Army. It sought innovative ethnographic research to develop a deeper understanding of the demographic shifts which are taking place in the outer northern growth corridors. This research is therefore less about service delivery needs, but more about the ways the local communities are forming attachments to place and to each other in the growth areas. It suggests that community building needs to be considered as an essential part of the development of new urban fringe communities, and key players such as local, state and federal governments, developers and local community agencies are all shapers of the current experiences of residents in new growth areas such as Whittlesea.

While service data can begin to tell the story of this change, it is the everyday experiences of people living in outer northern areas which are perhaps less understood and which can tell us how services and community resources are being experienced. This research makes a contribution to the wider policy discussions of social cohesion and community building in the urban fringe.

This research also provides insight to the issues faced by young people raised in the urban fringe areas. Government projections suggest that, in Whittlesea North, the numbers of young people aged 15 to 19 could increase from 1 807 in 2006 to 9 741 in 2026 (DPCD 2008). The area of Craigieburn is also projected to see an increase in this age group from 4 608 in 2006 to 9 491 in 2026. Between 2001 and 2006, over 50 per cent of Australia’s population growth was in the areas known as urban growth zones (National Growth Areas Alliance 2007). Nationally, it has been estimated that new urban communities on the city fringe represent 22.6% of the nation’s population. This is expected to rise to 25.8% by 2022. In total, over 1.4 million new residents are expected in growth areas in the next 15 years (National Growth Areas Alliance, 2007). With one in four Australians living in areas on the urban fringe, it is timely to learn more about what is important to these communities.

With 93,500 more people locating in Melbourne between 2008 and 2009, Melbourne has seen the biggest population growth of any Australian city. Sixty per cent of this growth was at least 20 kilometers from the city. These figures should be used with caution. According to the DSE website, “Victoria in Future 2008 - first release population projections are not predictions of the future, nor are they targets. They analyse changing economic and social structures and other drivers of demographic trends to indicate possible future populations if the present identified demographic and social trends continue.” (http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/CA256F310024BE28/0/DC43CE81BE641BEDCA257640002075B6/$File/VIF2008+Projected+Population+by+5yr+Age+Groups+and+Sex+-+SLA+LGA+SSD+SD+2006-2026.xls)
Planning for new communities needs to cater for all ages and ensure infrastructure is suitable for children and young people, as well as older singles, different cultural groups and people seeking affordable rental as well as new home buyers. Therefore the question of infrastructure, both social (in terms of community organizations and services) as well as physical (especially transport and housing), needs to be foremost in discussions of what the future holds for new urban fringe communities.

The ‘Melbourne 2030 Strategy’, released by the Victorian Government in 2002, identified that the development of growth areas would continue to grow but at a slower rate as before. In 2005, the Victorian Government released ‘A Plan for Melbourne’s Growth Areas’ which sought to ensure:

- the release of new land to protect housing affordability and provide adequate land for industrial uses and employment creation over the next 25 years and beyond
- long-term plans to provide certainty about the direction of future growth
- a new Growth Areas Authority that will help streamline processes and support councils, developers and the community to ensure new neighbourhoods are well planned and that new communities receive the services and infrastructure they need sooner
- a new partnership approach to infrastructure provision that builds on existing arrangements and ensures that developers in growth areas provide a fair contribution towards the provision of infrastructure.

In 2010, the State Government endorsed the extension of boundary of city to provide for an additional 134,000 new houses on the city’s periphery. The rationale for opening up more land in ‘Melbourne at 2030. A Planning Update’ was that population growth continues to exceed expectations, with Melbourne reaching 5 million in the next ten to twenty years. The development of this land has meant that Melbourne now is one of the world’s largest cities, spreading 100 kilometers from west to east.

While there are many flocking to these new housing estates, a number of studies warn of social fragmentation accompanying the creation of new communities on the urban fringe. The arrival of infrastructure also tends to lag behind the area’s establishment (OSISDC 2006), and there can be challenges developing social cohesion when newer residents and longer-term residents attempt to build a shared vision for new areas (Windermere 2010). Social planners are also concerned about isolation, disadvantage and disconnection which are of a different nature to those traditionally understood by existing community development models emerging.

Moreover, there are new inter-suburb dynamics occurring between the new communities and also between the fringe suburbs and those which many residents are leaving. While population levels on urban fringe areas from the 1980s have risen, there has been a decline in the population of many inner, middle and even some outer suburbs (CSIRO 2001). Concern about rapid development has been confirmed by studies that increasingly characterise these areas as experiencing new forms of disadvantage (Dodson and Snipe 2008). They pose a challenge for those with a stake in new communities to collaborate on strategies that build cohesive communities. Research has stressed there are different cultures which form due to different motivations for moving to the urban fringe, such as forced re-locations due to housing costs and those who chose freely to seek a counter-urban lifestyle (Land and Water Australia 2008).

This study sets out to go beneath the general picture of urban growth as a homogenous process and to explore the experiences and aspirations of those who live in suburbs in transition. The experiences of these communities offer lessons for planners about how communities are forming and facing rapid transition. However, it is up to the three levels of government, housing developers and community groups to continue to engage residents on the issues affecting them and to work together on building community cohesion.
1.3 Methodology and its strengths and weaknesses

This project was a small-scale qualitative research project which intended to generate themes which provide insights into the experiences of participants and the ways they understand their environment (Denzin and Lincoln 2003).

This project involved a small self-selected sample of residents in three suburbs, South Morang, Mernda/Doreen and Whittlesea township, to expand on the broader themes identified in the Craigieburn/Roxburgh Park research which related to young people living in the context of families facing potential social and economic vulnerability. These suburbs were selected by Crossroads as areas that are experiencing rapid change and transformation.

The township of Whittlesea, while protected by planning regulations that maintain its size, was included as a contrast to areas that are designated as growth areas. During the early stages of site selection, the bush fires of Black Saturday (7 February 2009) occurred, bringing a new and unanticipated relevance for including Whittlesea township. It was decided to exercise discretion and respect for the tragic events that took place in the surrounding areas and to keep consultations to a minimum and avoid overburdening the community. Nevertheless, the research did uncover issues related to the bush fires which are discussed in this report.

A wide recruitment strategy was adopted to maximize the backgrounds of participants. The researcher, along with a research assistant, conducted interviews with 46 residents in both one-on-one and focus groups, and 10 service providers. The site and form of these interviews are listed below, with the numbers involved provided in brackets:

Research participants:
- one focus group with young people from the Whittlesea township and surrounds [described in the report as Whittlesea young people’s focus group 2] (4)
- one focus group with young people from Whittlesea township, Mernda and South Morang (15 people)
- ten interviews with parents of 12-18 year-olds, (3 from Laurimar, 3 from Mernda [one was the Secretary of the Mernda Residents’ Association], 2 from Whittlesea township [these were interviewed together in a small focus group], 1 from South Morang),
  - One interview with a young person from Mernda, and
  - ten consultations with service providers.

Thirty three (33) young people ranging from 11 to 21 year olds were involved in focus groups. The focus groups contained a mix of males and females.

Service provider participants:
The service providers were from:
- Plenty Valley Salvation Army
- Laurimar/Delfin
- Kildonan UnitingCare
- Whittlesea Council Youth Services
- Whittlesea Bushfire Recovery
- Melbourne City Mission
- Plenty Valley Community Health
- Whittlesea Township Bushfire Recovery Wellbeing and Mental Health Working Party

Recruitment of participants was sought through a number of agencies. The sample came from a wide range of backgrounds, and had lived in the area for periods ranging from one year to thirty years. A small number, who had recently moved out from the specific suburbs of the study, were included as their perceptions of change in the area added another dimension to the research.

The range of perspectives means that the study was informed by those who had recently moved to the area, and those who had lived in the area for many years. The small sample makes generalizations difficult to make, but offers themes for further development and testing in future research.
1.4 About the study areas

The City of Whittlesea is identified as a growth area council alongside Hume, Casey/Cardinia, Wyndham and Melton/Caroline Springs.

The three study suburbs were identified as examples of communities in transition and at risk of social infrastructure deficiencies in the next five years or so because of rapid growth and new housing estates bringing large numbers of households together.

The following table provides their population from 1981 to 2006, as well as forecast populations for 2021.

Table One: Population growth from 1981 to 2021

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South Morang</td>
<td>1,053</td>
<td>1,209</td>
<td>1,256</td>
<td>2,369</td>
<td>5,166</td>
<td>12,252</td>
<td>20,998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whittlesea township</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,373</td>
<td>3,412</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6,304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mernda</td>
<td>627</td>
<td>831</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mernda/Doreen total: 44,683</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The population of these locations are set to grow in the next twenty or so years at such a rapid rate that resident concerns expressed now may get lost in the higher level planning, building and area development which will inevitably accompany growth. The challenge is to develop mechanisms to link the day-to-day reality of life in these suburbs with the macro-level context in which growth area planning is taking place. These three areas are described in more detail below:

South Morang: Located 23 kilometers from the CBD, this suburb grew from 5,166 in 2001 to 12,252 in 2006 and is forecast to grow to 20,998 in 2021. It is anticipated that the Epping rail line will extend to South Morang in the near future. It is experiencing rapid growth due to the availability of the Plenty Valley Westfield Shopping Centre and proximity to the Western Ring Road and public transport. Table One shows that South Morang has the highest proportion of young people aged under 24 of all three areas. It also has the highest percentage of couple families living with children at home and highest percentage of houses being purchased.
Mernda: Mernda is located 31 kilometers from the CBD and, combined with Doreen, is predicted to grow to 44,683 by 2021. It has been populated for many years in an old ‘township’ that is now known as ‘old Mernda’ and distinguished from the housing estates being developed in the area. In this research, people from the ‘old’ Mernda are identified as such, to indicate contacts with those living in newer housing estates such as Laurimar and Mernda Villages.

Whittlesea township: This suburb is located 40 kilometers from Melbourne and is out of the urban growth boundary of Melbourne, so its population is not predicted to rise as the other areas. However, it is facing change as a result of the new communities being formed in this growth corridor. It has also acted as a central meeting point during the bush fires of February 2009 and its experience of community-building after this event provides the study with some important insights facing the urban fringe in the light of drought and increased fire-risk.

The following table gives an indication of the population in each of these areas and their demographic features:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mernda</th>
<th>South Morang</th>
<th>Whittlesea township</th>
<th>Melbourne average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>830</td>
<td>12,323</td>
<td>4,563</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% under 24</td>
<td>37.6%</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% born in Australia</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>75.9%</td>
<td>82.7%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% couple family with children</td>
<td>57.4%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>51.6%</td>
<td>48.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% houses being purchased</td>
<td>48.9%</td>
<td>63.3%</td>
<td>44.5%</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% paying less than 30% of income on housing costs</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median weekly household income</td>
<td>$1072</td>
<td>$1243</td>
<td>$1070</td>
<td>$1079</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compared to the Melbourne average, they are more likely to be living in houses being purchased, earn an average income and be a couple family with children. It also has a younger age structure than Metropolitan Melbourne. These characteristics tend to be shared with many of Melbourne’s growth areas.

While Whittlesea LGA is one of the most multicultural municipalities in Victoria, the three areas focused on this study had a higher percentage of people born in Australia than the Melbourne average. The issue of mortgage stress, also often noted in urban fringe communities, did not emerge as a strong theme in this study.

The areas offer close studies of communities in transition and aim to build a picture of the general hopes and concerns of residents. In order to provide a lens through which to assess the concerns and experiences of residents, the project looked at the needs of young people aged 12 to 18 who face specific disadvantages in urban fringe communities.
1.5 Whittlesea and its changing environment

This study has taken into account the broader context of the City of Whittlesea which in 2006 had a population of 124,647 and, with the new growth boundary, is expected to grow to 298,458 by 2030. The area has a diverse cultural population, with 29.6% of its residents born in a non-English speaking country. Birthplaces include Italy, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece and Vietnam. It has also hosts those recently arrived from India and Sri Lanka.

The area has diverse environmental features, with one third urban and the rest rural or bushland. It was developed from the 1970s with the northern area, the subject of this study, being delayed by the difficult landscape and the stretch of volcanic rock which has determined land use. This has retained a rural environment. Many parts are only now being opened up for new housing.

The Whittlesea LGA is characterized by two very distinct growth arterials: Plenty Road, and High Street/Epping North. These two areas are connected by McDonalds Road, but are developing distinct identities. South Morang is divided between the ‘established areas’ south of McDonalds Road and the ‘growth areas’ to the north. The following map illustrates the north-south spread of suburbs and where the study areas are located.

Being an urban interface Council, the City of Whittlesea is challenged by a wide variety of social issues. In 2009, the City of Whittlesea released a Strategic Community Plan called ‘Shaping our future’ which drew on consultations with over 650 people across the municipality. The policy framework which emerged, ‘Shaping Our Future 2025’ articulated the following key themes:

- Inclusive and engaged community
- Accessibility
- Growing our economy
- Places and spaces to connect people
- Health and wellbeing
- Living sustainably.

These broad areas indicate Councils priorities for the next fifteen years across the whole LGA. The need to develop an inclusive and engaged community is particularly relevant in rapidly-growing areas where it can take time to develop shared community identity and connections between residents.

Community engagement can take a number of forms. While some agencies report a high level of community involvement in Whittlesea (Whittlesea Community Connections 2007), it is widely recognized that opportunities for community involvement in local groups or activities can be restricted in areas where services and community meeting places are not yet established. In a random telephone survey conducted in 2007 by Whittlesea Community Connections, a range of barriers to community engagement were raised across the LGA:

1. Work commitments
2. Caring responsibilities
3. Lack of local opportunities
4. Lack of appropriate information
5. Lack of transport

In addition, the specific needs of young people are one of the priorities for the Council. At a forum called ‘Shaping your community’ held in 2009, young people identified a number of strengths and challenges. The following lists were compiled as a summary of some of the issues raised by young people through this consultation (City of Whittlesea 2009):

- Work commitments
- Caring responsibilities
- Lack of local opportunities
- Lack of appropriate information
- Lack of transport
Broadly: the things appreciated about the City of Whittlesea

- Recognition of the first people of Australia
- The harmony and diversity of the population. This was overwhelmingly the most highly valued aspect of the municipality.
- High quality social and physical infrastructure.
- The natural environment and sustainability efforts.
- An established consultative culture and opportunities for democratic participation.
- High numbers of the elderly and young people.
- Council is perceived as progressive

Specifically there is concern about

- Population growth in the municipality
- Lack of transport
- Affordable housing
- Access to jobs
- Safety
- Destruction of indigenous bush
- Mental and physical health services
- Need for community connection
- Reconceptualised services

Specific concerns regarding young people

- More things to do for young people under 18 years old
- More opportunities for young people with disability in the municipality
- Support for international students
- More social responsibility for young people and opportunities for young people to contribute in planning
- Better education options, learning support, and community interaction with schools
- Better understanding of young people by adults
- Support for parents and families
- More youth workers
- More laughter

The needs of young people in the new Laurimar, of the new housing estates in Mernda/Doreen, have also been identified as needing particular attention. A consultation with young people was held in 2008 in the Doreen/Laurimar area. In 2008 the area had 2,500 residents, and its population was expected to increase to 15,000 over the next five years. The City of Whittlesea and Delfin conducted the consultation to inform the building of community infrastructure which is inclusive of young people. The notes from that concluded that the following issues needed addressing:

- Walking and bike paths
- Safety
- Traffic management
- Sports and playing fields
- Outdoor facilities
- Flexible indoor spaces
- Transport
- Aquatic facilities
- Environment
- Communication
- Meeting places
- Decision making structures

Many of the themes for the growth areas relate to the appeal of affordable housing in attractive physical environments with a rural atmosphere. However, there are differences across housing estates, with some attracting families drawn by the country feel and quality of houses, and others drawn by access to services.
PART 2 NEW SETTLERS AND CHANGING TOWNSHIPS

Amongst the sample involved in this study were three identifiable reactions to the social change they saw about them. There were those who moved to the area to find affordable housing or to accommodate growing families and who felt optimistic about the future; there were those facing challenges in dealing with the transition they saw taking place in their environment, and finally there were those who had specific infrastructure needs that they felt were not provided for in their area. This section considers the first two groups and the social dynamics which accompany population growth. The following section turns to the infrastructure gaps identified by residents and services providers.

2.1 Hope and anticipation

At the centre of this research project are three communities, each facing change due to population growth. Each suburb is facing transition from semi-rural to urban suburbs and as such face challenges when new settlers arrive in already established communities. High expectations and aspirations for new housing estates are part of the experience of moving to the urban fringe.

One of the attractions for new housing estates is that the buyer is investing in a quality neighbourhood where the developer has designed and planned for the future, and where the natural environment is integrated into the design. Residents expressed a strong attraction to these elements of the area. This desire to preserve the initial character of the area was summed up in an interview with a parent who lived in one of the new housing estates:

It’s so country and it’s just beautiful out here. (parent 1 in Doreen)

The country atmosphere, coupled with a confidence in the planning for the future, had inspired them to buy there because it offered space for their children to play outside:

I’ve got three sons and they love playing cricket and things they sounded like they really had planned it out well and I like the look of it, and then the blocks were cheap. (parent 3 in Doreen)

The child-friendly design of the area also appealed to this buyer:

We wanted a court location because of the kids, there’s parks all around us. The bus stops over at the post office and Mernda Primary is close. My son was in primary school so it meant that he could walk to school every day it took the pressure off having to get at least one kid anywhere. (parent 2 Mernda)

In contrast, another family moved to the older part of Mernda 15 years ago and said that the house itself was what they could afford at the time:

At that time there was a nice green belt between the suburbs and Mernda it was still – you could walk to the end of our street and there was paddocks. The house was what we could afford and at that stage it was a reasonable run into the city. (long-term Mernda resident 1)

The physical design of the area, and the opportunity to build a house from scratch, also suited this new Mernda parent who had a child with special needs:

One of the reasons for us coming out here was my son because it is so quiet out here and we can have the kind of house we want all I have to do is put a ramp and a rail on the front door and we can get a wheelchair in and out. The hallway is wide enough to fit his wheelchair, we can renovate the bathroom to make it disabled friendly – (new Mernda resident)
Finally, the appeal of wanting a new house is in itself a reason for moving to a new area:

Moving out to South Morang was an opportunity to get a bigger home and a nicer home.
(South Morang parent)

Moving to a new area therefore involves a great deal of confidence that the quality and design initially promised will be protected in the longer term. One respondent, who has lived in South Morang for some years, reported that it had improved over time:

From my point of view the estate has become a lot nicer than I thought. It's actually quite pretty for an outer suburbs,
(Parent, South Morang)

Residents hold a great deal of trust in the developer to maintain and protect the semi-rural qualities that residents had chosen when they first moved to the urban fringe suburbs. It is important that this trust is respected in the long term and that further population growth is introduced carefully. For these residents, the optimism and aspirations they have for the area are an asset which planners and developers can use to foster community pride and a shared vision for the future of the community.

2.2 Sense of change amongst longer term residents

There are clearly anxieties about changes that can take place when the estates grow and housing design styles adapt to suit different markets. The issue for community builders in new areas, especially developers, is to communicate effectively with residents about likely changes. While the ‘country’ atmosphere is a fragile quality that residents wish to protect, the urban amenity is also an essential part of a growing suburb.

The transition of a community on the urban fringe to a more heavily populated area can impact on people in a range of ways, including the loss of what was initially sought in moving to the area. For one resident, the change in the country atmosphere in their local area impacted on their future vision for the area:

We got a fright that our parkland’s going and [there will be] smaller properties. (parent 3 in Doreen)

One of the longer-term respondents felt that the clash between the area’s past and the new housing was affecting its appeal to others.

R: The area’s changed a lot. Bit sad that this area was used for housing when it was such prime farmland. All the farmers have had to move out. That’s a bit disappointing.
(parent 2 moved out of Doreen)

This respondent had previously lived in Doreen and now moved to a nearby suburb with more land, but recalled the experience was one of country farm living:

It was just a little old farm house that had mice coming in and snakes, I even had a snake in the kitchen drawer, and I think people always just felt welcome. (parent 2 moved out of Doreen)

The respondent noted that the change was about community feel, the increase in the population necessarily leading to a sense of living in a suburb rather than a place where you would see people you knew at the shops or post office:

R: Usually when you go to the post office there’d be somebody there that you knew
F: So you don’t see people you know there anymore?
R: No, sometimes I see some kids from the school but it’s just busier (parent 2 moved out of Doreen)

A young person in a focus group also raised this as an issue for them.

R: What’s really annoying to me is that they’re making so many estates
R: Too cramped (exchange between 2 young people in a Mernda focus group)
Another exchange in the Mernda young person’s focus group gives the impression of how development is a contested issue, even amongst young people:

R: I don’t want it to become a developed area. You come over the hill and all you see roads and houses and its – ten years ago it wasn’t here. It was much prettier back then

(exchange between two young people in Mernda focus group)

Parents in Whittlesea township also felt uncertain about the impact of population growth, and were aware that their suburb was likely to expand as it offered affordable land:

R2: The further out you go the cheaper the house and land packages are– it’s chaos with the traffic now cause we’ve got a bad intersection there they haven’t improved.

But they agreed that more housing in their area was inevitable, and they were cynical about the long-term green belt between Whittlesea township being maintained in the long term:

There’ll be a lot more people living up there, a lot more estates (Whittlesea parents focus group)

Currently, the Whittlesea Township community, according to young people consulted, was a tight knit community. For example, one young person observed that the way to get a job was to know the right person. While it had experienced some population growth, residents felt that the encroaching housing would have to finally reach it.

For one longer-term resident of Mernda, the significant changes in their area were causing them to think of moving, and this was particularly related to the demand on the roads:

R: We’re thinking of moving again. It’s now no longer pleasant. It’s this approach to new housing where they put all the new houses in and then build all the roads to suit it afterwards onto the single lane over-crowded badly maintained (long term Mernda parent 1).

This same resident explained how they considered the local infrastructure in the old part of the suburb being replaced with new versions on the new part:

The old part of Mernda’s really gonna become the second class part of Mernda, all the new stuffs gonna be put across the road and the older houses will either be bulldozed and replaced (long term Mernda parent 1).

‘Over the road’, which in the case of Mernda is Plenty Road, has the potential to create a divide between old and new parts of the suburb. However there was not a simple correlation between length of time living in the area and dissatisfaction with population growth: some longer term residents were very optimistic about the future of the area. Nevertheless, some residents who had moved to the area for a country life-style could see the area no longer catering to their original motivations for moving to the urban fringe.

Longer-term residents are also a critical resource for the future of the area. They can bring strong emotional and financial investment in the area, often want their children to be able to stay in the area when they become independent and may have strong social ties. The key issue for community stakeholders is how to best forge a shared identity between old and new parts of the suburb. The research suggests that communication with residents about change before it takes place is critical. In addition, binding strategies, such as community events, local newspapers or interest-based groups such as cooking, gardening, or cycling, can also work to improve a sense of shared space between newer arrivals and the longer term residents. There is clearly a role for community builders at a local level to undertake community development activities that protect against local resentments and divisions and promote a sense of trust, safety and cohesion across old and new groups.
PART 3
INFRASTRUCTURE AND PLACE-BUILDING

While there are different viewpoints on the impact of population growth in the area, social and physical infrastructure can create connecting points for new arrivals to find the sense of place already established in the township. This research highlighted the way the various elements intersect in people's lives and the meanings they ascribed to community, social and physical resources in their local area. This section begins with a discussion of some of the issues identified by representatives from local community service providers, and then considers the physical infrastructure important to the residents, namely housing and transport.

3.1 Timing of bringing in new community services

Many residents expressed the challenges they face with accessing community services. Local services do not yet meet the variety of interests and needs of the residents consulted. Residents spoke of the challenges of having to drive to health services, specialist services such as disability or counselling, or to participate in a sport or recreational interest. For these parents of young people, and young people themselves, the local resources in the area were still undeveloped.

The availability of community support services, and the difficulties faced by service providers planning needs for new communities, are key concerns for the government. As the Victorian Government has recognized, the human service system needs to adapt to the rapid population growth anticipated in areas such as Whittlesea (see DHS 2008). Non-government service providers tend to operate at the tertiary end of the service spectrum, responding to issues such as housing or financial needs, violence, homelessness, mental health or substance abuse. However, as critical as these services are, this research has also explored the connecting points between the community and the service system. What are the issues within this community that impact on the way the service system is perceived and used by residents?

The services consulted for this project also brought a range of perspectives to this research project. Their challenges, discussed below, stem from the concentration of publicly funded human services in the middle and inner suburbs of Melbourne. In Whittlesea, this leaves service provision primarily based in the southern and middle part of the LGA. However, attempts to engage the residents of the growth areas have demonstrated that this concentration is not sustainable. Some residents said they knew of people who had left the area because of the lack of health services.

Representatives from the human services sector were clear that rapidly growing areas need to be planned with reference to benchmarks that can trigger when and where new services develop. There have been efforts to co-ordinate planning on a local level, with Whittlesea Community Futures, auspiced by the Council, providing a key platform for discussing local issues of concern to community stakeholders. The Growth Areas Authority is also actively involved with linking relevant government departments around these issues.

Alongside the need to plan services which are viable, integrated and responsive, service providers raised the need for more services to address unmet need. One service provider reported that if a new community health centre was set up in South Morang, it could easily be filled up with clients. Residents themselves also spoke of the need for more local facilities to act as a base for a wider group of professionals to access the community. Given this potential high demand, service providers articulated a desire for more early intervention and community outreach to attend to problems before they required crisis support. However, some parents expressed a different view, stating that they felt that there was a perception that some community services were used by ‘troubled kids’. This created a barrier which impacted on local services attempting to engage young people. This research project identified the importance of delivering new services in less stigmatizing settings, such as those located at the ‘Edge’ led to better integration into the local community.
Nevertheless, there were still potential barriers to accessing this service because of the negative associations that people may have with existing services. For example, one parent from South Morang observed how hard it was to encourage her children to use youth services due to an image her children had that these groups were for ‘emo’ or ‘loser’ kids. Service providers felt that the area’s social needs were difficult to identify as many households, especially in the new communities, were working long hours to maintain their housing repayments.

Because there is an awareness that the growth areas are planned to increase over the next few years, service providers spoke of the importance of infrastructure keeping up with the population. The internal migration within the LGA meant that families may maintain their links with the southern suburbs because of the lack of facilities in the growth areas. This reduces the opportunity for local connections within the local area of the new housing estates.

3.2 Physical infrastructure

The service providers consulted for this research also highlighted the enormous needs in the area for affordable housing, transport, social support, and homelessness. In particular, the service providers discussed a number of issues facing the community which impact on the community’s capacity to support young people.

Along with community services, physical infrastructure, especially housing and transport, were critical elements for residents in how they felt about their area. One resident observed that the design of the new communities was problematic because ‘Everything is set up for driving; the walking paths are just a relaxation thing’. The capacity of Plenty Road was a major issue for residents.

Service providers also identified a critical lack of affordable housing in the area. For some new emerging cultural groups in the area who have large families, house sizes are too small especially when five or more bedrooms are required to accommodate large extended families or large numbers of children. Others were concerned that public housing, rental accommodation or, in one case, short-term hotels for visitors from interstate, were not locally available. This was also raised by young people, who felt worried that if they needed to move out of home, they would have to leave the area.

The other issue that is already beginning to be understood is the impact of housing diversity and mix in established areas and the importance of managing community cohesion in areas experiencing a different sort of demographic trend. Rather than attracting young families, some parts of Whittlesea township and South Morang will experience an aging population, declining household size, reduced incomes and a significant unmet demand for low-cost rental. These areas are two of a cluster of areas being included in the Whittlesea City Council’s Housing Diversity Project (Whittlesea City Council 2010). The Housing Diversity project reflects the awareness that population growth affects established areas of the municipality.

Most of the people consulted, however, were happy with their housing and tended to look to the commercial infrastructure, especially shopping centres to create a sense of connection within the new community.

Many of the residents at Laurimar were clear that the best thing that ever happened was the Safeway. (parent 1 in Doreen)

It was the proximity of shops, especially if they were within walking distance, which also inspired a sense of local pride for young people:
I think what makes us connected is Safeway, cause we can walk up there to get lollies.

On the other hand, the young people from Whittlesea township who lived further from these shops and further still from the Plenty Valley township (Westfield) shopping centre in South Morang, felt their area was deprived:

If you wanna go somewhere to buy something you have to travel an hour and that’s not even looking for stuff.

The key issue was independence and mobility. Buses were critical in whether young people were satisfied with their area. Those who were happy with the bus routes and frequency were happiest with their local area.

Transport was also a key issue for service providers. One service provider linked young people’s offending behaviour, especially car theft, to the lack of public transport. The extension of the train line to South Morang, planned for 2012, was much anticipated. The northern suburbs of Mernda/Doreen and Whittlesea township also had been advocating for the train to be further extended. According to one resident in Mernda who felt that Plenty Road was already stretched to over its capacity, a more integrated public transport system ‘would make everyone in the area relax a bit more’.

These young people were in no doubt that public transport was a critical element in their ability to navigate their local area:

“When you are a teenager, you need a train or you are stuck. If you miss the bus, you have to wait an hour.”

The planning for new urban fringe communities needs to address transport and housing diversity as early as possible to serve a variety of purposes across the life cycle. As discussed earlier, it can be difficult for planners to successfully achieve the balance between designing in open space as well as community centres, shops and community facilities. For some residents and service providers, the provision of regular public transport and community meeting places was the key to reducing the risk of social isolation, especially when families require specialist services or find it difficult to engage with their local neighbourhood.

3.3 Attachment to place: building community identity

The research highlighted the various ways residents understand and appreciate the urban fringe areas. While valuing the mix of city and country, there was also an awareness that this maybe temporary as population growth was changing this mix. As discussed above, the provision of new shops, better roads and health services were all factors in how well people felt connected to their local community. However, there was also a distinction made by residents between the lifestyle they felt they enjoyed and the suburbs closer to the city.

The area was seen as on the margins of both city and country and this provided the young people with a sense of being protected from the extremes of either.

‘Not in the middle of everywhere, I can see horses and cows from where I live but when you get into Laurimar it’s like living in the city so it’s a mix of both’.

‘It’s cool and awesome, you can make heaps of friends, it’s got Woolworths and stuff.

The country markets were particularly strong for this young person who commented ‘The emus down there have eggs.’

One person living in Whittlesea township also commented on this mix of country and city:

‘Kind of country near my area (Whittlesea) but take a 2 minute drive and it’s like suburb.’

Young people in Mernda drew a contrast between suburbs closer to the city they had lived in earlier

‘It was really closed off, there were too many little streets and this way it’s really open and massive parks and stuff.’

And a similar point was made later in the same focus group:

The thing that makes me connected to this place is probably the fresh air. Unlike where I used to live where I was [makes a gasping for air sound]

Participants in the South Morang focus group felt the same way, and referred to suburbs closer to the city as too busy, over-crowded and more likely to be dangerous, such as this respondent considered:
‘Reservoir is a good place to hide out if you are a murderer’.

And another also saw teenagers from other areas as threatening:

‘On the train from Epping, on city experience for school, the people are very strange, see teenagers there and wonder, what are they going to do, are they going to muck up?’

Young people felt safer being in areas that were separate from areas closer to the city and this gave them a strong sense of local pride.

However, some young people also commented on the changes in the area, suggesting that there was a sense that the city was encroaching on their suburb:

‘It’s annoying they are making so many estates, every time I go there it’s a new one, it’s too much. People say, where do you live, I live in the Maples, it’s really hard to find it, there’s way too much’.

Clearly, there was ambivalence about the benefits that come with new infrastructure. For some, the provision of a local supermarket had a big impact on people’s pride in their community and offered residents a resource that was an asset they could use as a central focus for activity:

But as far as we can tell – Safeway can’t be bad, it means that like I know my girlfriends who live here, a lot of people have come up and they’ve said to me ‘Oh yeah all we do is shop here now’. Like you know we might be passing through other places but we shop here. So that may be a sense of people feeling belonging that this is their Safeway you know (Doreen housing estate parent interview 3).

The consultations with residents suggest that the appeal of the urban fringe is its combination of urban and semi-rural qualities. The perceived peacefulness of the physical environment is something that residents wish to preserve, but not at the expense of urban amenity. This creates a need to balance population growth, and the subsequent demand for more infrastructure, with the semi-rural qualities that initially attracted residents to the area. For many of those consulted, there is a tipping point when the character of the area becomes changed to the point when they no longer feel they belong to the area.

The limited availability of social connecting points in the local area, including educational and employment opportunities, meant that some essential elements which need to be present for people to feel a part of their local community may have yet to be formed. Because many children leave the LGA of Whittlesea to attend secondary schools, they may increasingly feel disconnected from their local area if social groups and activities are not available locally. This was the concern expressed by service providers about the connecting points for community beyond the provision of education and employment. If people leave the LGA regularly, what else was in place to provide a sense of local connection and shared identity? This created a sense that community attachment may not be as strong as it might be in areas where social groups have cohered over many years.

It was observed by one service provider that if the fires had got to South Morang, they may not have had the community connections to respond during and after the crisis. It is the middle ground between the houses, shops, transport and community services which is perhaps the hardest part of community to create. Interviewees called it friendship networks, but from a planning point of view, how can opportunities to meet people be built into new communities? According to one service provider, a sedentary, passive lifestyle was encouraged by the dearth of community activities, and the new middle class in the area were culturally malnourished, lacking community events, festivals or meeting places. There was a desperate need to develop initiatives such as community gardens, sustainable schools with tanks and vegetable gardens, and better public transport to reduce reliance on cars. ‘Everyone has to travel to the inner city for things to happen’, this service provider said.

What people value in their local area were its natural assets, and the convenience of having local transport, shops and social networks. However, there was a need for activities to act as informal links between social groups and to create shared local projects that connected people and gave them a sense of their local area as the ‘centre’ for their lives. There was a concern that, in some of the new housing estates, these did not happen quickly enough and that people become isolated if promised initiatives in the local area do not happen quickly. The Whittlesea Township, which was seen to be a place where these ties were more evident, faced a natural disaster that brought these elements to the foreground.
3.4 Impact of bushfires on Whittlesea township

The fire was a devastation for the local area. However, one of the surprising issues identified by service providers, and also recognized by residents of Whittlesea, was that the bush fire on Black Saturday provided a rallying point which had empowered both residents and service providers. The work of the Whittlesea Community Bushfire Recovery Committee, and the mental health and wellbeing working group, was one example of this process in action. Their experience meant that they are all engaged in rebuilding the community and that the process involves learning a whole new way of understanding the role of Council, government and community. Service providers identified that when lives are shown to be at risk, the stakes become higher than they have been before.

In Whittlesea township, the fire caused a great deal of mobility within the area as relocation caused unsettled family dynamics. Make-shift accommodation in caravans exposed the fault lines in the community infrastructure. One service provider reported that the family issues which may have preceded the fire are now being identified by service providers who have begun to work with families in need. Financial issues are key issues for the community as full-time employment opportunities are limited due to the Global Financial Crisis and mortgage stress affects households struggling with interest rates and petrol prices. Housing repossessions were sometimes taking place as soon as a week after delay in repayments in cases of smaller lending companies.

A sense of disconnectedness, identified by residents of Whittlesea township who felt the presence of more people in the area after the fire, was also acknowledged by service providers who noted that many young people may have lost family members, or have additional people at home while housing is being rebuilt. There was also a concern in the year after the fire that some may also be less focused on school and truancy was identified as a problem.

Trauma and dislocation in bushfire-affected communities was described as having a ‘ripple affect’ in the Mernda/Doreen area where many CFA members and their families live.

The Whittlesea Council’s Bushfire Recovery effort is achieving community support and bringing together new partnerships in a response to the perceived emotional impact of the fires.

The aftermath of the bushfires was a central theme in many of the interviews. The location of Whittlesea township meant that, as a result of Black Saturday, there were a lot more people looking for rental or temporary accommodation in the town, coming from places such as Kinglake, contributing to the mobility of the population and the demand on the township.

Another outcome of the fires of Black Saturday was that Whittlesea township found itself receiving a lot of extra services, which were targeted at fire-affected people but also raised the standard of support services generally, as well as raising the profile of the area more broadly.

R1: *I think that centre’s improved a lot since the fires and they’ve got a centrelink there now –*

R2: *Financial counselling –*

R1: *You know and all that stuff so they’ve got that, it’s just happened. And yeah they’ve got the centrelink there now and –*

F: *You think it’s improved since the fires?*

R1: *Oh yes, yeah it’s had a makeover love*

F: *Really?*

R1: *We even got to see the prince [Prince William] like yes that was good [laughs], he’s a character. Yeah we’ve seen a few things. (Whittlesea parent focus group)*

As the area became the centre of attention, some residents felt re-assured that their area’s needs were being recognized. This extended to those young people who were offered counselling through the schools.
The tragedy of the fires in the area around Whittlesea township led to an influx of new residents into Whittlesea township and had the beneficial affect of pulling the community together. The recovery efforts of Council were welcomed, with prior ground work laid by the Whittlesea Community Building Initiative, thus creating scope for more development work in the township. Churches, schools and welfare resources had responded to the impact of the fire, and residents felt grateful for their efforts.

4. FINDING THE HEART OF THE COMMUNITY

The essential ingredient to building communities on the urban fringe is communication with all residents about the future plans for the area, and consultation with those likely to be affected by the population growth to ensure that a balance is struck between urban amenity and residents’ desire for a safe and secure community. This is not a uniform process, as the complex nature of communities means that it is important to seek a variety of entry points to a community to ensure the many voices are heard.

It is the layered nature of these communities which needs to be better understood, so that relationships across different geographic parts of the suburb become defined less by housing estate type or period of residence, but by shared visions for the future of the area and mutual interests in creating a sustainable community. Issues about the relationship between the old and new residents have been discussed in other contexts such as sea and tree change communities (Healy et al. 2009). But the dynamics discussed in this report suggest that this theme has resonances at city fringes (see Outer Suburban/Interface Services and Development Committee 2006; Windermere 2010).

One of the emerging themes from this research project is that social and geographically specific identification can emerge in areas experiencing rapid growth, decreasing the sense of social connection across areas. The experience of Mernda highlights the ways different forms of community co-exist, with people living in the old ‘township’ potentially seeing themselves as having a separate set of social connections. For example, according to a long-term Mernda resident:
The Mernda Residents’ Association was set up to get the sewerage on, the gas on, the Mernda township was so old, 120 years old, that all the extra bits weren’t there. But now all the new houses now have to have sewerage in, gas on, but the existing place didn’t have to have that. It’s only been not quite twelve months since we’ve had sewerage on. (Long-term Mernda resident 2).

He contrasted this with people from the newer parts of the suburb who tended not to use the Residents’ Association as ‘they have nothing really to complain about.’ His optimism for the future of the area was clear, particularly if public transport was improved.

Another Mernda resident compared the traditional model of planning where the pub would have been the centre of the town with the modern style of lots of small roads feeding into bigger roads. The challenge of finding the ‘heart’ to their suburb suggests that the gaps between the small pockets of new housing estates worked against creating a cohesive sense of belonging to a shared suburb:

Like there’s no heart to the place (yeah) at the moment, and there’s little patches of schools being built or like the health centre being put up, but there’s no real drawcard to that (long term Mernda parent 1).

For one parent living in South Morang for ten years, proximity does not necessarily create a sense of connection. She reported that, even though she felt comfortable with the population growth which has taken place around her, she did not see social connections being made amongst young people living in the same street.

The layers in new communities mean that community development initiatives face challenges. Activities to serve as a bridge between the older residents and those moving into the newer housing estates are one way to build social cohesion. But the morale of the suburb is also dependent on residents being involved in decisions affecting their local community, being consulted about changes in their local area and building trust not only in the systems which are shaping their community, but also trust of their neighbours.

5. CONCLUSIONS

A small-scale, place-based study can offer a great deal to the stakeholders in community building in growth areas, especially in the light of the planned growth in the next five to ten years. The evidence from these three areas is that as the process unfolds there can be alliances as well as tensions which impact on how communities negotiate their evolving community. However, it is also clear that social infrastructure can mediate across groups and offer spaces for needs to be addressed early. For urban growth to be about people, rather than houses, then research that tells us how people create community can shed light on what is a complex and dynamic process.

This report offers an insight into the way population growth defines and shapes people’s sense of community, control over their environment and their sense of future. This project has identified the challenges and tensions involved in responding to population growth.

The following themes were discussed in detail:

- Raised expectations of incoming residents who are buying houses in new housing estates
- Ambivalence about change among longer term residents who value qualities in the area which are seen to be threatened by population growth
- Lack of community and social support services,
- Investment in entertainment, shopping and leisure facilities, to improve the experience of living in the area for all age groups, especially young people.

In growth areas, the idea of building new suburbs next to older communities which have perhaps formed an identity as a semi-rural township, can evoke uncertain relationships between the old and new. This emerged especially in areas where new estates have received new services, shops and community centres, and older areas are at risk of feeling neglected.
The position of young people has been identified as particularly challenging in growth areas, as they may also experience a sense of constrained opportunities. However, the location of these suburbs made many of the young people feel safe and protected. Nevertheless, the shortage of community services means that they may face challenges if specific needs arise.

The issue of service needs in these growth areas requires continued monitoring as the population changes are so fast and the demographic mix can change rapidly. Planning, resourcing and preparation is currently happening at a local level through forums such as Whittlesea Community Futures and the City of Whittlesea Housing Diversity Project. It is important that continued co-operation between all levels of government and community sector agencies take place.

The integration of all residents’ views and experiences is, however, important to ensure that the heterogeneous experience of population growth is reflected in future planning and development. Planners need to recognize that there are complex processes at work when residents form attachments to a community. This research suggests there are many sources of local pride and confidence in the future of an area, but the pace of change is challenging many to re-assess how they want to build a community.

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