



**Submission to the  
'Review of the Latrobe Performing Arts and Convention Centre  
Feasibility Study and Business Case'**

**14 May, 2015**

*Latrobe City has the opportunity to create an iconic arts precinct for present and future generations.*

*A community-engaged, contemporary facility which delivers for local, regional and international audiences and performers, meeting a diverse mix of arts and cultural needs.*

*Advance Morwell believes the most appropriate location for such a facility is the Kernot Hall and Kernot Lake precinct.*

*While the 'Review of the Latrobe Performing Arts and Convention Centre Feasibility Study and Business Case' considers two site options - one each in Traralgon and Morwell - and favours the first option for any new development, our community organisation believes a number of relevant and critical matters have not been canvassed or considered.*

*The adoption of any recommendation should not be influenced by parochialism or self-interest. Advance Morwell is concerned the consultants' report appears to be framed to encourage council to make a quick decision when there is too much at stake to risk a hasty choice.*

*Council is about to make a decision on a major investment project which will significantly impact on all Latrobe City ratepayers for many years to come.*

*In doing this, it needs to select a site for an arts and culture precinct that not only meets the needs of a diverse community of current and potential users but, crucially, has the capacity to expand to accommodate future growth and demand.*

*Accordingly, we make the following submission to the 'Review of the Latrobe Performing Arts and Convention Centre Feasibility Study and Business Case' for your consideration:*

# *Site Suitability*

Advance Morwell Inc. supports the need for a new arts and cultural precinct but believes it is vital that further investigation and analysis is undertaken, with key considerations being the capacity for future expansion and car parking.

The preferred site should not be compromised by location if it is to offer the finest possible facilities and the opportunity for varying uses, growth and public access.

There are significant disadvantages with the Traralgon option's design. Chiefly, these relate to the potential for expansion and car parking. Further, the facility has been squeezed between existing buildings on the site, foyer space has been compromised in the design, external space is limited, there is no capacity for further growth of the facility and car parking is poor (even accounting for the plan to demolish the existing Traralgon Performing Arts Centre).

The Kernot Hall and Kernot Lake amenity provides a visually impressive location for an arts and cultural facility. It would not only allow for comprehensive internal facilities but externally it also offers many possibilities. These could include an outdoor performance space or amphitheatre; activities such as concerts being centred around the lake; purpose-built garden areas for reflection and relaxation; and lawns and facilities for families to enjoy.

# Design

Advance Morwell Inc. believes the significant investment of more than \$17 million in this once-in-a-lifetime project must be given diligent scrutiny not only from the community but by experts in the field.

The site design for the Traralgon option is seriously compromised by lack of space. Not only must this new arts and cultural precinct be a centre for the arts and associated events but importantly, it should offer facilities for the whole community, including families.

Expansion of the Traralgon site is restricted by the existing library, the Traralgon Performing Arts Centre and the additional smaller council owned buildings. As an example, the foyer in the Traralgon design is restrictive and convoluted, which would impact negatively on its use for functions including business and trade displays events regularly held in these spaces of existing performing arts centres.

Even if the TPAC is demolished, that space will be needed for car parking.

The Latrobe City's own Economic Sustainability Strategy endorses the development of an integrated and co-located performing arts and convention centre but the size of the Traralgon site would prohibit this.

The consultants' recommend that after adopting Traralgon as the preferred site, Latrobe City councillors and officers should visit similar facilities in other regional centres. Advance Morwell believes this sort of fact-finding activity is essential however logic dictates that it should be undertaken BEFORE a site decision is made.

Councillors and officers must also seek input from experts in the area of performing arts who can advise on the right mix of facilities for an arts and cultural precinct, designed for the 21st century and beyond, again BEFORE a preferred site is adopted.

The organisation considered the pre-eminent authority on performing arts centres is the Victorian Association of Performing Arts Centres (VPACC). It has produced and updated "Oh You Beautiful Stage - Australian Design and Technical Benchmarks for Performing Arts Centres" to which the consultants' report briefly refers.

This publication is considered "the definitive guide" in considering, planning and building a performing arts space to meet the latest technical, design, access and staffing requirements and to maximise the versatility of the space created.

The consultants' report quotes this publication in its report: "The size of a theatre should be determined by market analysis...(of) the performing arts market that exists or can be expected to develop in the local community over the life of the facility..."

The report provides no further detail on whether any discussions have taken place with the VACPAC about a proposed Latrobe Performing Arts and Convention Centre and if so, what were the outcomes.

# *Car Parking*

Traffic congestion around the Traralgon site on the corner of Kay and Church Streets is already extremely high both day and night.

Street car parking remains scarce of an evening with a high volume of traffic generated from the existing Entertainment Complex fronting Kay Street, the nearby Ryan's Hotel, the Star Bar and the Premier Function Centre.

Patrons at a proposed Traralgon sited Latrobe Performing Arts and Convention Centre would have valid concerns about walking any distance to their vehicles late at night given the history of reported incidents in this 'entertainment district', often requiring police attention.

Significant congestion also exists in the daytime, with street parking surrounding the proposed Kay-Church Street site extremely limited because of a nearby church, offices, and restaurants.

Even if the existing Traralgon Performing Arts Centre was demolished and could generate an additional and optimistic 80 spaces, this would still not be sufficient for predicted attendance numbers at certain events.

In contrast, the Morwell site currently has 270 marked car parking spaces and room for many more.

It should be noted that the West Gippsland Arts Centre is not located in the CBD and the Esso BHP Billiton Centre in Sale, while on the edge of the CBD, attracts patrons who mostly travel by car or bus, facts supported by both facilities' management.

# *Arts and Cultural Centre*

The Latrobe Valley has a vibrant community, comprising people from a broad ethnic and cultural background.

One of the Latrobe Valley's strengths is its diverse mix of arts and cultural organisations. This will only increase in the future.

Arts and music groups are varied and include theatrical societies, orchestras, ensembles, dance schools, music schools and clubs, film goers and drama groups.

Local schools, both primary and secondary, have a comprehensive music, speech and drama focus as part of their curriculum. While many have their own auditoriums, these are general multi-use (hall/gymnasium combined) and not acoustic specific or purpose-designed for their respective arts and cultural activities.

Any arts and cultural precinct should have a much broader focus than just a large theatre space.

In view of this, Advance Morwell Inc. believes a theatre/arts facility designer should be engaged for extensive input into the design of any facility.

This expert would collaborate with local artists, communities and organisations to explore all areas of need and inclusion. An arts and cultural precinct by its very nature should build capacity, create opportunities and drive social change.

Planning should focus on core needs and outcomes of the proposed precinct and also embrace strategic and multidisciplinary programs for the future in a bid to attract a broad usage.

The precinct should be a space where creative staff work with performers, organisations and schools, on a small or large scale, to partner, present, collaborate, deliver and produce innovative projects, industry professional development and community-engaged programs.

While it should bring new and diverse entertainment to the Latrobe Valley, the precinct should encourage existing local groups to use its internal and external space while also becoming a place for skills development and learning through partnering with schools, providing workshops and other capacity-building experiences.

# *Convention/Conference Centre*

Advance Morwell Inc. believes a solid business case and model needs to be provided before a new convention/conference centre is pursued.

According to the consultants' report, all other regional centres in Victoria have a co-located PAC and convention centre however the Traralgon site cannot accommodate a convention centre, that can cater for large attendances, now or in the future.

Of further concern a comment in the consultants' report in the section titled "Uncertain Demand for Functions and Events", that future "market expectation is that overall function demand will slow", including in Gippsland.

In a contradictory statement, the consultants' state there is, on the other hand, "general optimism" that a proposal such as this has the potential to attract significant revenue from outside the Latrobe Valley. The report, however, provides no hard evidence to support either assumption.

These two statements require urgent clarification.

Additionally, the report states Destination Gippsland believes there is a market for future business tourism in this area and also that the resident survey sample supports such a facility. Yet outside concerns from those in the events industry have stated that any new convention centre would rival current private concerns which can easily accommodate future projected growth of the Latrobe Valley.

There are inherent dangers in failing to explore this issue. In view of the above information and the absence of evidence that a convention centre will attract both internal and external events, a solid business case must be undertaken on this aspect of the project before any investment decision on the Latrobe Performing Arts and Convention Centre is made.

Advance Morwell Inc. will support the inclusion of a convention/conference centre in the proposed precinct if this resulting business case can provide evidence to confirm future economic and community benefits.

If a business case can establish the benefits of a co-located convention/conference centre with a performing arts centre, it must be acknowledged that this cannot be accommodated on the Traralgon site.

# *Travel / Public Transport*

Evidence supports the Advance Morwell contention that the majority of people who attend both the West Gippsland Arts Centre in Warragul and the Esso BHP Billiton centre in Sale travel by car.

Therefore the availability of car parking is crucial to any development of an arts and cultural precinct.

The consultants' report states that 23 per cent of Latrobe Valley residents travelled to West Gippsland Arts Centre in Warragul for "specific musical performances" last year. The majority of people who attend the Esso BHP Billiton Centre in Sale also travel by car, even though it is located on the edge of that town's CBD.

It is generally the case that people will travel across Gippsland and further afield for specific events.

People already travel by car throughout the Latrobe Valley to various entertainment hubs across the three towns, to restaurants and the large Cinema Complex at Mid Valley.

Travel times would not be much different from the population growth area of Traralgon West to either site. In fact it takes around nine minutes to travel from Traralgon West to Kernot Hall in Morwell by car. The Morwell site is also geographically central for smaller communities located outside the three major towns and there is easy access from the Freeway.

It should be noted that schools, who could be major users of a new facility, usually bus students to events.

The consultants have raised the issue of poor public transport to the Morwell site. While public transport to BOTH sites could be improved, an existing reliable bus service travels from throughout Latrobe to the adjacent Mid Valley Shopping Centre.

# *Nearby Facilities*

Advance Morwell Inc. rejects the inference that the Kernot Hall site presents a greater 'risk' than the Traralgon site - the latter being labelled as an 'in town' site. While there is no evidence supplied in the consultants' report to support the "wider social and economic benefits" assumed to flow from a Traralgon site, Advance Morwell Inc. also rejects the 'edge of town' label given to the Kernot Hall site.

The Kernot Hall site is located adjacent to the major shopping hub of the Latrobe Valley (Mid Valley) which includes a large bus terminal, taxi rank, eateries and a very well patronised Cinema Complex, the largest in Gippsland.

While a café, restaurant and bar facilities would be incorporated in any precinct design - as is the case with other regional performing arts centres - there is an existing restaurant on the Kernot Hall site which could be upscaled to meet any additional demands of performing arts centre patrons.

# *Festivals/Expos*

Kernot Hall in Morwell is already identified by Gippslanders and beyond as a centre for major functions and events.

The popularity and patronage of these events is not hampered by public transport limitations because of the extensive car parking available for patrons.

Council has run many major events at the site, including a wide range of multicultural activities, because of its central location and expansive area. This site is home to the Immigration Park, an area which also stages cultural activities.

The Kernot Hall precinct is also the venue for many trade expos including caravan and camping, leisure, 4WD and holistic themed events as well as the local eisteddfod.

# Surveys

The consultants state that feedback and input for their report were obtained through “consultation, focus groups, listening posts, one-on-one interviews and online survey”.

In fact the consultants suggested that a further telephone survey of residents would be helpful.

However the report clearly states that no specific site preference emerged from either stakeholders or those surveyed.

It is therefore confusing that a reference in the report suggests “community sentiment” favours a Traralgon site. Advance Morwell Inc. contends that no weight should be given to this assumption given it is not validated by survey results nor is there any other supporting evidence provided.

In fact the above information affirms that stakeholders and residents want a new facility that best meets the needs of its users and patrons, regardless of its location.

# Funding

Advance Morwell Inc. has noted an inference in the consultants' report that Creative Victoria would favour an 'in town' site, as industry experience indicates there is more risk with 'edge of town' sites. We understand, however, that Creative Victoria has not expressed a preference for either site and we reiterate that we do not believe the Kernot Hall site is 'edge of town'.

Additionally, the report suggests some haste is needed in confirming a site, claiming it should be made "without delay". The need for a speedy decision is not clear however Advance Morwell Inc. understands this could be part of a push for Council to apply for PAC funds through the National Stronger Regions (NSR) fund.

The federal NSR fund will provide funding of more than \$1 billion over five years. The first round of applications has closed and the second is currently due to open. The fund is expected to operate for several years to come, indicating an application does not need to be submitted urgently.

While Advance Morwell Inc. acknowledges the fund requires projects to be completed on or before 31 December 2019, the criteria for applications also states that supported projects will be in "disadvantaged regions or areas of disadvantage within a region". Parts of the Latrobe Valley have already been recognised as "disadvantaged" by all tiers of government.

The NSR has replaced another regional development fund under the previous federal Labor government so it is reasonable to suggest there will be continued opportunities for funding large scale regional infrastructure projects in the future. Projects which include a strong evidence base and a comprehensive business case are likely to be more successful than those which have been submitted in haste in order to "scrape in".

Advance Morwell Inc. agrees with the consultants' finding that all funding applications should be "scrutinized rigorously to ensure that the business case is well made and soundly based". We suggest the business case for a proposed Latrobe Performing Arts and Convention Centre must include the expert advice of a theatre designer and a detailed assessment of the need, or otherwise, of a convention/conference centre.

# Evidence

Advance Morwell Inc. is concerned that the consultants' report includes a number of assumptions, which lack supporting data or evidence to validate its recommendation of Traralgon as the preferred site for the Latrobe Performing Arts and Convention Centre.

These include:

- *“...it is reasonable to assume the Traralgon site is also the preferred site for key potential funders of the project”.*

The report does not include any evidence to support the above assumption. In fact it acknowledges that views of potential funders have only been “informally obtained both now, and in the past”. It purports that these views, of which we have no details, should be “considered persuasive”.

- *“...greater flow-on economic benefits from the Traralgon in-town site are probable”.*

This is another assumption lacking supporting evidence. It is based on the arguable case that Traralgon is the only site which can be considered ‘in town’. This assumption appears to ignore Kernot Hall site’s close proximity to Gippsland’s largest retail hub, as well as a range of other entertainment and commercial services.

- *“...industry experience indicated there is more risk with ‘edge of town’ sites”.*

No details are provided to support this claim. The consultants' report goes on to state this view is consistent with the views of Creative Victoria and Regional Development Victoria but again, there is no documented evidence of the basis for these views.

- *“...it is on this basis (above), Traralgon should be considered the preferred site”.*

Based on the arguments listed above Advance Morwell believes that this constitutes a flimsy basis for such a critical recommendation.

# *Points of note*

- Advance Morwell Inc. recommends that more weight be given to evidence-based findings in the consultants' report - many of which favor a Morwell location. Advance Morwell Inc. strongly challenges the consultants' assertion that "a decision to proceed with the Morwell site would need to be supported by a much more pronounced evidential advantage than indicated (in the report)". In fact Advance Morwell Inc. argues there is a distinct lack of evidence and an oversupply of assumptions underpinning the recommendation for a Traralgon location.
- Advance Morwell Inc. asks council to appoint a performing arts/theatre designer to make recommendations for an arts and cultural precinct based on community needs.
- Advance Morwell Inc. believes a thorough business case for a potential convention/conference facility, to be co-located with a performing arts centre, should be undertaken as a matter of priority to help inform the site selection.
- Advance Morwell Inc. questions the logic of the consultants' recommendation for council to "confirm the site for the proposed new facility without delay", recommending Traralgon. It calls for the following recommendations to be adopted by council before any site decision is made:

- 1. Council seek out an experienced performing arts/theatre designer, as recommended by VACPAC, for advice on how a new arts and cultural facility can build on current capacity, can provide facilities that meet the needs of current and future users, create future opportunities and drive social change;*
- 2. Council must undertake a comprehensive and evidence-based business case for a conference/convention facility in the Latrobe Valley to be co-located with a performing arts centre;*
- 3. A representative survey of Latrobe Valley residents be undertaken to assess their views on the relative merits of Traralgon and Morwell sites and potential community usage, based on evidence and research associated with both sites.*

# *Conclusion*

Latrobe City Council has an opportunity to provide a regional arts and cultural facility that is the envy of regional Australia.

Council's own consultants, Geografia, state there is little variation in demand from surveyed citizens as to its location.

An investment of this size must be based on sound planning, evidence-based economic analysis and thorough research.

Advance Morwell Inc. urges councillors to think regionally for the benefit of ALL and make a decision based on advice from experts in the field. A new facility should be for the use of not only today's citizens, but future generations.

*John Guy OAM*

*Chair*

*Advance Morwell Inc.*

*14 May, 2015*

**Note:** Advance Morwell Chair, John Guy OAM, wishes to speak to the above submission.