



A Creative Arts and Cultural Precinct for Wonthaggi

DISCUSSION PAPER FOR A MASTERPLAN - FEBRUARY 2021

Members of the Bass Coast Arts and Culture Advisory Committee have developed a document packed full of ideas and recommendations for a Creative Arts and Cultural Precinct in Wonthaggi.

A Cultural Precinct for Wonthaggi

There has long been a 'Cultural Precinct' proposed for Wonthaggi, with decade-old plans not yet acted on. This paper demonstrates the continued need, demand, drivers, advantages and opportunities to be gained for Bass Coast through the creation of diverse and activated cultural spaces integrated into a civic precinct.

The Benefits

Drawing on historical business cases and current strategic plans, this paper identifies economic, cultural and social benefits stemming from the development of new cultural infrastructure. It argues that a cultural precinct will provide a much-needed boost to Wonthaggi's identity.

Planning and Engagement

It makes the case for a community-driven process of open and informed discussion to ensure diverse creative and cultural voices are heard. Additionally, we can learn from the experience of other regions and townships such as Greater Bendigo and Clunes, where investment in creativity has provided civic, social, cultural and economic regeneration.

Community Accessibility, Activating Spaces

Community, accessibility and local engagement are central to the success of a Creative Precinct, ensuring these are activated, interlinked spaces for creative making and connection, not just infrastructure for 'arts presentation'. It also identifies a range of potential activities and opportunities to be enabled through the development; including an art gallery, library, artist studios and sculpture parks.

Proposed Site

An opportunity exists for development of the former Wonthaggi Secondary College McBride Campus, central to the civic heart of Wonthaggi and with many key advantages. The benefits to the Bass Coast region of developing a cultural precinct, however, are not dependant on using the school site.

Summary

A Wonthaggi Creative Arts and Cultural Precinct will be bold, differentiated, destinational and defining, creating a regional creative hub that contributes to Bass Coast as a desirable place to live, work, visit and create. We commend it to council and recommend an open symposium on the arts in the Bass Coast region, with community and expert panel participation. We also call for Federal, State and Local government participants to come together for the development of a Masterplan for this worthy project for the entire region.

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Introduction

The abandonment of the former Wonthaggi Secondary College McBride Campus in central Wonthaggi, along with the recent donation of a large and significant art collection to the Bass Coast Shire, has caused debate and prompted this discussion paper.

This paper aims to facilitate an open discussion to move forward a long proposed creative arts and cultural precinct (referred to here as 'the Precinct') for the region. It argues priority be given to the development of a comprehensive Masterplan for a creative arts and cultural precinct in Wonthaggi.

There are many reasons this is a good time to kick-start this project.

Economic Driver

A major infrastructure project will be a creative driver of the economy and a "COVID-Normal-Community Re-Builder". Funding this development will generate multiplier effects financially, with every dollar spent generating several more through construction, transport, hospitality, accommodation, and entertainment industries, and commercial art sales.

The *Bass Coast Cultural Precinct Business Case and Plan* (BCCP) commissioned by Bass Coast Shire Council in 2011 details the extensive economic, social and cultural benefits such a precinct would create for the region. The Plan estimated that the precinct would add \$3.7 million to the gross annual regional product and provide additional community benefits valued at \$2.3 million a year. This translates in 2020 to \$4.35m GRP and \$2.7m in valued benefits to the region respectively.

The report found Wonthaggi was more than ready for "a new set of cultural infrastructure"¹, and yet nearly a decade later little has been achieved.

For more on the Business Case, please see supporting reports section at the end of this paper.

Town Identity

Wonthaggi has struggled to find a new focus since the State Coal Mine shut down in 1968.

As the town becomes a "peri-urban" regional centre, growth should be aligned with a planned identity; a lack of planning risking a negative impact on the character and liveability of the town.

Wonthaggi has become the Regional Centre for Bass Coast and South Gippsland. It is also identified in *Plan Melbourne* as a Regional Centre. Now working mainly as a drive-through shopping town (a regional services "watershed"), its city fabric sorely lacks a precinct dedicated to the enjoyment of cultural activities and celebration of its own identity.

Arts and cultural interventions are crucial in revitalising activity centres and main streets. Placemaking uses arts and culture as tools to animate public and private spaces, and to rejuvenate structures and streetscapes. Arts are a great way to attract people to areas like Wonthaggi, that have long been associated with an industrial use that no longer serves the town.

The way a space is programmed plays an important role in determining how it will be used, who will participate and how the benefits of placemaking are distributed. When programming is done well, it can support social well-being, public health and the economy.

The name of the Precinct will be part of the branding for the region. For example, if using the former School site as suggested, 'the Old School' could be its name ("Wonthaggi is going Old School"), with themes to match. A vote on the name would be a good way of activating community participation and ownership.

1 BCCP 2011

Activity Centre for New and Old Locals

Wonthaggi is experiencing a boom in development; with high demand from young families wanting to build new homes, as well as empty-nesters leaving Melbourne to make the change to a more relaxed and affordable lifestyle.

Enabled by the ability to work remotely from home, there has also been a shift prompted by COVID-19 of urban professionals and their families moving to regional Victoria. Many have capitalised on the opportunity to buy affordable homes and have access to a rural lifestyle.

A new cultural precinct would bring new and existing residents together and provide focus for a range of activities that are scattered and disconnected across the Shire.

Perfect Location

A unique, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity has arisen for the Shire to develop a large tract of land in the civic heart of the town; an area untouched by heavy traffic that can be made into an accessible, pedestrian friendly and thriving centre.

What this Paper Aims to Achieve

This paper calls for an open symposium – with input from other regional projects, expert advice and the Shire community – on the benefits that cultural activity can bring.

We also call for funding and contributing parties to come together to create a Masterplan, particularly Federal and State members and relevant agencies.

We see Wonthaggi's cultural precinct project as a unique opportunity for a coordinated effort across all tiers of government to develop a new and thriving arts and cultural centre for the entire region.

The Precinct should connect artists and their audiences across the Bass Coast Shire. It should create links between creative hubs and spaces across Bass Coast, such as the Wonthaggi Union Arts Centre, the Cowes Cultural Centre, the Luminous Galleries in the waterline communities along Westernport, the emerging Archies Creek music scene, as well as Wonthaggi's other hidden gems such as the Rescue Centre, Art Shed and ArtSpace.

Vision

The Precinct will be a major catalyst for creative and social change and a generator of cultural, creative and economic activity.

It will create a vibrant identity for the regional township of Wonthaggi and all of Bass Coast. It will also create a sense of place, purpose, activation and difference, connected to the identity and history of the region within the heart of Wonthaggi.

More specifically, the Precinct will:

- connect, nurture and support emerging and established Bass Coast artists and creative practitioners from across the region;
- connect local, regional, national and international creatives to inspire each other, as well as local and broader audiences;
- acknowledge our indigenous culture and make first nations recognition and reconciliation a core component of the project; offer affordable and accessible creative spaces;
- tell our region's own important stories through the production of art and cultural practice in visual, performance and other art forms;
- engage younger creatives and audiences, exploring emerging cultural practices such as digital arts, live art, multi-disciplinary and experimental theatre, and live and digital music production;
- foster mentorship programs embracing traditional and modern art practices for the benefit of our younger population;
- embolden community partnerships and enterprises; and
- drive tourism to Wonthaggi as a destination.



The Wonthaggi Creative Precinct will be bold, differentiated, destinational and defining: creating a regional creative hub, contributing to Bass Coast as a desirable place to live, work, visit and create.

Identity and Placemaking for Wonthaggi and the Bass Coast

The Precinct should be destinational and location defining, becoming a focus point for community connection.

Destinational

Wonthaggi will become a tourism destination for the region. The Precinct will re-brand Wonthaggi, with a flagship gallery and other infrastructure defining the destination and providing exciting reasons to visit.

Creating a Precinct

The area around the flagship gallery will be activated, the public spaces forming a vibrant precinct. Programs will be offered outside the walls of the buildings such as public art, festivals, recitals, open air performances, and group activities, but also facilitate every-day events such as busking (participation by local talent or visiting artists) or inspecting a public artwork in the garden during lunch (incidental discovery).

Activation will occur at different times so different audiences and art forms will be accessible, providing something of interest for everyone.

Connecting the Community

The Precinct will become a point of community connection: for people to meet, for artists to connect with other artists and their audiences, and for anyone to learn about art and how to create it.

It also presents an opportunity to celebrate our past, providing a place to tell our stories.

Indigenous history and art should be incorporated.

Wonthaggi's coal mining origins should also be celebrated; incorporating mining artefacts into installations and showing the works of Noel Counihan – part of the Robert Smith Collection – who documented Wonthaggi miners at work .

Community, Accessibility and Education

Central to the Precinct will be a sense of community ownership, local activation and accessibility.

While the *2011 Cultural Precinct Plan* focused on cultural infrastructure (i.e. buildings) that would lie idle between events, the Precinct will be occupied by local artists, creative businesses and the community, with spaces in constant use, and available for external hire. The aim is to ensure the local community engages with the site, regardless of age, ability, interest or background.

The Precinct should:

- enable connections - a place where creative communities can come together;
- support artists to create work and to develop new skills;
- support community art and well-being;
- provide all-ability access to creative spaces
- supply inclusive and accessible spaces for youth and the disadvantaged – audiences traditionally disengaged from the arts;
- break down generational barriers;
- attract younger audiences with digital, creative, messy and industrial activities;
- welcome those who don't normally access the arts, encouraging exploration through free tours, activities and classes;
- offer spaces for hire to the broader community for events and meetings
- be open all week and on evenings – night time activities might include open air arts events similar to Guildford in the UK, or Vienna's night fairs and ballet projections;

- Offer partnerships with the education sector that keep students engaged, reflect curricula in education, deliver programs that cannot be delivered in-house by schools, and provide opportunities for lifelong learning (e.g. U3A);
- offer multiple and diverse engagement experiences;
- hold festivals and multi-cultural events; and
- attract incidental visitors, inviting exploration via short cuts and laneways through the site.



Activities Identified for the Precinct

Bass Coast Regional Art Gallery

“We’ve already got the collection, we just haven’t got the gallery.”

The Bass Coast is in a strong position to make a Regional Art Gallery a significant economic and community driver for the region. (BCSCACS)

A centrepiece of the Precinct is a Bass Coast Regional Gallery; a showcase of our region’s artists and identity, telling our own stories and celebrating the heritage of the area – including our indigenous heritage.

Touring Collections

The premier regional gallery will host touring exhibitions of a national and international calibre. It will establish a high-profile addition to the region’s tourism offerings, building on the potential of initiatives such as regional food and wine trails and the Dinosaur Trail.

Local and Indigenous Art

The Gallery will be a space that engages the local creative community, and also act as an important vehicle for the promotion of the indigenous art of the Bunurong-Boonwuring people.

Robert Smith Bequest

The gallery should be home to the recently gifted Robert Smith Collection, featuring around six hundred works that include pieces by Pablo Picasso, Francisco Goya, and Kaethe Kollwitz. The bequest also includes the important Noel Counihan collection of Wonthaggi mining art prints created in the mines themselves. Printed on paper, this important collection is currently in storage when it should be in frames on walls.

A note on ArtSpace and the Wonthaggi

Visitor Centre: Bass Coast Council downgraded the Wonthaggi visitors reception centre approximately 3 years ago and offered the empty space to ArtSpace Gallery; a not-for-profit organisation. ArtSpace Gallery has expressed interest in the Precinct and welcomes the opportunity to relocate to a new site. A dedicated gallery building would also free up the tourist information centre for its originally intended purpose.



The Counihan collection also provides further tourism opportunities associated with the coal mine and union art works located at the Wonthaggi Union Community Arts Centre (the cinema and playhouse).

Your Art Collection

The gallery could also house the Bass Coast Shire’s own art acquisitions and YAC (Your Art Collection). The YAC awards are a council initiative. The Collection includes around 100 artworks accumulated over several years.

Wonthaggi Library

The current Wonthaggi library is in a former shop, which was not designed with a library in mind.

The library would function better in a purpose-built home; one that is customisable for multiple uses, associated with education, located close to the new Wonthaggi Secondary College Campus, and in a property that is council owned and does not involve paying rent to private interests.

The new library could have designated study areas, projector rooms, access to recording facilities, computer laboratory and a 3D printer.

An arts section of the library could include Robert Smith's bequest of over five thousand art books, a unique collection that is worth preserving.

The Wonthaggi library is a branch of the West Gippsland Library Group – an independent identity formed to service three councils; Bass Coast, South Gippsland and the Baw Baw Shire Councils. Their head office is in Drouin. To enlist the library's participation in this project, the CEO will need to be approached. Bass Coast council has members on the board.



Working Art Studios

The Precinct offers the opportunity to expand current cultural facilities managed by council, and support and grow new creative industries within Bass Coast.

Benefits include:

- providing a 'home' for creative practitioners – a place to create, dream, design, present, sell, engage with each other and the public;
- support, enablement and facilitation of cultural production and creative industries;
- a space where stories can be shaped and told, strengthening the identity of our townships and landscapes; and
- capitalisation on a sector of economic potential for Bass Coast: including cross-sector and industry partnerships.

The studios should include a mix of traditional and state of the art high-tech art making spaces for technology enabled new works.

A "Sunday Open Art Studios" program would open the doors to the wider community and entice people into the precinct.

High Profile Tenants

A high-profile arts company – such as a performing arts group or animation company (e.g. Creature Technology) – should be recruited as a key tenant to position the studios and lend them prestige.

Artist residencies should also be located here; either integrating existing residencies, or creating a new rolling program for the precinct, and awarding residencies to inspiring new talent.



Artist Studios

The precinct should provide flexible, casual co-working spaces for individual artists, as well as providing community arts classes and childrens' art activities. These might include:

- jewellery workshops;
- ceramic studios with communal kiln access;
- photography studios (traditional and digital);
- video and animation editing suites;
- arts-company administration;
- dirty making spaces; and
- an arts business incubator.

Performance and Recording Spaces

Affordable access to rooms and technical equipment should be made available to support local music, live art and performance.

Here, projects could be developed to appear at the Wonthaggi Union Theatre and Cowes Cultural Community Centre before touring elsewhere.

Access to recording studios for music, podcasts and broadcasts should also be prioritised.

Outdoor Spaces

Good planning of outdoor spaces will develop interconnectivity with the site and link the Precinct to the town, as well as creating destinations in their own right.

Spaces should provide a broad range of arts and activities such as outdoor sculpture park visits, talks, performances, installations and recitals.

Outdoor Stage

Outdoor spaces could include an outdoor performing stage for bands, live show performances, Christmas carols and an open-air cinema in summer.

Sculpture Park

The arts precinct would ideally include the Wonthaggi Sculpture Town concept. The proposal was submitted in 2018, a short video developed for council on Vimeo.² The original proposal sought to cultivate a series of sculptures in popular public spaces, walking tracks, and common reserves, and aligns nicely with this project.

The original submission included a 'Wonthaggi Plinth' concept, where competing sculptors would showcase their work for 12 months. Upon completing the 12 months, sculptures are to be relocated to a permanent public space within the Wonthaggi township.

Parkland for Picnics

Use of the Wonthaggi Secondary School McBride Ave site could incorporate parkland down the centre of McBride Ave, removing roads and providing a dedicated shady parkland for picnics and outdoor performances.

Hospitality and Catering Businesses

Hospitality and catering should be encouraged in the plan, to create an inviting social space for community gathering.

Food and beverage offerings might include:

- catering businesses for the precinct's events, including bars and restaurants;
- social enterprise food businesses (training for unemployed kids, refugees etc) as per Melbourne's STREAT³ model;
- cooperative ventures processing food from local growers;
- farmers markets; and
- a bakery or coffee roastery (nice smells emanating).



² <https://vimeo.com/294090331>

³ streat.com.au

The Site Location

The ideal site for the Precinct in Wonthaggi would:

- be located in the heart of town;
- contain, or have access to, significant indoor and outdoor spaces that can be activated;
- be broadly accessible; and
- have capacity to house a range of cultural activities for presenting and producing art (e.g. an art gallery, a properly resourced library, performance spaces, artist studios, an arts business incubator, cafés, outdoor gathering spaces which could host weekend markets or outdoor cinema, conference and symposium spaces, etc).

While the former Wonthaggi Secondary College Site provides these attributes and many more, the identified need for a creative precinct and its many benefits for the Bass Coast region – economic, social and creative – are not dependant on using the school site.

Notwithstanding the specific site, this proposal is about bringing arts and culture into the heart of the community regardless of final location. However, the opportunities this particular site offers seem too good to miss.



Former Wonthaggi Secondary College (McBride Ave) Site

On the previous set of criteria, the vacant former Wonthaggi Secondary College McBride Campus (see Appendix 2) offers the perfect site location. It:

- Is located on the civic spine of Wonthaggi; McBride Avenue, opposite the Council Offices, the old bank and Post Office, the perfect spot for a regional gallery.
- Has a prominent, visible corner site on a hill with open public lawn areas on McBride creating the appropriate setting for a 'statement building'.
- Is ideal for safe pedestrian traffic
 - Located on separated, low-traffic lanes along the McBride Ave frontage, which could easily be narrowed and the traffic slowed (or even diverted) and thus pedestrianised for local workers and visitors to safely explore the precinct.
 - Watt St not being a busy feeder road would also lend itself to slowed traffic, wider footpaths with trees planted, cafes with outdoor seating, small shops and even an arts and craft market on weekends.
- Offers several buildings that could be retro-fitted for multiple uses. Their preservation would contribute to the retention of local heritage, memory and stories.
- Offers adaptability to mixed use, with the cultural precinct augmenting other possible uses such as housing and business; walkable lanes through the heart of the precinct would knit the site into the town fabric.
- Offers car and delivery access from the McKenzie St end, keeping vehicle traffic away from the heart of the site and the McBride area; the site is also serviced by bus stops, and Watt St is a good safe cycling route.



- The Old Post Office Building opposite may also be activated to service and expand the precinct, perhaps as an arts and craft shop, a café, performance space or a smaller gallery space. A feasibility study was undertaken in 2018 by Terroir Architects but not pursued further and the site remains abandoned.

The development – including pedestrian landscaping and parkland of the proposed site is supported by the *Wonthaggi Activity Centre Structure Plan Draft 2019* which flags that “future uses can potentially accommodate arts and cultural events and activities” as well as calling for community consultation on the use of the site.

For more supporting points from the draft *Activity Centre Plan*, please see supporting documentation at the end of this discussion paper.

Retention of old buildings: lowering the Shire’s carbon footprint and saving money.

Research shows that retrofitting existing buildings preserves resources and reduces the carbon footprint of new construction. Feasibility studies and examinations of the existing building fabric are necessary to establish viability and suitability to the program, but a hybrid approach could be adopted to save at least some of the buildings.

The presence of asbestos is a real concern, and with it the expense of its removal. However, even if the buildings are demolished, the asbestos will still need to be removed so as not to endanger demolition workers or the community. Therefore, the cost remains the same in any case.

Selling off this public asset to private interests may provide short term profits to the Shire, but the site will be lost as a public asset to the community forever.

Planning and Feasibility

This project will require a comprehensive feasibility study that considers all elements from the site to existing and new cultural infrastructure, financial viability and funding, operational opportunities and mix of use.

Benchmark Precincts and Regional Examples

There are many well-known and documented regional township examples of civic renewal through cultural activation that the Bass Coast Precinct could learn from. Some urban arts and cultural precincts also offer valuable lessons. These include:

- Abbotsford Convent
- Ballarat – integrated arts and culture programs
- Bendigo – entire civic centre visual, performing, studio arts and production
- Bunjil Place, Narre Warren
- Clunes Book town
- Collingwood Yards (Contemporary Arts Precincts enterprise)
- Shepparton – Shepparton Art Museum (SAM)
- Sale – Port of Sale cultural and entertainment hub
- TarraWarra Museum of Art – Healesville

Potential Funding Partners

This project has the ability to attract a variety of funding from both government and non-government sources.

As all three tiers of Government look to stimulate the post-COVID economy through infrastructure projects and investing in programs that support the arts and cultural tourism, 2021 is a year that will provide Council an opportunity to seek more than matched funding if the Masterplan and Feasibility groundwork has been done.

There are also cultural and civic co-location and funding opportunities to explore, including the recently announced Wonthaggi University Hub – bringing education and the arts together in productive partnership, and the substantial infrastructure funding allocated recently by the State Government to its Social Housing initiative.

A large site such as the Wonthaggi Secondary College site provides an enticing potential for co-location and civic mixed-use of culture and supported housing.

Privately, there are a number of philanthropic foundations who focus on Bass Coast and dairy communities. Establishing the cultural precinct as a not-for-profit charitable organisation – see for example the Collingwood Yards (Contemporary Arts Precincts enterprise) development of the old Collingwood Technical School site – may provide an avenue to bring significant other funding to this development.

The Feasibility Study should also consider mixed tenancy options with the potential to generate revenue towards ongoing site and operational costs of the cultural precinct.

For a list of potential contributing partners in the development of a Masterplan, please refer to the Appendices at the end of this document.

Possible Roadmap for Approval / Stages Of Proposed Project

Stage 1: Short term 1-2 years 2021-22

Goal: Site, Feasibility and Draft Plan for Precinct established

The Bass Coast Shire Council may pursue this stage by:

- convening a symposium – an expert conference, open to community, on place making, the importance of art in civil life and regional art town developments;
- facilitating events to raise community interest and support;
- updating the *Bass Coast Cultural Precinct Business Case and Plan 2011* to reflect current trends and changes (i.e. population expansion, rising revenue from rates, the Robert Smith bequest, WUCAC's completed upgrade);
- undertaking feasibility studies;
- establishing a list of stakeholders and a consultative committee;
- establishing a draft brief and community consultation;
- committing to a site in central Wonthaggi;
- holding an architectural competition for the site, or inviting suitable architects to tender for design phase;
- establishing preliminary scheme;
- beginning advocacy to funding bodies – Federal and State partners, with an MOU Intent for Funding.

Stage 2: Medium term, 2 years 2022-24

Goal: Flagship building (gallery) completed

- Public consultation (exhibition) of draft plan.
- Council considers submissions.
- Masterplan developed.
- Public consultation on Masterplan.
- Council and Funding Partner Organisations approval.
- Stage 1 Construction Commences: Flagship Gallery.
- Launches in line with stage completion.

Stage 3: Long Term - 4 years plus

Goal: Precinct is alive and humming (all construction complete)

- Other construction undertaken.
- Series of launches in line with each stage completion.

Support for a Wonthaggi Arts Precinct from Previous Plans and Strategies

The Precinct outlined in this discussion paper will further Bass Coast's cultural assets program, urban renewal aims and placemaking strategies and potential, as outlined in the *Wonthaggi Activity Centre Plan 2019*.

The Precinct concept supports the six specific goals of the *Bass Coast Shire Council Plan 2017-2021*, and Council's *Arts and Culture Strategy 2019-2029*.⁴ The Strategy looks toward aspirations that will:

activate places, introduce new spaces and inspire people – our vibrant creative community, audiences and participants. It also must accommodate unprecedented and as yet unknown cultural changes. (p.3)

The vision acknowledges the work of the current Bass Coast Creative community which is scattered across the Island, coast and hinterland, without a central location to create, share, promote and celebrate their work; and also anticipates the attraction, building and enabling of a new generation of creatives and cross-generational audiences.

The precinct will bring to fruition Council's identified aims of creating a Bass Coast Cultural Precinct – as documented in: *Bass Coast Cultural Precinct: A business case and plan for development of the Bass Coast Cultural Precinct*, by Artistic Merit 2011⁵. The business case states:

The Bass Coast Cultural precinct offers considerable benefit to the Regional Community, growing liveability for the region and forming part of Council's vision and strategy. In particular its economic strategy to attract key segments of the population that will sustain a healthy economy and community for the future of the region.

... All of these ...(cultural precinct)... elements contribute to the liveability of the region, assist in meeting Council's economic and community goals and will contribute to a strong sustained community. (p.4)

⁴ See *Arts and Culture Strategy 2019-2029*

⁵ See *Bass Coast Cultural Precinct business case and plan 2011*

Bass Coast Council Plan 2017-2021 and MAV Cultural Commitment

The proposal for a Bass Coast Cultural Precinct aligns directly with the aims, goals and aspirations of Council's Plan and its *Arts and Cultural Strategy 2019-2029*.

Recently adopted by Bass Coast Council, *The Arts and Cultural Strategy* methodically lays out the measurable outcomes it will achieve across all six of Council's Goals, from 'A prosperous local economy' and 'A liveable, enjoyable place to be', to contributing to the creation of 'A healthy, active community' and telling those important regional stories which ensure that 'Our unique character and history (is) celebrated'.

Adding further emphasis to the Bass Coast strategic position on arts and culture, the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) adopted its significant *Position Statement for the Arts, Culture & Creative Industries* in June 2020. It articulates local governments' commitment that "the Arts and our Culture are Essential". It states:

Local government has long recognised the invaluable contribution arts, culture and the creative industries make to local employment, community wellbeing and vitality, tourism and economic development, and we will continue to invest in this essential service.

...On behalf of Victorian councils, the MAV and Creative Victoria are committed to placing the creative industries at the forefront of our state's future growth, prosperity and liveability.⁶

The MAV position statement, on behalf of all Victorian Councils, details the essential role the arts play across such sectors as the visitor economy, education, social inclusion, health and wellbeing, and business development.

As we look toward what a 'COVID-normal' looks like for our society and economy, turning to creative transformations, solutions and activations offers a pathway forward. Investing in a Creative Precinct in Wonthaggi is an investment in our region's future with tangible returns on investment that are economic, social and cultural.

As noted at the 2018 Regional Development Conference:

There is widespread international consensus that the future of work will be driven by creativity and innovation... how can regional communities respond to the challenges and disruption of our economy and society?⁷

6 Municipal Association of Victoria – Position Statement for the Arts, Culture and Creative Industries. <https://www.mav.asn.au/what-we-do/policy-advocacy/social-community/arts-culture>

7 Quote from Tony Grybowski, CEO Ausco at the 2018 Regional Development Conference, Tweed Heads

Bass Coast Cultural Precinct Business Case and Plan 2011

Economic Benefit – Creative Industries

The Bass Coast Cultural Precinct Business Case and Plan 2011 estimated that the precinct would add \$3.7 million to the gross regional product and provide additional community benefits valued at \$2.3 million (p.4). This translates in 2020 to \$4.35m GRP and \$2.7m in valued benefits to the region respectively. Additional considerations such as the added asset of the Robert Smith Collection and the rapid population and economic growth of Wonthaggi in the past decade add further to the potential economic outcomes of investing in cultural infrastructure and assets.

Victoria's burgeoning creative sector delivers strong and consistent growth: supporting 260,000 jobs, up 15% in four years and critically contributing \$31 billion - or about 8%, to the Victorian economy. These figures are even more impressive when we see that this equates to 34% of the national creative economy. Australia's creative and cultural economy contributes more than \$111 billion or 6.4% of our country's total gross domestic product (GDP), and employs close to 600,000 people or 5.5% of the workforce.

Cultural Tourism has a key role to play in driving future economic activity in our region. In 2017 cultural tourism brought in \$2 billion to the Victorian economy, demonstrating the capacity of the creative sector to deliver important sustainable and long-term benefits in regional Victoria.⁸

Investing in the professional capacity of local artists and organisations – in addition to touring, professional and national creatives – is an investment in the economic vitality of Bass Coast.

As demonstrated in the *Cultural Precinct Business Case*, investing in the Bass Coast Cultural Precinct:

...will contribute to the quality and liveability of the region supporting community cohesion, shared identity, social connection and life-long learning. The centre's activities will create new opportunities for the community and increase community pride, health and mental health outcomes. (p. 4)

It will provide the social focus and amenity Wonthaggi needs, combating its 'service-town' image as it becomes destinational in its own right, re-creating its identity within the creative landscape for both our own population and for cultural tourism visitation.

8 Source: MAV Position Statement for the Arts, Culture and Creative Industries

Bass Coast Arts and Culture Strategy 2019-2029

Council's Arts and Culture Strategy 2019-2029 reinforces the case for investing in the future development of arts and culture in Bass Coast, creating measurable and beneficial outcomes across all of Council's Six Key Goals.

Social Benefit

There is a positive correlation between arts and liveability. The arts are valued highly in Bass Coast, therefore we will stimulate creativity for artist participants and audiences.⁹

Being involved in arts activities can improve people's mental and physical health and help build healthier communities, increase self-esteem, pride and cultural identity, sense of self-determination, control and belonging, academic outcomes, skill development and increased chances of employment.¹⁰

In our 'COVID-normal' context and post-pandemic recovery period, the importance of creativity to our social regeneration, community resilience and capacity has never been more important. The Bass Coast cultural strategy identifies we need to increase our investment in amenity and opportunity to better provide for these opportunities:

There is a lack of amenities, opportunities and pathways for young people. We also have a growing retiree population. We know that for arts and culture to make a vital contribution to community health and well-being, all demographics should benefit from participation in arts and cultural activities, therefore target activities that engage and foster participation from all sections of the community.¹¹

⁹ Bass Coast Shire Council Arts and Culture Strategy 2019-2029-9

¹⁰ Vic Health Resource Centre https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/-/media/ResourceCentre/PublicationsandResources/arts/VH_Promoting-Aboriginal-health-through-arts-V1.pdf?la=en&hash=3275AF42F36622D71AE2

¹¹ Bass Coast Shire Council Arts and Culture Strategy 2019-2029- 9

Wonthaggi Activity Centre Plan V2 (Draft 2019)

Found on the Bass Coast Council Website under Building and Planning, a Wonthaggi Activity Centre Plan was commissioned to be completed by Mesh Urban Planning and Design. While this report has not been advanced beyond its draft status, it relates to zones around the central business district of Wonthaggi, breaking it up into various zones including the former Wonthaggi Secondary School site on McBride Ave.

Supporting notes in this plan for the former Wonthaggi Secondary School site include:

- Future uses can potentially accommodate arts and cultural events and activities.
- Design as an iconic site within a growing regional centre.
- Design for the consolidation of civic uses in the precinct leveraging off the McBride Avenue Gardens amenity.
- Integrate the development with the existing road and pedestrian movement network.
- Require the creation of pedestrian connections through the site, internally and externally.
- Identify unique site features to be considered by the future architecture of the site.
- Where possible existing established and healthy trees should be incorporated into the design for continuity of character and provision of shade.
- Any future development of the site should also incorporate significant landscaping of the surrounding streetscapes. There is opportunity for substantial tree planting within the verge along all boundaries of the site.
- Investigate opportunity to upgrade McBride Gardens along with the redevelopment of the site. (p 72)

Further, the draft plan recommends the Council:

Investigate the part/full conversion of road to open space at the east side of McBride Ave in front of the proposed civic plaza. This would prioritise pedestrian movement between the site and McBride Garden and Council buildings. This may require the western section of McBride Ave to convert to a two-way street, and for parking provisions to be re-considered and dispersed across the precinct. (p 74)

and to:

Investigate preferred future options for the secondary school site, in consultation with the community and key stakeholders.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a vision combining exciting possibilities; all of which are supported by previously documented strategies that have not been enacted. Some recommendations have been tabled for over a decade.

Now is the time to act.

A major infrastructure project is eminently achievable, with broader funding resources in place and the skills and enthusiasm of our community patently obvious.

We recommend an open symposium on the arts in the Bass Coast region, with community and expert panel participation. We also call for Federal, State and Local government participants to come together for the development of a Masterplan for this worthy project for the entire region.

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Additional Comments and Contributions

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Resident and Advisory Committee Member

Appendix 1

Potential Masterplan Contributing Parties

This project should attract funding from a wide range of Federal and State agencies, in addition to local council support.

The following suggestions are included as an addendum to the paper for reference. Some organisations listed are not-for-profits and don't fund anyone; however, they may have advice on project implementation or be able to contribute through partnerships.

Federal

- Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications
- Australian Business Arts Foundation
- Australia Council
- Australian Broadcasting Corporation
- Australian Film, Television and Radio School
- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
- Commonwealth Grants Commission
- Digital Transformation Agency
- National Film and Sound Archive
- COVID economy-rebuilding funding

State

- Department of Premier and Cabinet
- Department of Education – for programs, but also including possible transfer of the former Wonthaggi Secondary College site and associated liability costs
- Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions (Vic)
- Department of Regional Development Victoria
- Museums Victoria
- Regional Arts Victoria
- COVID economy-rebuilding funding

Local Authorities

- Bass Coast Council
- West Gippsland Libraries
- Bass Coast Foundation
- Health and human services providers
- Bass Coast Adult Learning

Private

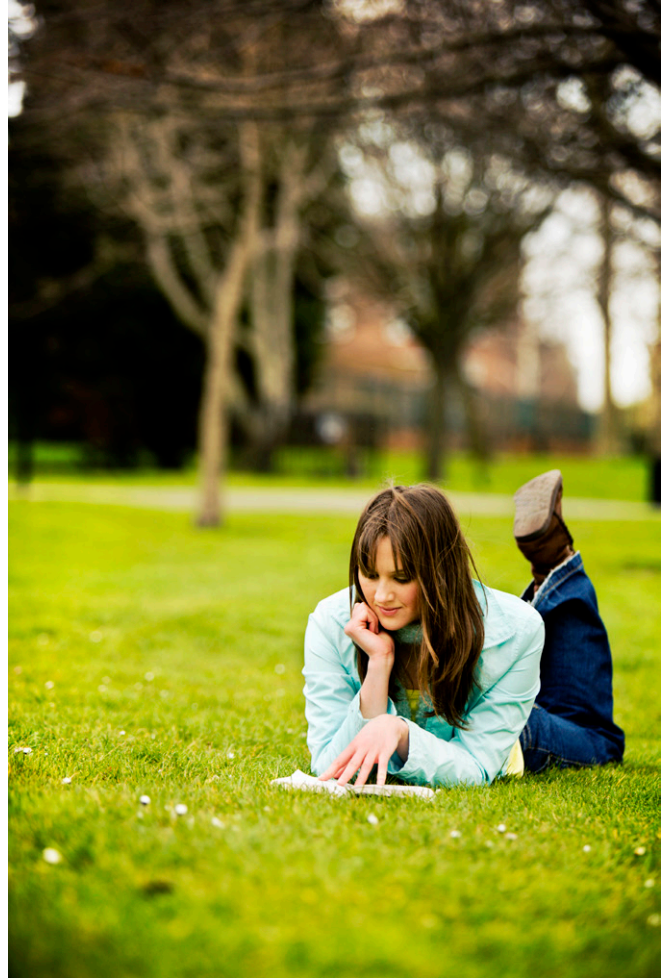
- Commercial rent on site: commercial sites can be incorporated into the development, particularly hospitality and accommodation
- Philanthropy: there are a number of foundations who focus on Bass Coast and dairy communities, including the Bass Coast Foundation which could be of great assistance in helping generate community funding
- Donations in Kind

Not For Profit Contributing Agencies:

- Bunurong / Boonwurrung People
- Bass Coast/South Gippsland Reconciliation Council
- ACMI: Partner organization (see Bendigo incubators)
- Writing groups including Writers Victoria, the Wheeler Centre, various writing circles and book clubs, and coordinating with large writing festivals such as the Melbourne Writers Festival for speakers to tour
- ArtSpace Wonthaggi

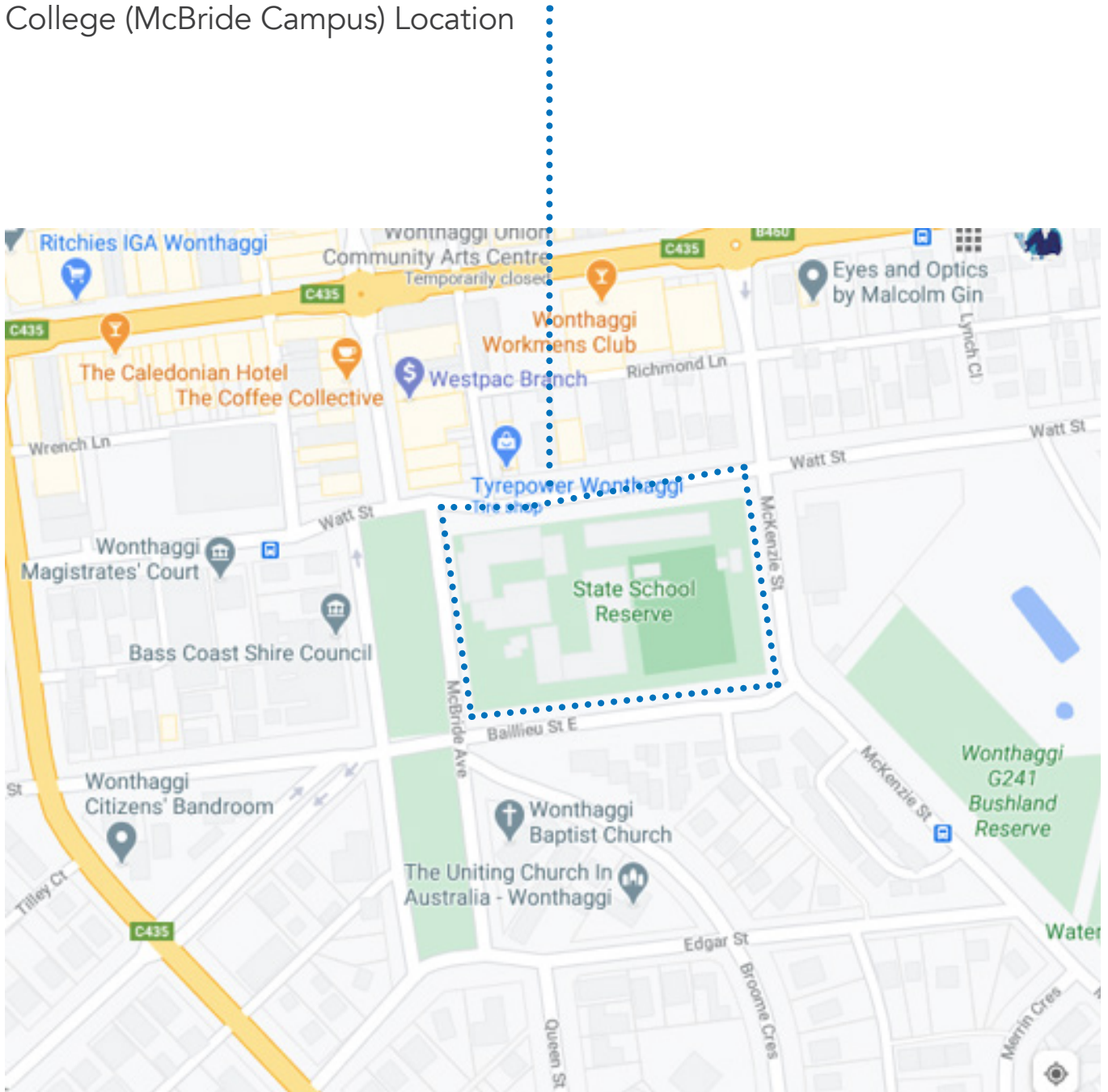
Benchmark Precincts

- Abbotsford Convent
- Ballarat – integrated arts and culture programs
- Bendigo – entire civic centre visual, performing, studio arts and production
- Bunjil Place, Narre Warren
- Clunes Book Town
- Collingwood Yards (Contemporary Arts Precincts enterprise)
- Sale – Port of Sale cultural and entertainment hub
- Shepparton – Shepparton Art Museum (SAM)
Appendix



Appendix 2

Former Wonthaggi Secondary College (McBride Campus) Location



Appendix 3

Some Existing Cultural Assets in Wonthaggi



Wonthaggi Union Community Arts Centre
(Cinema and Playhouse)



ArtSpace Gallery located within the
Centennial Centre (Tourist Information)



The Goods Shed - Bass Coast Artists'
Society



Rescue Station Arts Co-Op



Railway Station Museum



U3A, Wonthaggi Woodcrafters



Bass Coast Principal Library, Wonthaggi

For further information contact the

Bass Coast Arts and Cultural
Advisory Committee

(Contact person tba)

