

# annual report

## 2025

west vic business  
linking business across regions



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# introduction

At West Vic Business, we know the future of our region isn't built on networking lunches and workshops alone. It's built on bold ideas, vibrant spaces, and communities that thrive.

We're not just observers, we're catalysts for change. By working hand-in-hand with key stakeholders, we help shape precinct development projects that aren't just functional, they're magnetic. Thoughtful placemaking, strategic partnerships, and smart or strategic leasing are the levers that transform our towns and cities into places people want to live, work, and play.

Water is at the heart of this transformation. Waterfront precincts aren't just pretty, they're powerful economic engines. They attract tourism, spark business activity, and create the foot traffic that local enterprises need to flourish. But the impact goes beyond dollars. Well designed precincts nurture mental health, provide spaces for artistic expression, support sporting and recreational pursuits, and create environments that young people and families want to call home.

When youth stay, families grow, and communities thrive, the local economy follows. More jobs, more vibrancy, more reasons to stay, and suddenly, a region that might have been aging is bursting with energy, creativity, and opportunity.

This is the difference West Vic Business and our members hope to make. We're not just shaping precincts, we're shaping the future of our region.

# regional business context

Operating in the Wimmera–Mallee region (Western Victoria) brings a unique set of opportunities and challenges

## Challenges

- Ageing demographics: many business owners are from the baby-boomer generation, and succession planning is weak; this leads to potential business closures or foregone sales
- Workforce shortages: in hospitality, health and agribusiness, the region struggles to attract younger workers or skills from outside the region
- Rising cost pressures: energy, transport, regulatory compliance and wages are escalating, squeezing margins
- Member constraints: small firms have less discretionary budget to spend on membership or participation
- Funding contestability: grants from local/state government are increasingly competitive, reducing the efficacy of relying on external funding alone

## Opportunities

- Transition of business ownership: as baby-boomer owners retire or scale back, new entrepreneurs can emerge and initiatives like #HungryTown are well timed
- Precinct development and regional liveability offer opportunities to attract young families and workforce, which in turn strengthens local commerce
- Sector-specific networks enable tailored support and deep value for members, improving retention and relevance
- Collaborative local government / chamber partnerships can leverage external grants and funding more effectively

# membership movement

Membership throughout 2025 continues to trend in preference for service based sectors, with varied sector growth opportunities linked to industry specific network development, alongside alternate membership models to be presented in 2026.

Declining numbers throughout 2025 reflect a statewide trend for regional chambers and business groups, with increasing financial and extended pressures impacting perceived ancillary aspects such as memberships and subscriptions.



# the thriving business landscape of regional victoria

Engaging in business within regional Victoria presents a bold and thrilling opportunity. Robust sectors including agriculture, industry/manufacturing, and health, enhance the Wimmera Mallee's appeal as a vibrant and desirable tree change destination for those in search of alternatives.

The expansive natural beauty of the skies and landscape, along with a collection of the State's most cherished natural attractions such as The Grampians and the Little & Big Deserts, positions north-west Victoria for growth. This growth is supported by plans for increased livability initiatives, a fair approach to accessibility through rail and air transport, and a boost in funding for long-term major infrastructure projects and the emerging mining sector.





# our goal

to enhance existing and future business opportunities for our members through a supported and collaborative strategy for growth and targeted precinct development



# message from the Chair

2025 has been a year of reaffirmation for West Vic Business.

Amid a rapidly changing economic, demographic and membership landscape, we have held firm to our mission: to advocate for and connect the region's businesses, to empower local entrepreneurs and to help shape a sustainable, vibrant economy in northwest Victoria.

While we celebrate strong project outcomes such as our youth-entrepreneurship initiative #HungryTown, we also recognise that chambers and business groups across the state and nation face headwinds. Declining membership numbers, rising cost pressures, shifting member expectations, and tighter budgets. We embrace these realities and position ourselves proactively.

The coming five years will be critical. WVB will move beyond traditional chamber models, deepen sector-specific networks, align with precinct and youth-retention strategies, and adopt a new hybrid funding model to remain viable and relevant.

I thank our members, sponsors, local governments and volunteers for your support. Together we continue to shape the future of business across our region.

Mark Clyne

Chair, West Vic Business



# navigating financial challenges in regional business

A confluence of financial difficulties is significantly impacting regional businesses. The combination of rising energy and utility costs, challenges in securing stock and products through traditional supply chains, along with increased expenses for services, materials, and freight, is further intensified by legislative requirements.

Moreover, employees are pushing for higher wages to cope with their own financial struggles stemming from the rising cost of living, creating pressure on both ends. A major concern is the struggle to attract and retain staff in these industries, which is placing considerable stress and financial burden on many SMEs in our region.

As numerous businesses face aging ownership or contemplate selling or closing, they are actively looking for ways to reduce costs. This situation raises concerns about the impact on small business advisory and support services, such as business groups and chambers of commerce. We are witnessing a notable decline in membership both at the state and national levels. It is crucial to secure financial backing for these vital services, which act as the most trusted and accessible link between businesses and government. Exploring innovative models to ensure the ongoing viability of chambers and business groups is essential for their survival.

As we look ahead beyond 2025, West Vic Business remains dedicated to navigating the challenges presented by this evolving landscape. With a forward-thinking and innovative approach in 2026, we aspire to continue offering our members the support they need as we enter an unprecedented era of change.

(Financial report available upon request)

*Catherine Shirrefs*  
Treasurer

# ambassador

Think of our Ambassador Stacey Taig as the voice for local business. Loud enough to be heard across the region, sharp enough to cut through the noise, and always keeping the bigger picture in focus.

From local council to state and federal government, our Ambassador has been there throughout 2025, making sure our businesses and communities are seen, heard, and understood.

Turning local challenges and opportunities into captivating and practical projects that open doors to funding and connections, delivered straight to the people who can make them happen, whether in government, corporate, or private sectors.

But it's not just about papers and meetings. The Ambassador brings people together. Stakeholders, community groups, and local champions, all to lay the foundations for business activation and precinct development that excites, inspires, and drives real growth. Together, we turn potential into action, creating opportunities that keep our towns vibrant, our youth engaged, and our communities thriving.

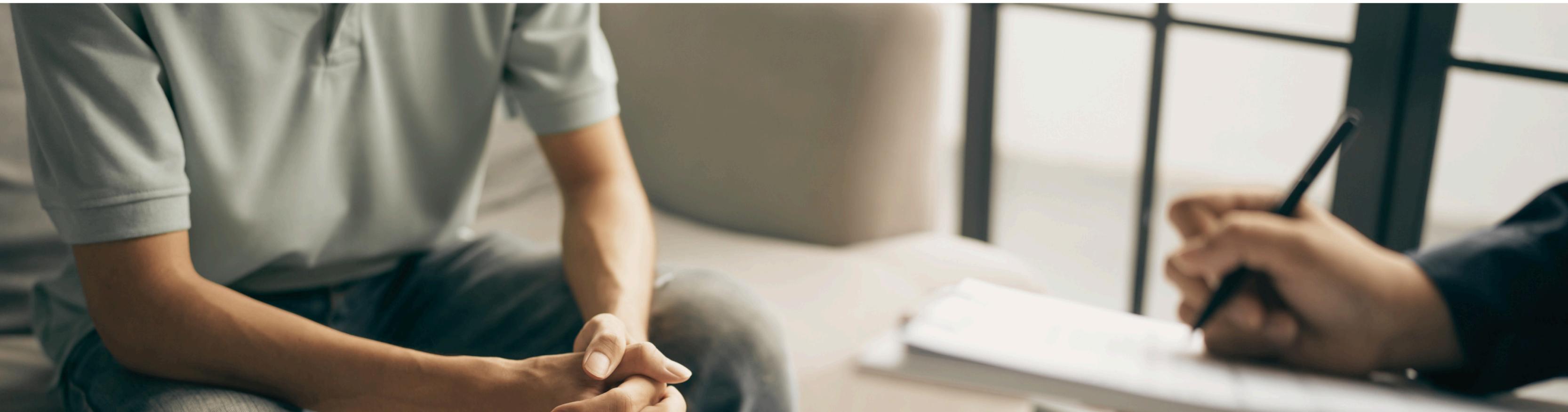
Because when passion meets purpose, great things happen, and our Ambassador is here to make sure that happens for every corner of our region.



# support beyond business

The Wimmera Mallee region is experiencing higher-than-average levels of mental health conditions, both diagnosed and distress-related, when compared to Victorian and Australian averages. As a result, there is a growing need for extended support for business owners and their staff. In rural and regional areas, including this region, the risks of end-of-life and self-harm appear to be heightened. Key factors contributing to this issue include limited access to mental health services, longer travel distances for care, social isolation, and economic stress.

This is where the strategic alliance formed by West Vic Business over the past 18 months becomes crucial. The Rural Finance Counselling Service has proven to be an invaluable partner for the chamber, consistently providing essential guidance and support to members. The Ambassador plays a vital role as the intermediary, facilitating access to counselling and offering direction related to occupational health and safety (OH&S) and internal protocols for business owners and management who are navigating the impacts of these tragic events.



# part of something bigger

The Victorian Regional Chamber Alliance (VRCA) brings together business groups and chambers of commerce from across the state, forming a unified voice for regional businesses.

The VRCA addresses regional concerns and advocates for rural business communities. They engage with industry leaders, state government representatives, and ministers to explore solutions and funding opportunities for regional projects and programs.

West Vic Business takes pride in being a vital member of the VRCA, representing the interests of North West Victoria.



# precinct development & regional sustainability

The future vitality of the Wimmera Mallee region depends not only on existing business support but on the broader ecosystem of livability, workforce, retention of young people, and attractiveness to new families. West Vic Business strongly advocates for an integrated approach to precinct development and underscores the role of the chamber in that process

## ***Why precinct development matters***

- Young people and young families are less likely to remain in or relocate to regions where there is limited social/recreational amenity, services, infrastructure, and decent employment/emerging enterprise opportunities
- Ageing demographics mean fewer active business owners, resulting engagement and shrinking consumer base in some towns. Precinct investment helps offset this by encouraging population growth, diversification and new business formation
- Business precincts (for example revitalised town centres, industry hubs, mixed-use zones) provide focal points for growth: new cafes, coworking spaces, light manufacturing, visitor economy assets
- The State Government is increasingly recognising the importance of regional chambers in precinct design and place-based development. Chambers bring the local business voice, networks and partner capability

## ***Role of West Vic Business in precinct development***

- Advocacy: partnering with local government, economic development offices and state agencies to ensure the business community's voice is heard in town strategy, infrastructure investment, marketing of towns and precincts design
- Youth-focus: aligning precinct development with youth retention – e.g., enterprise zones, incubator space for young entrepreneurs, mentoring programs
- Member engagement: helping local members capitalise on precinct investment opportunities (e.g., tenant opportunities in new hubs)
- Collaboration: facilitating local government, businesses, landowners and education/training providers to design precincts that deliver mixed economic and social outcomes, with recognition of the need to expand regional multicultural offerings

# precincts of focus

Like pieces of a puzzle, the precincts prioritised by West Vic Business ensure that business opportunities expand beyond the traditional and open up new and exciting revenue streams, with a flow on impact that significantly improves the economic landscape for not only the municipality of Horsham, but the wider region.

After taking the lead and instigating movement in the activation of the lake region, West Vic Business and its selected key stakeholder alliance are now working alongside Horsham Rural City Council as it moves towards master plan stage, of what is now referred to as the Three Lake Precinct

- Three Lake Precinct
- Haven Community Hub
- Maydale Reserve Event & Tourism Hub
- Roberts Place Hospitality Precinct
- Cinema Entertainment Precinct
- River Development Precinct
- Multicultural Community Centre Precinct



# quantitative outcomes

From case studies of successful regional waterfront developments (e.g., Lake Wendouree – Ballarat, Lake Hamilton, Lake Hume, Mildura Riverfront), the successful development of the Three Lakes Precinct will potentially have comparative outcomes to below

## **Impact Area Estimated Growth**

Visitor numbers

+25–60% in 3 years

## **Visitor spend**

+\$10–30 million annually

## **Employment**

+100–300 direct & indirect jobs

## **Private investment**

+\$20–80 million in adjacent precincts

## **Property values**

+10–20% in surrounding suburbs

While primarily economic, the benefits also include

- community wellbeing from recreation and open space access
- environmental stewardship through improved lake management and native habitat
- cultural activation supporting local artists, events, and heritage tourism

The precinct's drawcard effect will have the ability to enhance Horsham's regional profile, positioning it as a destination of choice within western Victoria. Improved infrastructure, amenity, and branding drive both population attraction and business confidence, all while providing the community with a high-quality recreational asset that reinforces local pride and wellbeing. In essence, Three Lakes Precinct is more than a local project, it's a catalyst for long-term regional growth, livability, and economic sustainability. Its multiplier effects extend well beyond the waterfront, embedding long-term economic resilience and community vibrancy

# sector specific networks



## **HART (hospitality & retail trade)**

Building the intrinsic connection of foot traffic between hospitality and retail, the network has begun discussions on CBD revitalisation through champions and shared ideas surrounding the experiential that is now required to attract and retain customers

## **MAIN (manufacturing, agribusiness & industry)**

Creating an environment and platform where these three intertwined sectors can rebuild relationships, gather to learn from shared topics of interest, and speakers/events that benefit all in what is arguably one of our strongest combined sectors

## **FIND (finance, industry & development)**

Insights from this sector reveal a strong desire to contribute. Enter our developing legacy project, the Small Town Big Hearts Philanthropic Trust. This trust, which will be established and overseen by an external administrative organisation, aims to create an online portal where individuals, businesses, and government entities can easily direct donations and funding to their chosen projects. In addition, it will feature a community chest salary sacrifice option. This innovative and unique design will help navigate the changing and challenging funding landscape, positioning our region for sustainable self-development.

## **PUSH (professional services & health) - launch 2026**

A social network designed to bring connections and help retain new professionals within the region

## **EAT (entertainment, accommodation & tourism) - launch 2026**

Establish connections and a central portal for a coordinated approach to heavy traffic periods, events and large scale activity across the region

# 2025 signature project

With the valuable support of corporate partners NAB and Woolworths, WVB has successfully introduced its youth-enterprise initiative, #HungryTown, yielding promising outcomes. This project aims to connect young entrepreneurial business management students from St. Brigid's College, an educational member, with an aging business community predominantly owned by baby boomers.

## ***Strategies for Effective Engagement***

Engaging Generation Z, known as the entrepreneurial generation, can be challenging. To bridge this gap, we have initiated a YouTube cooking show that links students with local hospitality professionals. This platform discusses startup ideas, as well as the obstacles and opportunities of business ownership, paving the way for ongoing and expanding engagement with this vibrant cohort.

## ***The Timeliness of the Initiative***

The timing of this initiative is crucial, as many business owners in our region are retiring or stepping back from active management roles. Without intentional succession planning and youth involvement, there is a risk that businesses may close or lose direction. National and regional data indicate a hotspot in the Wimmera Mallee for a generational shift in business ownership and management. Younger entrepreneurs are typically more tech-savvy, open to collaboration, and eager to access new markets while infusing fresh energy into the business landscape. By linking young entrepreneurs from schools with established local businesses, we encourage a knowledge transfer, mentoring, business renewal, and community cohesion.



## 2026 outcomes

- 2025 showcase report
- #hungrytown roundtable gathering term 1
- expand participation to include additional education members
- filming #hungrytown 2026
- expand #HungryTown to include a business succession mentoring stream: matching retiring owners with young entrepreneurs to take over or partner in local businesses
- establish a regional "start-up bootcamp" for young people wishing to launch enterprises
- link #HungryTown participant enterprises with our sector-networks so they gain ongoing support and network benefits
- identification of potential pilot enterprises, assist design for launch phase

# town strategy masterclass

Understanding the deep connection between the success of local businesses and the overall vibrancy and well-being of the broader community is essential for crafting strategies aimed at regional sustainability.

In 2025, the momentum continued from the successful Town Strategy Masterclass program held throughout 2024.

Community groups and town representatives are still leveraging this platform to establish essential funding connections and gain stakeholder knowledge to launch their projects. These initiatives aim to rejuvenate struggling spaces and build new hope for small rural communities facing challenges to their growth and survival.

The expansion and continuation of this project into 2026 is currently being investigated with funding bodies.



George Liaicos  
Director, Spark Strategy  
Town Strategy Masterclass Lead

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*Mr Chef*

building the dream

**5 PRINCIPLES TO CREATE DRIVE & DIRECTION**

**WENDY'S RETREAT**  
like coming home

**Kaniva**  
small town grit & determination

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*Wine*  
a little, laugh a lot

**GLOBAL EXPORTS**

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Kelly Smithyman  
succession in the making

**GENERATION NEXT**

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**quarterly**

promotional publications developed to reach funding, government & business bodies



# shop your town gift card program

The Australian gift card market was anticipated to expand from approximately 7.42 billion in 2024 to around 11.85 billion by 2029, reflecting a compound annual growth rate of about 9.6%. Digital gift cards, in particular, are experiencing rapid growth. For instance, digital sales reached a staggering 10.9 billion last year, and it's projected that digital will account for 43% of the entire market by 2028. Nearly 50% of holiday spending in Australia is expected to be allocated to gift cards.

A notable success in this arena is the Scenic Rim Regional Council's "Shop Scenic Rim" initiative, which reported sales of \$165,000 in gift cards (over 165,000 cards sold), injecting more than \$12 million into local communities. The program also highlighted that "every \$500,000 spent in retail businesses supports five local jobs." Such examples underscore the need for increased commitment to this sector. The Shop Your Town gift card initiative continues to generate revenue for member businesses across various industries. Recent discussions with WVB corporate partner Telstra have revolved around transitioning this program to a virtual platform. This transition improves the program's usability and mobility, enabling it to overcome geographical limitations. Consequently, member businesses across the region can benefit from the online shopping platform.

This initiative clearly demonstrates that locals enjoy supporting one another. Given the choice, they prefer to gift options for regional businesses rather than generic national cards. From dentists to curtain shops, builders to clothing boutiques, hairdressers to beauticians, these gift cards channel funds directly into our members' pockets. Stay tuned for more updates as this program is poised to become a leader in innovative business support.

# strategic focus 2025-30

Over the next five years, WVB will prioritise to

- build towards an integrated and bespoke small business advisory/support framework and concierge process alongside relevant councils, and work collaboratively in the co-design of precinct master-plans (in line with business engagement)
- support the development of service, agri and business specific hubs precincts to counteract the shortfall in service required bricks and mortar
- linking youth-oriented entrepreneurship via initiatives such as #HungryTown, with precinct spaces, so young enterprise can take root in local infrastructure
- leveraging precinct investment to improve livability, thus helping retain and attract young families, strengthening the workforce and local spending power

This work not only enhances regional sustainability but positions WVB as a partner of choice for councils and state agencies, further supporting proposed funding models.



# key stakeholder acknowledgement

- Wimmera Mallee Shire Councils
- Wimmera Catchment Management Authority
- GWM Water
- Rural Financial Counselling Service Victoria West/Finwell Support
- Local Learning & Employment Network
- Department of Education
- Department of Jobs Precincts & Regions
- Business Victoria
- FRRR
- Telstra
- Woolworths
- nbn Co.
- Mainstreet Australia
- Victorian Regional Chamber Alliance
- Victorian Small Business Commissioner

together we can do much more

