



WEST VIC BUSINESS

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ANNUAL REPORT 2026

***LEAVING A LEGACY
THE FUTURE FROM HERE***

*Celebrating 20 Years of Business Support
Throughout the Wimmera Mallee*

@westvicbusiness

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About This Report

This Annual Report highlights the last 20 years of operation, celebrating this incredible milestone, and investigating the possible future direction of the organisation. It provides an overview of the strategic progress throughout the previous six years, since transitioning to a regional focus under the banner of West Vic Business. It reflects our continued commitment to innovation, long term sustainability of the sector, and extended stakeholder value.

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Message from the Chair

Over the past two decades, West Vic Business, formerly Business Horsham, has stood as a pillar of advocacy, connection and progress for our regional business community.

What began as a local chamber in Horsham has grown into a regional voice representing businesses across multiple municipalities in Western Victoria. This transformation reflects both our ambition and our responsibility, to ensure that regional businesses are not only supported, but empowered to thrive.

Throughout this journey, our organisation has championed collaboration, economic development and innovation. We have worked alongside councils, stakeholders, industry leaders and community groups to deliver meaningful outcomes, whether through precinct activation, workforce development, or strengthening local development opportunities.

Today, we stand at an important crossroads. Like many chambers and business networks across Australia, we are navigating a rapidly changing landscape. The way businesses connect, advocate and access support has evolved, and so too must we.

Our members now face a critical decision, whether to dissolve the organisation, recognising the shifting environment, or to return it to its roots as a volunteer led entity that continues to serve the region.

Regardless of the path chosen, what remains undeniable is the legacy we have built together. This report reflects not only our achievements, but the enduring value of community led advocacy.

On behalf of the Executive, I thank every member, partner and volunteer who has contributed to this journey.



Chair 2022- 2026



Message from the Ambassador

As I retire from the role of Ambassador for West Vic Business, I reflect with immense pride on the past seven years, a period defined by strategic alignment, purposeful growth, and meaningful progress. Together, we have transformed a small, city based business group into a respected voice across both the state and national chamber landscape. Through thoughtful rebranding and repositioning, we elevated not only the organisation's profile, but also its capacity to advocate, connect, and deliver value across our region.

During some of the most challenging times in recent history, particularly throughout the pandemic, it has been a privilege to support both members and non-members alike. Providing informed, practical, and measurable small business advisory services across sectors has reinforced the role of West Vic Business as a trusted and reliable partner in times of uncertainty and recovery.

The networks and relationships I brought into the chamber have continued to evolve and strengthen, underpinned by growing respect and expanding strategic alliances with key stakeholders. These connections have been instrumental in amplifying our collective voice and ensuring our region remains well represented and supported. On a personal note, this journey holds even deeper significance. Having been the project manager of the Streetlife Project in 2006, which led to the creation of the original business group, it is incredibly special to have witnessed, and contributed to, its 20 year legacy. It is rare to help build something that endures, and rarer still to return in another capacity, reconnect, and help it grow further. For that, I am deeply grateful.

I extend my sincere thanks to our federal, state, and local government partners, to our valued stakeholders, and most importantly, to our members for their continued support, trust, and commitment over the years. Finally, I acknowledge and thank the many Executive members, past and present, who have given so generously of their time and expertise. Their dedication, insight, and selflessness are the foundation upon which organisations like West Vic Business stand. Without them, chambers and business groups simply would not exist. Beyond the work, it is the enduring friendships and shared purpose that I will carry forward. Each person who has contributed to this journey has left a lasting impact, and for that, I am truly thankful. It has been an honour to serve.

A portrait of Stacey Taig, a woman with long, wavy, reddish-brown hair, wearing a light-colored blazer over a white top. She is standing with her hands in her pockets, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is dark with decorative orange and white dot patterns on the left and right sides.

Stacey Taig

Ambassador 2020-2026



Faces Over The Years



PAUL ATHERTON

Long term member and Chair for a three year tenure, Paul's 'Chair Project of Choice' and passion was Urban Living. Encouraging centre revitalisation through combined commercial and residential spaces



ANDREA CROSS

Along with other long term members such as Allison Roberts and Catherine Shirrefs, Andrea is one of the original Executive. Dedicating 20 years of her life to serving the agriculture and wider business sector through her tenure with Business Horsham and West Vic Business



GILBERT ROCHECOUSTE

From the origins of Business Horsham through to the most recent master planning phase of the Lake Precinct Development Project, Gilbert & the team at Village Well have reinforced the importance of place making for the sustainable futures of the regions



GEORGE LIACOS

The founder of Spark Strategy, is a seasoned strategist in the social and for-purpose sectors. His work with town strategies and masterclasses for precinct managers will have significant and long lasting impact

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Where We Started

Founded in 2006, Business Horsham emerged as a local advocacy organisation, offering a platform for local businesses to address regional concerns. Originating from the Victorian State Government funded Streetlife Project, Business Horsham was formed through the amalgamation and unification of two previously opposing business groups. The establishment of a single chamber representing the city of Horsham marked a significant and positive shift towards collaborative representation for businesses across the municipality.



To maintain sustainability and a forward focused vision, the organisation cultivated networking opportunities through diverse channels, prioritising member engagement. Business-to-business support was actively promoted among members, while the Shop Your Town Gift Card Program was developed to assist businesses across all sectors in benefiting further from their membership. Information and training sessions were widely promoted and facilitated, aligning with state and federal government initiatives focused on upskilling and succession planning.



A Catalyst for Change

In 2020, the selection of an Ambassador signified a crucial turning point in the organisation's path. Bringing extensive expertise in multinational corporate strategic development, public relations, marketing, media, business management education, and entrepreneurship, the Ambassador worked closely with the core Executive team to address the shifting demands of a business community facing one of the most daunting and transformative eras in recent history: the pandemic. Every organisation encountered unforeseen changes, and those tasked with providing support and guidance were compelled to rise to the occasion in innovative ways.



To forge a new direction, Business Horsham needed to examine the swiftly evolving nature of human interaction, including how consumers and clients communicate and make choices. Life, irrespective of preferences or desires, was guiding everyone, including the chamber, along a new journey. Fast forward, and the early habits developed during this period continue to shape our lives today. As an organisation, Business Horsham had to learn to adapt to change and embrace the opportunities it presents, rather than clinging to the past and fearing what was to come.



Repositioning

Looking to the future, it was essential to recognise the shifting funding criterium and resulting pressures, and the satellite nature of Horsham businesses, which in many sectors, depended heavily on neighboring townships and the broader region. The Executive acknowledged the need for rebranding and repositioning to ensure long term sustainability, as well as to facilitate program and project development that cast a wider net. This dialogue led to the creation of West Vic Business. With a renewed regional focus, the chamber of commerce aimed to establish itself as the leading body and representative voice for businesses throughout northwest Victoria. This initiative was further enhanced through thoughtfully planned collaborations with state and national representative organisations, along with a focus on building strong relationships with local, state and federal government bodies.

West Vic Business recognised the need to evolve how it served both its members and the broader business community, shifting toward initiatives that delivered tangible, long lasting impact. This transition moved away from an over reliance on generic training sessions and declining networking formats, while still supporting access to these services through trusted third party providers. Instead, a more deliberate focus was placed on precinct development and place making, strategies designed to address the challenges of an ageing, predominantly baby boomer owned business landscape, and the broader economic implications tied to it. This approach led to the development of collaborative, stakeholder driven projects such as the Town Strategy Masterclass Program, the River Activation for Business Project, and most notably, the Three Lake Precinct Development Project. The latter represents a significant opportunity for generational economic impact, with the potential to generate an estimated \$15–\$30 million in direct annual visitor expenditure by capturing just 5–10% of the existing \$297 million Grampians tourism market, leveraging the continued growth in nature based tourism. If sucessful, this West Vic Business initiative, now at master plan stage with Horsham Rural City Council, will have a life altering impact on the wider business community.

Current Challenges

Business chambers and networks across Australia, particularly in regional areas, face increasing challenges

Structural Challenges

- Declining membership participation in traditional models
- Increased reliance on volunteer capacity
- Difficulty demonstrating immediate ROI for members

Digital Disruption

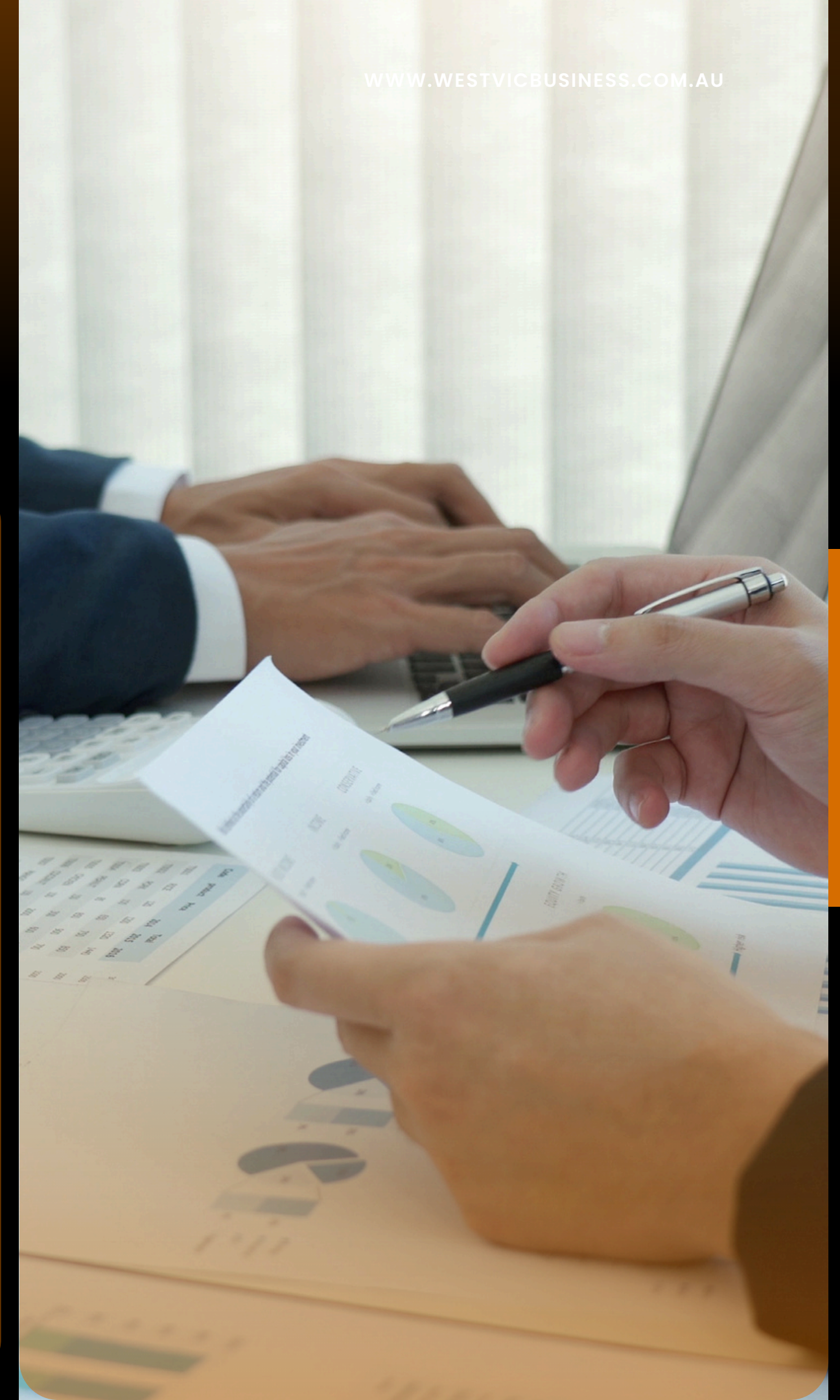
- Rise of online networking platforms
- 'Direct to consumer' marketing reducing reliance on intermediaries
- Fragmentation of business communities

Economic Pressures

- Cost of living impacts on businesses and households
- Workforce shortages in regional areas
- Changing industry structures and supply chains

Regional Specific Challenges

- Geographic dispersion of members
- Limited access to funding and resources
- Competition with local and external based services
- Escalating political environment and need to remain neutral, inclusive and all encompassing in approach and public platforms, with representation of all sectors





Alternative Models Explored

Over the past 12 months various alternative financial models have been investigated to support a more sustainable future for the chamber



Special Levy

While representative bodies favor a levy style model, imposing a council led and managed rate on already pressured businesses, was seen as a strategic misstep, likely to provoke significant community backlash

Outsourced Business Concierge Process

An unsuccessful proposal was submitted to the council suggesting the outsourcing of the agreed to business concierge process under the Small Business Friendly Charter. This approach aimed to reduce substantial employee costs for the shire and eliminate the need for chamber funding, thereby allowing for a free blanket membership throughout the municipality

Auspiced Body

In considering potential auspicing opportunities, it was important for West Vic Business to ensure that any partnership reflected strong, consistent public and professional support, as well as a reputation that aligned with the organisation's values and strategic direction. At the time of assessment, it was felt that level of visibility, engagement, and standing within key stakeholder groups had diminished significantly, making the alignment less suitable for West Vic Business's current and future objectives. As such, a decision was made to explore alternative opportunities that more closely matched the organisation's aspirations and the expectations of its members, corporate partners and stakeholders.



Empowering Our People

West Vic Business reached a defining moment in 2025, when discussions commenced around the compounding issues relating to sustainability of not-for-profit organisations, their required evolution, and recognising the need to reassess how the organisation could best serve the region's business community in a rapidly changing world.

In response, the Executive made the deliberate decision to place its future in the hands of its members, seeking a clear and collective mandate on whether to transition back to a volunteer led model or to dissolve entirely, creating space for new and emerging approaches to business support and advocacy.

This decision reflected a commitment to transparency, accountability, and the long term interests of the broader business community above organisational preservation.

Orderly dissolution, recognising that the traditional chamber model may no longer meet regional needs in its current form; or

Continuation reverting to a volunteer led organisation, refocusing on grassroots engagement and community driven initiatives



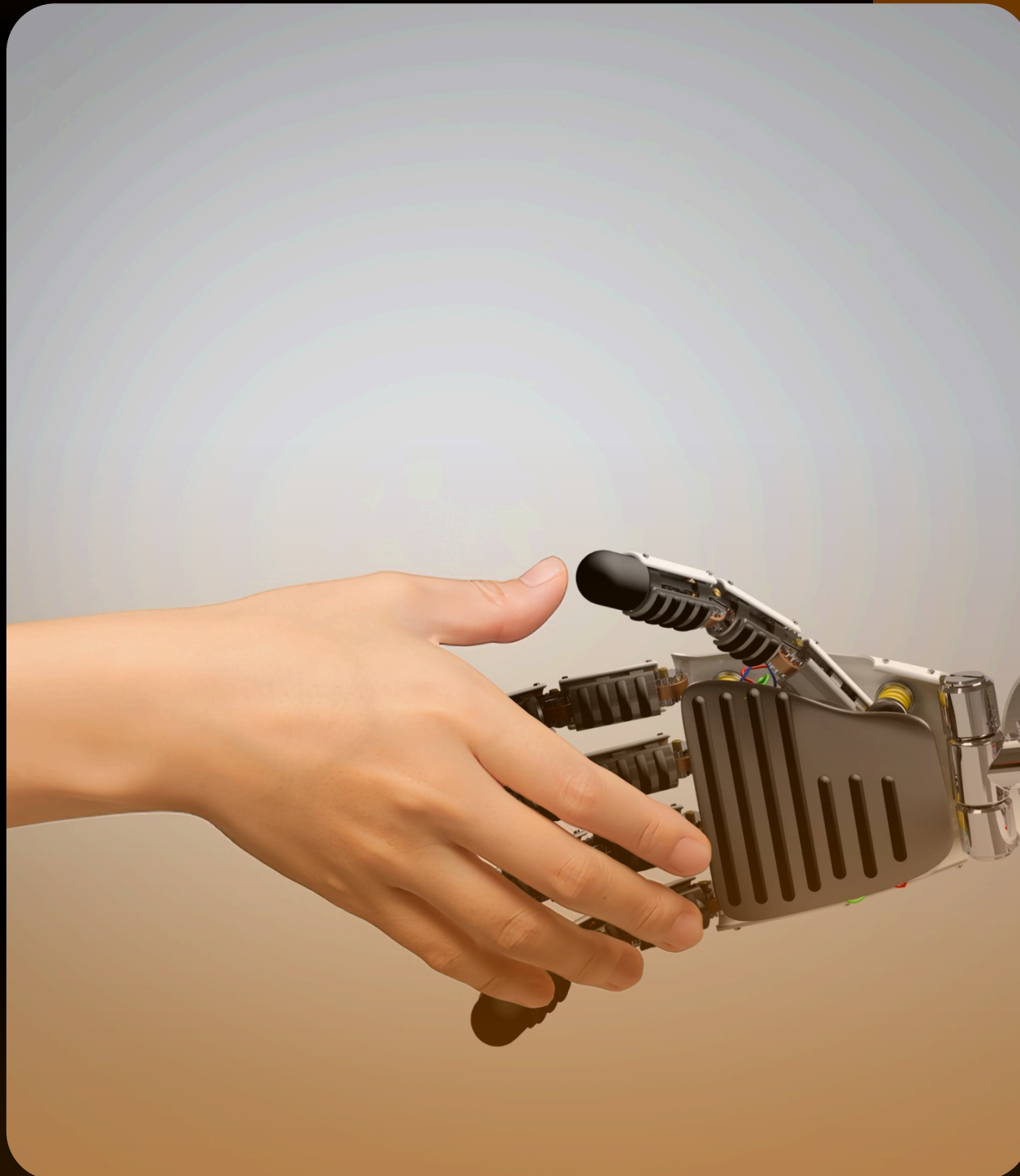
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Dissolution: Is It The End?

Throughout history, periods of technological advancement have consistently reshaped how people connect, work, and access information, often challenging established models but ultimately creating new pathways for growth and relevance. The current shift toward digital engagement and virtual interaction is no exception. Rather than signalling an end to traditional not-for-profit structures, it presents a clear opportunity to redefine and reimagine how organisations deliver value, particularly for regional and geographically dispersed businesses. As generational expectations continue to evolve, with a growing preference for flexible, technology enabled engagement, this transformation is occurring irrespective of legacy preferences. Embracing it requires not resistance, but a willingness to reflect objectively on future relevance and to adapt in ways that ensure continued purpose, accessibility, and impact.





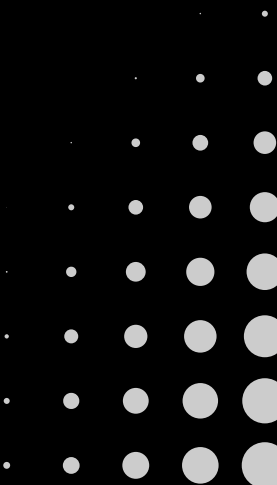
Volunteer Led Model

Reverting the Chamber of Commerce to a volunteer led structure represents a pragmatic and community focused response to declining membership numbers and reduced funding opportunities. By embracing a model grounded in local ownership and shared responsibility, the organisation can sidestep the financial pressures associated with formal operational structures while taking the time to re-establishing stronger, more personal connections with its members. A volunteer led approach encourages grassroots participation, and reinforces the intrinsic value of community driven initiatives. It creates space to prioritise 'in person' engagement, while demonstrating that collective effort and local leadership remain powerful drivers of relevance and resilience.

Financial Summary 2025–2026 Fiscal Year

The 2026 audited financials are yet to be received due to the expediated nature of the Annual General Meeting being brought forward from November to July. A profit statement and/or balance sheet can be requested from the Treasurer as a point of interest

	2025	2026
Total Income	\$86,810	\$69,874
Total Expenses	-\$110,611	-\$88,937
Net Loss	-\$23,801	-\$19,063
Net Assets	\$58,629	\$39,566





Statistics Around Future Sustainability of the Sector

Approximately one in four organisations report a decline in membership, with most experiencing modest reductions but a significant proportion facing drops of more than 10 per cent. Importantly, this decline is not universal, rather, it reflects a sector characterised by instability and transition. Many organisations are maintaining overall membership levels, but only through continual recruitment, masking a deeper issue of high turnover and weakening long term engagement.

This pattern is reinforced by membership flow data, which shows average new member growth of around 12.7 per cent against attrition rates of approximately 9 per cent. While this suggests nominal stability, it highlights a persistent cycle of churn, where organisations must constantly replace departing members simply to stand still. For chambers and business groups, this dynamic places increasing pressure on resources and limits the ability to build sustained, connected membership bases.

The primary drivers of declining and unstable membership are consistent across the sector. Financial pressure is the most significant factor, with more than two thirds of organisations identifying cost constraints as the leading reason members do not renew. In an environment of rising operating costs and economic uncertainty, discretionary expenditures such as memberships are often among the first to be reduced. Alongside this, nearly half of organisations attribute membership decline to a perceived lack of value, reflecting a shift in expectations from businesses that are seeking more tangible, outcome driven returns on their investment.

Compounding these challenges are structural pressures within associations themselves. Many organisations have experienced a reduction in staffing capacity of more than 20 per cent, limiting their ability to deliver services, engage members effectively, and innovate.

This creates a reinforcing cycle, where reduced capacity impacts value delivery, which in turn affects member retention. Broader economic conditions further intensify this environment, with increasing business closures and a contracting small business base reducing the overall pool of potential members.



Commitment to a Better Future

Taken together, these trends suggest that the issue facing chambers of commerce and business groups in Victoria is not simply one of declining membership, but of changing relevance and expectations. The traditional models of engagement, centred on networking events and generalised training, are under increasing pressure, as businesses seek more direct, measurable value. The challenge, and opportunity, lies in recognising this shift and adapting accordingly, repositioning chambers not as legacy structures in decline, but as organisations capable of evolving to meet the contemporary needs of their business communities. In this context, the decision before West Vic Business is not simply one of continuation or closure, but of purpose. The data shows a sector under pressure, with growth tempered by churn and constrained by cost, capacity, and changing expectations of value. What remains clear, however, is that the need for connection, representation, and local leadership has not diminished, only the way in which it must be delivered. Whether through an orderly dissolution that acknowledges a significant legacy, or a reversion to a lean, volunteer-led model grounded in community and direct engagement, the path forward should be viewed not as an endpoint, but as a transition. In either outcome, there is an opportunity to refocus on what has always underpinned the organisation's strength, people, place, and the collective will of the business community to support one another in times of change.





***Join us in transforming how
West Vic Business takes on the future***

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