

KURRI KURRI & District which includes the towns of Weston, Abermain, Neath, Pelaw main, Stanford Merthyr and Heddon Greta.

Vision of the Kurri Kurri District Business Chamber

The *Kurri Kurri District* will be recognised as the number one provincial community in the Hunter Region.

Kurri Kurri district its History & its Future

The township of Kurri Kurri and the surrounding district was first established when coal was discovered at East Greta Junction now known as Gillieston Heights. In those early days at the end of the 19th Century the coal mine employees lived in very primitive conditions in villages surrounding the future township of Kurri Kurri.

In 1902 after considerable lobbying by the coal miners a permanent settlement was established. The first lands in Kurri Kurri were sold in 1903. Kurri Kurri is recognised as the "First" planned Crown town in NSW. The town gained its name from the Aboriginals in the community as being "The Very First" or "First time once upon a Time"

From its early establishment as a town the people of the community always struggled for an identity and to have control of their own destiny. In 1906 the town shire council was handed over to the Tarro Shire and later became part of the Kearsley Shire, which later became Greater Cessnock City. During this period of destabilisation the community suffered from discrimination and deprivation from all levels of government.

1904 was a special period in the town's development as many of the major foundations were laid. The Hospital (supported by donations from the area miners) Primary School and the Coop Store to name just a few.

It was in this climate that Kurri Kurri business people set up their Chamber in 1913, less than ten years after the establishment of the town out of a need to establish such basic needs as banking and phone services for the growing business district and community. The early business people were also concerned at the lack of support for the district at Local, State and Federal government level.

For many years the township suffered from a period of political agitation and posturing that saw the community used to promote the aspirations of the local politicians at State and Federal level. Business and Economic Development lobbying has remained a key focus for the Kurri Kurri Chamber of Commerce since its establishment.

Coal was the economic driver until the late 1960's when mine closures such as those that were located in the new Hunter Economic Zone created high unemployment. John Renshaw Drive was constructed in 1966 to give displaced miners a direct access to the BHP and associated industries in Newcastle. When the ALCAN Aluminium smelter arrived in 1969 it provided employment opportunities for some of the displaced workforce. During the late 70's and early 90's the textile industry also provided an income for around 600 to 700 girls/women of the district, but this was short lived as the industry quickly moved offshore chasing cheaper labour, due to government policy decisions in the textile industry.

In more recent times the Kurri Chamber has had to lobby hard for the establishment of Weston Aluminium and Signode Strapping operations. Both of these manufacturing businesses have brought moderate relief to our employment woes.

The Kurri Chamber has continued to lobby for the construction of the F3 Link road from the Freeway to Branxton and has been instrumental in the establishment of a lobbying website www.f3linkroad.com.

The announcement of, and approval for the Hunter Economic Zone is the first major step in seeing unemployment significantly reduced in the Kurri Kurri district.

With this project we will see the commencement of serious economic development for the Kurri Kurri district as the town reinvents itself; and we will witness a future prosperity not seen since the establishment of the coalmines more than 100 years ago.

How did our community address the issues of Community and / or Regional hardship?

The Chamber of Commerce back in 1994 set down a strategy to bring together community groups into one cohesive force to drive economic development in the area.

The sub-committee charged with this progress was called "Beyond 2000" and featured ultimately in the securing of government grants from DEWRSB, Hunter Area Consultative Committee, NSW Department of State and Regional Development, Cessnock City Council and corporate Business support. More than \$150,000 was raised through regional partnerships to progress the town's future.

The Chamber was instrumental in the establishment of the Small Towns committee now known as "**Towns with Heart**". This committee eventually became a separately incorporated committee with ongoing support from the Business Chamber

The principle aim of this committee was to bring the community groups together to work as a team to further the community's future prosperity.

How did we demonstrate our community's refusal to give in?

The Kurri Kurri community is legendary in its commitment to ensuring the viability of its community. The many fights to maintain hospital and health services in our community are well documented. The fight to have the Alcan Aluminium Smelter, Weston Aluminium and the Hunter Economic Zone established in the community is also well documented. Both sides of the debate have been well covered in the press but the Business Chambers commitment to ensuring the ongoing development and prosperity of the area while not compromising the environment is testament to the chambers ideals.

Do we have a Community Based Strategy, Business Plan or similar response for overcoming the hardships?

Yes:

MISSION STATEMENT:

Kurri Kurri District Business Chamber is committed to improving the communities of the Kurri Kurri District through communication, promotion of employment opportunities and quality lifestyles.

The Chamber will support development and new business so long as it meets all the Environmental and statutory guidelines laid down by Federal, State and Local Governments.

The Chamber is committed to customer satisfaction, quality service and serving the needs of the community.

The Chamber will listen, inform, involve and educate the community in the process of making the Kurri Kurri District the best community in the Hunter Region.

STRUCTURE:

The Chamber is a non profit Incorporated Association.

The Kurri Kurri District Business Chamber has a Board of nine people all of whom are local business people with extensive business background.

The Board consists of a President, two Vice Presidents, Secretary, Treasurer and four ordinary board members.

OBJECTIVES:

- 1 Produce a regular Chamber column & business news via media releases informing the Kurri Kurri District what's happening and current events in the business community.
- 2 Contract a coordinator to assist the Chamber in promoting the community, economic development, business activities and membership. **(Towns with Heart)** Coordinator.
- 3 To expand the membership base of the Chamber to include Sporting organisations, Church, Service Clubs and other community groups to become associate members or full members depending on their financial status.
Membership base to be greater than 100. *(Current membership 84)*
(Set up an incorporated sub committee of the community to coordinate the Small Towns Project under the guidance and support of the Chamber) **"Towns with Heart"**
- 4 To ultimately have every business in the Kurri Kurri and Weston District as a member.
- 5 Develop and maintain a Website to market the Kurri Kurri area. **Kurrikurri.com**
- 6 Encourage and support high profile festival events for the community.
- 7 Encourage all business people to participate in the beautification of the business districts by restoring or decorating their premises appropriately.
- 8 Promote the community to outside business organisations with a view to encouraging them to set up their business in the Kurri Kurri District.
- 9 Promote and encourage a Shop Local campaign.
- 10 Promote the Kurri Kurri District as the Eastern Gateway to Hunter Valley Wine Country.
- 11 Lobby for the Kurri Kurri Highway Corridor F3 Extension as a number one priority.
- 12 Produce a new Business Prospectus to replace the current Business Prospectus by the end of 2009.

What level of Publicity / promotion exists for the strategy / plan?

In 1998 the Chamber produced a development prospectus. This has subsequently been updated in 2004.

The Business Chamber commissioned the development of a community portal website in 2001.

www.kurrikurri.com. And constructed the F3linkroad website in 2002 to lobby for the construction of the Freeway extension.

These websites are being continually developed by the community and **Kurrikurri.com** was given to the local High School in 2004 as a development project for IT students. As part of this sponsorship the chamber also instigated an annual award for the school for the IT Student of the Year.

A high profile festival has been created (Kurri Nostalgia) and has now been run for the fifth time.

The **Towns with Heart** committee have set up a Mural Project with more than fifty now completed. It is estimated that at the end of 2008 more than 50 murals will be completed. Kurri Kurri is now on the international map for Mural Towns.

A monthly Farmers Market has been established by the **Towns with Heart** committee and is now organised by the Girl Guides with help from Kurri Kurri Rotary Club.

New brochures promoting the Murals and the Tidy Town Heritage Walk are sponsored.

The Nostalgia Festival began 5 years ago is now an integral part of the festival calendar in the Hunter.

What partnerships have been formed to help address the issues of community hardship? Between:

There are numerous organisations dedicated to Economic Development and growth in the Kurri Kurri district. They are the Kurri Kurri District Business Chamber, The Hunter Region Business Enterprise Centre in Kurri Kurri, Cessnock City Council, Cessnock City Tourist Board, Kurri Community Centre, local Service Clubs and the Kurri Kurri High School.

Attached to these are a number of committee's including the Light Metals Task Force, Tomalpin Employment Zone Task Force, **Towns with Heart**, Kurri Kurri Tidy Town committee, the Kurri F3 Corridor, Transport Taskforce and the "Link or Sink F3 group.

By working closely with all these committees the Chamber will bring about the economic change required to see the Kurri Kurri & Weston communities grow.

Council:

Cessnock City Council's Economic Development Officer has played a major role in the development of the Towns with Heart Project and other economic development projects as far back as 1996. The first major work undertaken by council and the board of the Hunter Region Business Enterprise Centre was the establishment of a Business Incubator in the town. This facility was constructed in 1998 from a recycled textile factory. The Incubator can house up to 28 businesses in start-up or development phase. To date 43 businesses have been in and out of the Business Incubator with a further 22 in tenancy. This is an excellent project where council and the community have worked together.

The council Economic Development Officer guided the Chamber sub committee through the planning and submission stage with the Beyond 2000 project. Ultimately a new committee was put in place called "**Towns with Heart**" committee in 2000 with representatives from all areas of the community including local councillors. Council has also given financial and extensive in-kind support to the development of the town through the Tidy Town Committee.

Community:

Kurri Kurri as a community has extremely strong bonds throughout the town due in part to the disadvantages suffered over the past 100 years.

Mining is an industry where great hardship was experienced. Mine explosions and deaths brought together the community. The miners and their families were instrumental in the building of the Kurri Kurri Hospital and the Ambulance service for the town. Eisteddfods were very popular because of the Welsh and Geordie backgrounds and we still have a strong annual Eisteddfod in Abermain each year.

The community really got behind the Tidy Town movement in 1988. The network developed under the guidance of the Tidy Town committee saw the town ultimately win the NSW Tidy Town crown in 1993 and become a finalist in 1994 for the best town in Australia. Weston and Abermain have also had very effective Tidy Town committees.

The project wouldn't have become so exceptional without the support of Service Clubs, Schools, and the Business, business, community groups and council.

While unemployment is still our greatest challenge the establishment of a strong hospitality and tourism business on the towns backdoor and the establishment of the Hunter Economic Zone for large business augers well for the future economic growth of the town.

More recently we have seen the corporate food retailer's move into town. KFC and now Aldi Supermarket have opened or under construction and it won't be long before McDonalds Restaurant will be a part of the retail mix.

Local Businesses / Industry:

The Kurri Kurri township was created out of a need to provide proper housing and services for the fast growing mining industry, which commenced at the end of the nineteenth century. Most of the business in the community in the early days of the town revolved around mining. The town had a growing retail centre and the timber industry was a major player because of the need to provide timber for the mines. After the world wars another industry sprung up by the allocation of small farm lots for returned servicemen know as Soldiers Settlements. The soil structure and composition was poor and this rural industry was only subsistence farming. In the early sixties the mining industry began to close down placing many hundreds of blue-collar workers on the dole. As a result of this the land became cheap and the retailers began to feel the pinch through low incomes. The local Cooperative Store was one of the first to feel the effects of the mine closures and closed down putting a number of retail employees out of work.

In 1965 Alcan one of the largest Aluminium producers in the world looked at developing an Aluminium Smelter on the East Coast of Australia. They looked at five potential sites before deciding to build the plant in Kurri Kurri. The Northern Miners Federation members were a driving force in the eventual establishment of the plant due to the high unemployment in the area.

With the establishment of the smelter came a plethora of new business in manufacturing to support the new industrial giant. The textile industry followed providing an income for the women of the area but this was a short lived history only lasting 15 to 20 years before government policy saw the demise of this valuable employment sector for the females of the district.

In more recent times we have seen a small increase in manufacturing with the establishment of Weston Aluminium and ITW Strapping operations. These plants have provided a temporary relief for some of the blue-collar workers of the area.

With the establishment of the Hunter Economic Zone new industries will provide future employment opportunities for the community.

Other Groups/Organisations

The Business Chamber has had enormous support from community groups in the area. All of the groups have worked constructively to see the town grow. These groups include the Kurri Kurri Lions Club, Kurri Kurri Rotary Club, Kurri Girl Guides, Tidy Town Committee, Kurri Community Centre, registered clubs, sporting groups, schools and State, Federal and Local government through grants.

What evidence is there to demonstrate successful outcomes, "Against all the odds`?

For many years Kurri Kurri persevered through adversity to establish itself as an independent community. It was during the late 1980's that the town saw an opportunity to develop its own profile through the Keep Australia Beautiful Council Tidy Town competition. During the period from February 1988 until 1999 the community worked hard to pull the district together until ultimately a regime of making the community a better place to live was established.

This ten-year period saw the community receive accolade upon accolade for its achievements. Tidy Towns was the catalyst for the change in community focus. The next phase was the establishment of the Small Towns committee now known as “**Towns with Heart**” to cover the seven small towns in the Kurri Kurri district. This committee has achieved many new milestones against the odds. The most recent project being the Mural Project to paint the history of the community. The mural project has been the fastest town Mural Project undertaken in Australia and possibly the world.

Kurri Kurri is now being recognised as a business destination for tourism and industry other than a tired old coalmining town.

The Future:

The Kurri Kurri district has a bright future with major housing developments under construction or in the planning stage.

Medium house prices match or are greater than areas such as Rutherford, Telarah, Metford and Bolwarra Heights. In some cases these prices are greater than the Cessnock city area.

Old miner's cottages have been restored or where they have been neglected pulled down and new homes or duplex developments replacing them.

The Hunter Economic Zone (HEZ) is much closer to becoming a reality and when businesses begin to establish in this area much needed employment opportunities will take place.

With the ultimate construction of the F3 Link to Branxton, the Kurri Kurri district will grow exponentially.

Conclusion:

External professors, academics and other so called experts look at the Kurri Kurri district as though it was still in the 1960's when unemployment was in double digit figures and youth unemployment was close to 30%.

The district still has issues as does many other communities throughout NSW.

The Kurri Kurri district will prosper when the right economic conditions and infrastructure and education facilities are there and governments of all persuasions give the community the appropriate support. This includes the retention of adequate public medical services.