

Bushfire Resilience & Climate Adaptation



PROJECT UPDATE: Forrest Gateway to the Otways

The first part of the Gateway Project was a feasibility study (2018-2020) into the re-development of the DELWP buildings at 47-49 Grant Street into a state of the art bushfire resilient community hub.

In 2021 the state government asked the Gateway Project to apply for another grant of \$500,000 for the next step in re-development of the community hub. Our application included a deep level of community engagement to inform development of detailed facility plans and all the permits needed to get a state of the art bushfire resilient community hub to the shovel ready stage.

One of the state government funding requirements was that we secure an additional \$100,000 from other sources for community-led bushfire preparation and resilience projects in Forrest and district. Many hours of volunteer work went into grant writing and liaising with funding bodies.

Unfortunately, despite moving through the early rounds of assessment and being recommended in the top tier of projects, state government priorities were affected by the Pandemic and we were unsuccessful in securing the \$500,000 funding.

BUT - We were successful in the additional funding applications. We received a total of \$100,000 to support community engagement in bushfire resilience from the following sources:

- *The Lord Mayors Charitable foundation*
- *Preparing Australian Communities (Federal Govt)*
- *Colac Otway Shire community grants*

Despite our disappointment that the re-development of 47-49 Grant Street wasn't funded, the \$100k that we did secure, along with the networks we've developed and lessons learnt means we can continue with the broad objectives of the Gateway Project. These are:

- Bushfire risk reduction
- Climate adaption
- Resilience and recovery



Where to from here?

Without significant additional funding, it's unclear how we could proceed with the full plans for a new state of the art bushfire resilient facility and community hub, as explored by the Gateway Project. The Forrest Public Reserves Committee (FPRC), who now host the Gateway Project, will continue to consider alternatives.

In the meantime, the project team and our partners have identified a list of ideas that could help our community adapt to climate change, prepare for a bushfire emergency and help us recover afterwards. This has been informed by community consultation throughout the project. These are:

- More education and engagement about leaving early on high risk days
- Developing individual and community-wide bushfire plans
- Learning how to minimise fire risks at your own home and as a community
- Identifying the safest place to go in our community - if people become trapped in town during a bushfire.
- Planning how we would recover and preparing our infrastructure and community assets.
- Establishing a new bushfire resilience committee that can work alongside the CFA to coordinate local community preparation and recovery efforts into the future.

How will we do this work? We're hiring!

Some of the funding will be used to hire a part-time contractor to do this community engagement work in our region. We are proud to invest in local skills and bring new employment to our region. This new position (working alongside existing volunteers) means many more ideas and questions raised from the community will be able to be embraced and addressed.

We encourage everyone to look at the role and share with your networks.

The full position description is available at <https://www.forrestvictoria.com/news>.

For a further discussion about the role, please contact Beth Sprunt or Kylie Pollock from FPRC by emailing beth.sprunt@unimelb.edu.au or kpconsultations@bigpond.com.

**Applications are due on 5th September 2022
by email to forrestgatewayproject@gmail.com**

Identifying a safer place in our community

It's clear that when it comes to bushfire danger, the safest place to be is far away. Our top priority will always be supporting and encouraging locals and tourists to leave early on high risk days.

However, it's important that we have somewhere for support and long-term recovery efforts after a fire. This could also potentially be a place to shelter as a last resort if anyone's personal fire plans fail and they get trapped in town during a bushfire.

FPRC commissioned South Coast Bushfire Consultants to undertake an assessment of current community places in relation to bushfire safety. We wanted to know which site could be the most resilient to bushfire; to understand what upgrades would be possible at the sites to best prepare them and minimise risk; and if any sites had potential to be a Neighbourhood Safer Place/Bushfire Place of Last Resort (NSP/BPLR).

On Tuesday 26 July, over 30 local and district residents gathered at the Hall and online to hear the findings of the assessment, presented by Kylie and Mark Steel from South Coast Bushfire Consultants.

They assessed the Forrest Hall, the Community Hub site, the Forrest Common, and the Terminus Hotel. We included the Terminus Hotel because it has been discussed by many locals over the years as somewhere they might go in a fire. In follow-up to an audience question, the Recreation Reserve was also assessed following the meeting.

South Coast Bushfire Consultants identified the Forrest Hall (14 Grant St) as the best of the five sites and outlined recommendations for upgrades to increase the safety and resilience of this important community asset. Their reports detail the work and investment required to strengthen the Hall's resilience to bushfire. If a number of the upgrades outlined in the report are undertaken, then the Hall would be considered to be 'reasonably resilient to bushfire'. Key areas of weakness to ember and fire penetration include the decking and verandah area, the front entrance doors and windows, subfloor and roof.

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The localised radiant heat exposures were identified to be not exceeding 10KW/m². This means it could be considered as a potential NSP, subject to assessment by the CFA. However the report underlines the risk in Forrest due to the broader landscape, which is considered to be extreme as there are large areas of forest and unmanaged vegetation within the surrounding area with high fuel loads. We all need to be realistic about how serious a bushfire event may be for Forrest. The safest place is to have already left well in advance.

The reports also provide recommendations for strengthening aspects of the Community Hub buildings (47-49 Grant St), noting that resilience of community assets is important for long-term post-fire recovery even if those buildings are not recommended as a place for shelter during a bushfire. Improvements should also be considered at other community assets such as the Recreation Reserve.

People at the session broke into four groups to talk about the report, and what action they would support. Three of the four groups indicated clear support for further investment in the Hall, with the final group raising questions about the potential costs. Participants also raised a range of excellent questions which need further research and consideration. These included questions about likely water access at the site and in town during and following a fire; how to manage vehicle traffic and parking around the site; and especially,



how to make sure the clear message remains that people should leave early on high risk days, and not rely on a community shelter.

FPRC is now considering the findings of the reports, the questions raised at the community meeting and what activities and investments we can undertake as a next step. **You can access the full reports at the Forrest Public Reserves Committee page of www.forrestvictoria.com/community.**

A huge thank you to Colac Otway Shire for the funding that enabled this assessment; to South Coast Bushfire Consultants; and to the Forrest General Store for their excellent catering on the night.

We also thank the many community members, groups and partner organisations who've supported the Forrest Gateway to the Otways project over the past several years, and we look forward to continuing to work with the whole community.



Consultants reports are available on the Forrest Public Reserves Committee page of the Forrest Website www.forrestvictoria.com/community



Forrest Gateway to the Otways Project - a brief history

In 2015 DELWP announced they were moving from Forrest to Barwon Downs.

The community successfully lobbied for the site at 47-49 Grant St not to be sold, and to be used for community priorities. During 2017, extensive consultation by DELWP (called the Forrest Futures process) documented community priorities for the site as: Neighbourhood Safer Place, CFA facilities, Neighbourhood House, arts space, public toilets, historical and cultural tourist centre.

A local group of volunteers formed to explore the possibility of a new facility on the site. The Forrest Gateway to the Otways Centre was an idea identified by our community that could increase bushfire, climate and economic adaptation, resilience and recovery. It would be a state of the art community hub and a home for the Neighbourhood House, CFA, Historical Society and local artists.

It could also be a micro-business incubator and provide space for the community, students and visitors to connect, collaborate and learn in the heart of the Otways. This would help the Centre to generate income to maintain the site and create more local employment. As a state-of-the-art bushfire resilient building co-locating these community services, it would also model resilience-in-place, and provide a more secure community asset in the face of a bushfire

The volunteer group successfully secured a Victorian Government grant (auspiced by the Forrest & District Community Group) to undertake a technical and feasibility study, develop concept architectural drawings, investigate a business model and establish key partnerships. We were then able to employ a number of short-term contract positions to help deliver the project.

The volunteers and contractors planned and undertook many:

- formal and informal community meetings
- articles in the Forrest Post
- meetings with locals, partners and funding bodies

All this helped to shape the project and over two years numerous activities were achieved:

- The Fire and Rain Podcast series brought experts and leaders to our community (available on Spotify and Youtube)
- Research projects with Deakin University and Landcare investigated local implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and regenerative agriculture
- We helped develop the Forrest 2030 Plan which brought together local groups and identified the priorities for our town over the next 10 years. This plan is still informing local and regional investment in Forrest
- We established a network of bushfire experts and leaders across the region and state to support Forrest and District to become a bushfire adapted community. This includes G21, the CSIRO, Emergency Management Victoria, CFA, DELWP, Barwon Water, Regional Development Victoria, and Colac Otway Shire
- Initial architectural designs for the facility were developed, informed by engagement with local community groups, businesses and residents, and by a technical working group of bushfire experts from across the country.

Between 2018-2020, the DELWP site was handed to the community for management through the FPRC which is responsible for managing the Community Hub and carpark and the Forrest Hall.

All the community engagement, partnerships developed and lessons we have learned along the way is what continues to drive, inform and focus the volunteers. We look forward to continuing the important work of bushfire and climate adaptation and resilience with our community.

What is an NSP-BPLR? (Colac Otway Shire Neighbourhood Safer Places Plan (2021): a 'place to provide persons in bushfire affected areas with a place of last resort during a bushfire'. Some important limitations: 'NSPs are not community fire refuges or emergency relief centres. NSPs are Places of Last Resort during the passage of a bushfire, and are intended to be used by persons whose primary bushfire plans have failed. NSPs are places of relative safety only. They do not guarantee the survival of those who assemble there. Furthermore, there may be serious risks to safety encountered in travelling and seeking access to NSPs during bushfire events. Depending on the direction of a particular fire, it may not be 'a safer place' to assemble than other places within the municipal district. At that point in time it almost certainly will be a matter for individual judgement and decision, as to which if any NSP a person or persons should travel in the presence of fire.'