

Welfare funding call as battlers turned away

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A MOUNT Gambier-based welfare organisation has urged the Federal Government to provide more funding after it was forced to turn away battling South East residents in recent days.

Due to the rise in unemployment and the impact of the global financial crisis, 254 residents knocked on Anglican Community Care's (ACC) door for help between July and December last year - an increase of 37

compared with the previous year. Another 32 struggling residents, including children, sought assistance from ACC in the first 22 days of January, four of whom had to be turned away.

Mount Gambier ACC included these alarming statistics in a report to a meeting held in Sydney on Tuesday with Employment and Workplace Relations and Social Inclusion Minister Julia Gillard.

The Federal Government called the meeting to tap into welfare sector groups, including ACC and the Salvation Army, to determine the impact of the global financial crisis on

communities in terms of unemployment, housing and mental stress.

An Access Economics report in November showed welfare groups have turned away about 80,000 people seeking assistance nationwide during 2006-07, due to a lack of funding for services.

The ACC report referred to a changing client base seeking help.

"We are just starting to see a different client seeking accommodation support such as those in part-time work and lowly paid work. It has been rare to have clients seeking help whilst in employment," according to the report.

"We've also had experiences where former Mount Gambier residents have lost jobs interstate, lost tenancies and are returning to Mount Gambier for support."

Welfare groups want the government to commit to at least \$300m in extra funding to provide emergency relief such as cash handouts for food, bills and shelter.

ACC expressed doubt where the funding would go and hoped rural communities would not be left out.

"Current emergency relief funding does not adequately allow for infrastructure costs," the report read.

"In rural communities there is a

reluctance to ask for handouts. We need to tackle this more holistically and provide longer term solutions so people can move forward."

However, ACC acting chief executive Helen Francis said it was promising the sector has been invited to meet the Federal Government.

"We hope this will translate into fast action, as we are already seeing people who were traditionally not on benefits," she said.

"We hope it is acknowledged that despite all the similarities within the community welfare sector there is acknowledgement of differences, such as those in rural communities."

Festival set to put down roots in city despite poor turnout

THE Blue Lake Blues and Roots Festival appears set to be an annual fixture on Mount Gambier's major events calendar, despite only 300 ticket-buyers attending the inaugural concert at the weekend.

Millicent-based organiser Dale Nitschke took a hit of tens of thousands of dollars when the droves of people he hoped would turn up on the day failed to eventuate, despite sunny weather, 12 highly-regarded acts and strong facilities at McDonald Park.

"We needed over 1000 payers to break even," he said.

However, he refused to be turned away from his vision of developing a major annual event for the city, pushing ahead with a five-year plan to build the festival with support of sponsors and investors.

Mr Nitschke said he hoped to rein in the debt resulting from the festival with the help of supporters and creditors and the quality of the first event was likely to see it gain popularity.

"The bands said they would spread the word and help make sure there are people everywhere next year," he said.

"A lot of the young people were saying they had more fun than any of the really major festivals they had been to and one guy said he had been to nine blues and roots festivals in the past 12 months, but this one was the best and he'd bring a busload from Colac next time."

Mr Nitschke said the festival would be held later in the year, possibly in March, and developed in future to feature larger marquees, visual arts displays and wine stalls.

"It will be a ripper - a great day out," he said.

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CSuse O'Connor and five year old Crystal Batu enjoy the fun of the inaugural Blue Lake Blues and Roots Festival on Sunday.
 Picture: JASON WALLACE.



CMount Gambier's Terry Sutherland on stage during Sunday's Blue Lake Blues and Roots Festival, which featured musicians from Mount Gambier alongside interstate acts.

Record heat Timber harvest delay

From front page

CFS regional commanding coordinator Brenton Hastie said the heat wave was causing extreme fire conditions. Fire authorities were worried and on full alert.

He warned the wind speed was expected to pick up today and tomorrow, which further increased the fire risk.

"We are not expecting conditions to get better for at least few days," said Mr Hastie, who urged people to follow harvesting bans in the region's forests.

Meanwhile, Allendale East CFS and Nelsyn CFA brigades were called to a power pole fire on Tuesday afternoon, after sparks were sighted coming from the pole near the Nelson Road on the Victorian side of the border.

Nelson brigade deputy group officer Bill Spehrs said the sparks started a small blaze.

"On such hot days all the volunteers are ready to move as soon as their pagers go off," said Mr Spehrs, who explained all the volunteers along with the Nelson captain Stephen Silvester did a great job to contain the small fire.

He said the crews stayed at the site until a representative from Powercorp arrived from Portland to ensure the fire did not reignite and cause a major incident.

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From front page

"It has not been able to develop the infrastructure and so I and other bluegum companies have been very frustrated by that."

Timbercorp forestry general manager Tim Browning said the global economic crisis was affecting all commodities and products, be it food, coal or woodchips.

But woodchips from bluegums were still in demand and contractual obligations and supply agreements with customers were still in place "so it is not the end of the world".

Mr Browning lashed out at former State Governments which had privatised ports essential for exports.

"Green Triangle woodchips are in demand and the only thing stopping harvesting is the development of the Port of Portland," he said.

"The Port of Portland has not been able to finance itself and build the facility."

He said during negotiations in years past, bluegum companies offered to fund the facility but the port had

rejected that funding.

Port of Portland chief executive Scott Paterson confirmed several export ships for softwood chips had been cancelled in the last three months.

"They (Japanese buyers of pine woodchips) have high inventory levels; as a result of that they stop producing while they sell down inventory," he said.

"The question for us is once they get their inventories under control, will they continue buying at the same levels as last year, or will they buy at a reduced level?"

"Our bluegum woodchipping export - that is stronger than they were (in 2007) and increased last year.

"We have a very large bluegum chip facility to be built - the last stage is to secure financing for the facility.

"It will be built as soon as we can finance it."

Mr Paterson said there was still a 12-month turnaround from the time finance was approved to the time construction could be completed.

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