

13 Murtoa

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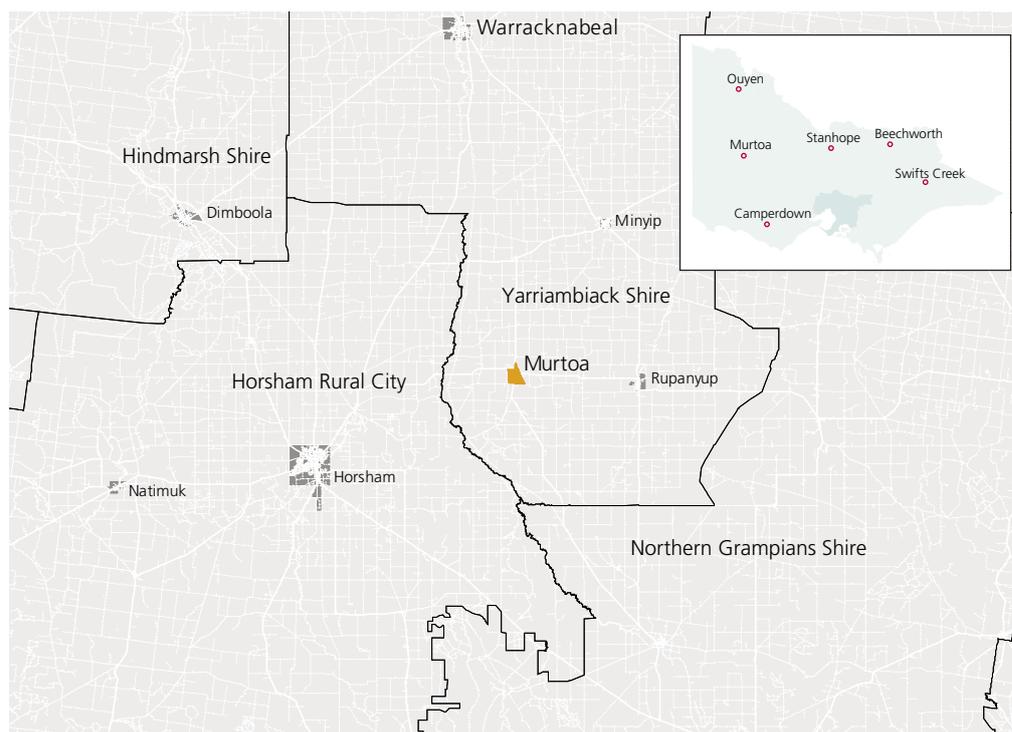
Introduction

Murtoa in the Wimmera region of western Victoria was selected for inclusion in the 1988 small towns study as an example of a town in a dry farming district with a traditional rural service role. Murtoa is about 300 kilometres north-west of Melbourne and about 35 kilometres east of Horsham. Its relatively close proximity to this growing regional service centre added an interesting dimension to its role in 1988; while much of the town's fundamental role has been retained, there have been some significant changes and shifts in the character, profile and role of the town and its institutions.

Murtoa is one of many small towns that serve the state's major grain area, principally wheat production, but increasingly diversifying into new commodities such as oilseeds. Murtoa is located on the Wimmera Highway, linking to St Arnaud in the east and Horsham in the west. The Melbourne–Adelaide rail line forms the eastern boundary of the town and while grain handling is still a major rail-based activity, passenger trains no longer stop at Murtoa. The monotony of the Wimmera landscape and the hot dry summers is

relieved by Murtoa's large man-made lake, Lake Marma, which is the focus of the town's recreation and tourism. As in other areas, the declining need for farm labourers, the growth in the capacity of machinery, and the increasingly globalised and competitive agricultural production sector has seen farm sizes increase and the number of people living on farms decrease.

Figure 13.1 Location of Murtoa



Source: Department of Sustainability and Environment



Reference to population numbers is a common method of tracking the fortunes of a town, but it often tells little of other changes that have occurred in the community. Population losses of about 25 per cent in the last quarter of the twentieth century is a characteristic of almost all small towns in the Wimmera region, so Murtoa's loss of 231 people during this period alone does not distinguish it from other towns.

Despite the population decline, there is little visible sign of decline in terms of housing. Locals estimate one or two new houses have been built each year in the town since 1988, a fact borne out by an inspection of the residential areas. It is evident that much of the new housing constructed in the last decade or so is fairly substantial and represents confidence in the future of the town. Investment in new housing represents a significant act of faith in small towns because while land prices are often low, the actual cost of building can be higher than in larger centres due to increased transport costs for material and fittings, and labour (especially in the skilled trades), which has to be brought to the town.

It is also evident that much of Murtoa's older housing stock, particularly larger houses with heritage and architectural qualities, has been renovated and restored. The local residents point to a number of well-known historic houses that have been bought by 'outsiders' at what would have seemed bargain prices, but to the locals represented unprecedented values. Murtoa has also been 'discovered' by those seeking a new start, even though admittedly on a much smaller scale than many other higher profile locations.

Unless Murtoa has been losing housing stock through demolition (and local intelligence indicates that this has not been the case) there is only one explanation for population decline and increased housing stock—significantly lower household sizes. Census data indicates that this is the case. Between 1981 and 2001, the number of persons per household in Murtoa fell from 2.93 to 2.33. This dramatic drop is similar to the trend occurring across the western world and is an important factor in explaining the changing character and profile of small country towns. Smaller families, fewer children, and larger numbers of lone person and two person households are now more characteristic of Murtoa than nearly two decades ago.

The retail area has changed little. While there has been limited rebuilding, there has also been a loss of some businesses, and other town facilities and services have altered significantly. The secondary school has expanded and further buildings have just been commissioned. The grain handling facilities, always a major role for the town, have been considerably enlarged. There is a very active community/neighbourhood house, the sporting facilities have expanded, and the parks and recreational facilities adjoining Lake Marma have been totally transformed. Murtoa may have fewer people but the community has certainly not stood still.



Murtoa's role, 1987–2005

In the late 1980s, the role and rationale for Murtoa's existence experienced an almost unprecedented challenge. In addition to its long held role as a rural service centre, with the added advantage of having facilities such as the secondary college that attracted students from a wide catchment, Murtoa had become the base for a number of government departments and agencies. During that period, jobs at six departments and agencies were being scaled down—Murtoa lost about 100 jobs from the Victorian Railways, Telecom (as it was then), the State Electricity Commission, and various other agencies and departments.

Understandably, the initial small towns study reported a 'gloom' hanging over the town, which could almost be called despair. According to many residents, the town appeared to be facing its own demise and possible death. Government jobs were steady jobs; they often paid better and gave the town a feel of permanence. Government departments purchase goods and services and run accounts at local businesses. There was a natural presumption that not only these jobs, but also the families associated with them, would be lost from Murtoa.

Of the 100 workers who lost their jobs, about 50 decided to move from Murtoa; significantly, about 20 decided to take a redundancy package and stay in the district. Others sought to stay in the district and commute to where the jobs had been relocated, to Horsham in many cases. Horsham was very much seen as a 'sponge city', a term coined to explain regional centres that sucked the life out of the small towns in their hinterland.

The idea of Murtoa being a commuter town for Horsham did not sit well with the community in 1988. Such a role and title challenged the importance and independence of the town and Murtoa's feeling of self reliance, that to some extent it stood apart from Horsham and was not dependent on it. The concept of a commuter town also had connotations of Murtoa being like an 'appendage' to the growth and development of Horsham, where most of the government jobs had gone.

While some members of the town could envisage Murtoa as potentially offering a real lifestyle choice when compared with Horsham, as a concept for the future this had some way to go.

A number of 'institutions' in town were also feeling the pressure of rationalisation of services, in particular the Murtoa Secondary College. The college was facing declining enrolments amid rumours that the Education Department would be looking at the viability of offering a year 7–12 program when it had relatively small numbers and was facing the prospects of declining attendance. The loss of the secondary school would have had an enormous impact on the town. While not all teachers lived in Murtoa, the secondary college gave the town status. It brought young people to the town and it established Murtoa's district role given that students were brought in from farming properties and from the nearby towns of Rupanyup and Minyip. An icon and focus of the town would be lost if the school was forced to close.

At the time of the 1988 study, Murtoa was a community undergoing change, all of it undesirable from the town's perspective. For some it was a town in crisis, for others it represented the result of forces over which the town had little control. By 2000, the dominant items that had set the scene in the late 1980s were now well behind the community. And by 2005 the town was looking to a new era.



Three major changes appear to have turned around the mood and performance of Murtoa. Firstly, the corporatisation of grain handling operations in the early 1990s rejuvenated employment in that industry and Murtoa had expanded its role as a regional centre. Secondly, local trucking and grain distribution and freighting businesses were stimulated by the corporatisation. And thirdly, a local joinery took advantage of redundant buildings

near the railway line and established a successful business serving a large part of the Wimmera. By 2000, the town had largely recovered the job losses of the late 1980s.

Table 13.1 summarises the changes in government employment in Murtoa between 1988 and 2000, highlighting job losses and also clearly demonstrating how Murtoa has lost important community services.

Table 13.1 Government services and employment in Murtoa, 1988–2000

Service or office	Nature of change 1988	Reason for decision in 1988	Status in 2000
Telecom	Approx. 30 linesmen withdrawn	New technology introduced/ rationalisation	–
SEC	Approx. six sales office & linesman withdrawn	New technology introduced/ rationalisation	–
Lands Department Office	Approx. five officers withdrawn	Rationalisation	–
Railways	Train examiners/pilots/guards and shunters withdrawn	Introduction of new technology	Two staff
Grain Elevators Board	Less 'peak' labour required	Introduction of new technology	Six full time, 12–14 part time, 35–40 casuals
Post Office	Downgraded. Staff withdrawn	Reduced mail volumes	Two staff
Rural Water Commission	Under review. Eight office staff to be withdrawn	Regionalisation	Two field staff based at Murtoa
Hospital	Downgraded. Two doctors withdrawn, pharmacy precariously situated	Regionalisation. Introduction of Dunmunkle Health Service Agreement	Seven staff
High School	Under review. Possible withdrawal of some senior teachers	Introduction of senior school concept	College council employed 26.5 staff at the secondary college; 12 staff at the primary school; four staff at two private schools
Shire of Dunmunkle	External boundaries under review	Local government restructuring	Part of Yarriambiack Shire council (five employees in town)

Source: Henshall Hansen & Associates 1988 small towns study; RPD Group Study 2000.



The development of the town's commuting role progressively occurred during the 1990s and the community had largely come to accept and then embrace the idea that living in Murtoa provided a clear alternative to Horsham. As people from Horsham 'discovered' that Murtoa could offer a small town lifestyle not found in the regional centre, this distinctive feature increasingly became part of Murtoa's role. Houses in Murtoa were cheaper than in Horsham, the town was quieter, the sense of community strong and the quality of life offered by the town began to be realised.

The development of Lake Marma and Rabl Park added to the town's character and assets, contributing to strong local pride. Development of the neighbourhood/community house also became an important resource and focus for the town. Almost without conscious effort, the residents realised that these and other attributes that set them apart from Horsham were differences worth promoting. Rather ironically, by 2000 one of the major issues the town was keen to resolve was the lack of convenient public transport services to Horsham, particularly for older residents and for young people without a car. The desire to assist people commute to Horsham was perhaps the ultimate acceptance that commuting was now a major role and rationale for the town.

The transformation of Murtoa Secondary College's role exemplifies the importance of adapting to change and responding to new challenges. By 2000, the school's student population was about double what it had been just a few years before, partly due to better retention rates for

years 11 and 12 students. But the school had assumed a new role. Educational reform had seen high and technical schools across the state replaced by secondary colleges restructured into large years 7–10 and years 11–12 campuses.

Many parents in Horsham and surrounding areas faced the prospect of their children attending large institutions where they found themselves overwhelmed and displaced. Parents looked for an alternative and found Murtoa Secondary College, small, almost pastoral in its approach, where every teacher knew every student, where the school was like another small community and where students were welcomed as individuals. The virtues of smallness were celebrated. Consequently, groups of parents banded together to bus their sons and daughters to school in Murtoa. Because these students were not attending their closest school, parents had to pay the cost of transport. In 2005, about 60 students a day were traveling by bus from Horsham (at a cost of about \$1,000 a year for each student) to take advantage of the program Murtoa Secondary College was offering.

As the fortunes of the secondary college revived, it was not only able to hold its local student numbers but became the school of choice for many in the wider district who also had the option of attending a Horsham school. Government schools are not permitted to market themselves in a competitive environment against other government schools but across the Wimmera and in Horsham, word of mouth quickly established Murtoa's unique role in secondary schooling. In fact, the Victorian Education Department

recognised the college's role and program by assigning it the title of a leading and innovative school.

References to Murtoa Secondary College frequently appear in the Horsham daily newspaper, the Wimmera Mail Times. With programs and activities such as the Alpine School visit, the Wetlands Project, the Strawbale Science Building and Windmill Project, and the fact that Murtoa College is featured in the federal government's report on high demand schools, the profile of the college is consistently maintained. In a further significant change, Murtoa Primary School has been relocated onto the grounds of the secondary college. Facilities and services were consolidated at the end of 2005 and the 'combined' school is looking forward to a \$2 million refurbishment of its facilities.

In addition to these significant developments, which have recast the town and its role, the mood of the town in 2000 and 2005 was found to be decidedly more progressive, despite the loss of population and the decline in some local business roles and services. There is evidence of new housing, and the residents are keen to acquaint those interested with the initiatives the town has taken on. Such initiatives include the development of Rabl Park, where the community took the footbridge from the railway station and put it in the park, and the relocation of the Lutheran primary school building to the sporting facilities after the school closed due to declining enrolments.

The community is proud of its efforts in terms of maintenance and upgrading of key facilities. While there are concerns



that more could be done to strengthen the community and to support local initiatives, the overall mood is strong and there is a cooperative approach to tackling problems. One of the most significant initiatives has been the development of the neighbourhood house and the transformation of the role of the coordinator, who is now effectively a community development officer, even though this enhanced role is not part of paid duties.

There is widespread recognition that this role is now an essential component in the town and initial scepticism has been replaced with widespread support.

Changes in Murtoa over nearly two decades are not revealed by simply examining raw population statistics. In fact, simply looking at such figures tells a very different story. The Murtoa story of population numbers firstly needs to be seen

in the context of the Wimmera region and then in terms of the other two towns in the immediate district, Minyip and Rupanyup.

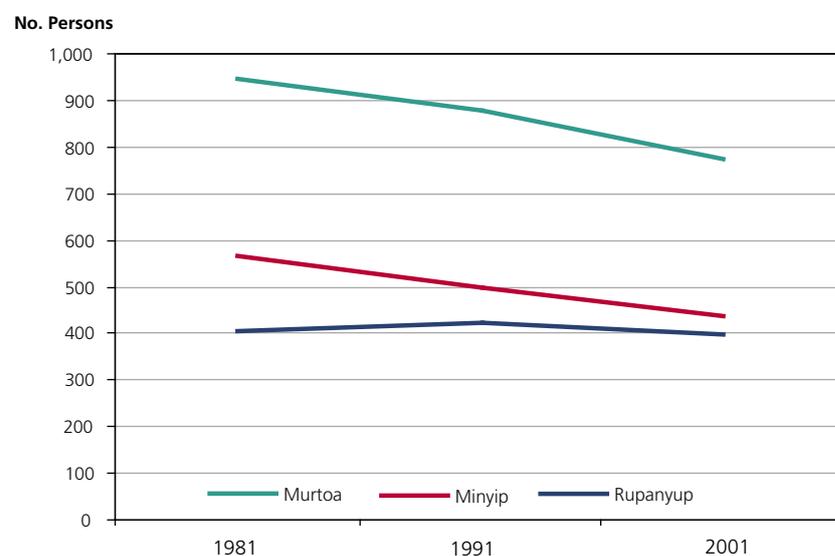
Of the three towns, Rupanyup has held its population while Murtoa and Minyip have declined at similar rates. Rupanyup may have leveled off compared with the other towns but there is no ready explanation for this situation. As the smallest of the three towns (and the one furthest from Horsham) there appears to be little basis for Rupanyup's stronger retention rate. And local government amalgamations affected Rupanyup the most because it was the headquarters of the former Dunmunkle Shire that covered the three towns and their rural districts.

Table 13.2 Population levels in Murtoa, Minyip and Rupanyup 1981–2001

	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001	% change 1981-2001
Murtoa	990	900	878	843	773	-21.9
Minyip	610	570	497	459	436	-28.5
Rupanyup	430	470	422	395	399	-7.2

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.

Figure 13.2 Population levels in Murtoa, Minyip and Rupanyup 1981, 1991 and 2001



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.



Formation of the Yarriambiack Shire based at Warracknabeal meant that some local functions and employment was lost. Discussions with local residents indicate that perhaps Rupanyup has a stronger and more aggressive community and business sector. Certainly the establishment of the Bendigo Bank's first community bank in Australia at Rupanyup/Minyip exemplified a strong local community. It should be pointed out though that a decline in the population of towns in the last quarter of the twentieth century across the Wimmera and southern Mallee regions is typical, and the apparent comparative volatility of population numbers depends on the periods selected. If the starting year was 1986, for example, the percentage drop would be 23.8 per cent for Murtoa, 24.8 per cent for Minyip and 16.9 per cent for Rupanyup, indicating that each town has had mixed fortunes in the five year intercensal period.

Murtoa's age structure indicates some variation from the simplistic pattern that all small country towns have a pronounced ageing population. Most age groups have generally held their proportion of the population, and the proportion of the population aged over 60 years is basically the same over the twenty-year period.

Table 13.3 Population age structure, Murtoa

Age group (years)	1976	1986	1991	1996	% change 1976–96
0–14	292	182	185	151	–48.2
15–19	75	72	58	52	–30.7
20–29	114	102	76	91	–20.2
30–39	93	114	111	114	22.6
40–54	170	132	162	156	–8.2
55+	260	258	272	216	–16.9
Total	1,004	860	878	843	–16.0

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.

Table 13.4 Age structure of Murtoa's population, 1981–2001

Age group (years)	Proportion of population %				
	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001
0–4	8.5	5.2	6.5	4.1	7.1
5–17	23.2	21.8	20.1	16.9	23.8
18–24	7.5	8.2	4.9	7.5	6.3
25–34	12.2	11.8	11.5	10.7	11.7
35–49	15.4	17.1	20.4	21.8	18.0
50–59	11.3	10.8	11.3	11.0	12.1
60–74	15.4	15.6	17.1	19.7	14.0
75+	6.6	9.5	8.3	8.2	6.9

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.

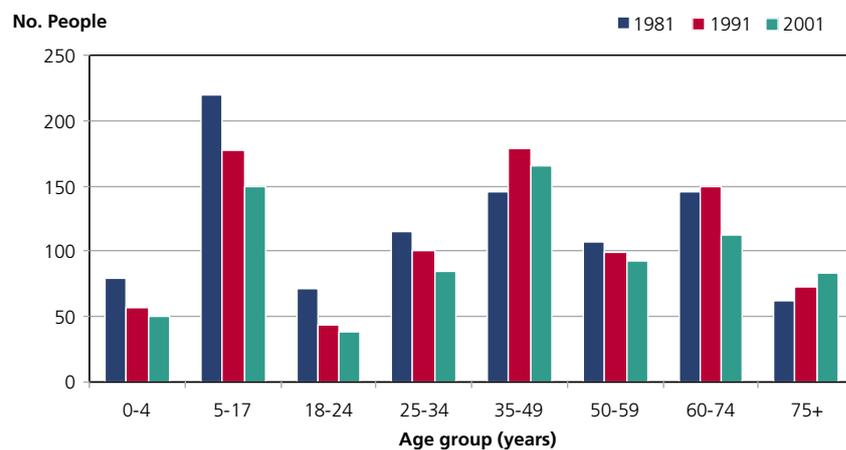


Table 13.5 Population by age group, Murtoa 1981, 1991 and 2001

Age group (years)	1981	1991	2001
0-4	80	57	50
5-17	219	177	149
18-24	71	43	38
25-34	115	101	84
35-49	146	179	165
50-59	107	99	92
60-74	146	150	112
75+	62	73	83

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.

Figure 13.3 Age structure of Murtoa's population 1981, 1991 and 2001



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.



Industry and employment patterns

Murtoa has historically been a service centre for the farming district, which has led to a higher than average employment rate in the service industries. The service sector in 1986 accounted for 81.2 per cent of employment for Murtoa residents, higher than the state average of 66.9 per cent, while manufacturing and agriculture accounted for 7.4 per cent and 8.6 per cent respectively. There was a 10 per cent decline in employment in agriculture and a 50 per cent decline in manufacturing employment in Murtoa between 1976 and 1986. By 1986, there was also a loss of 51 private sector jobs and 10 government positions.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics data does not differentiate between work locations, making it difficult to determine whether employment in the industry is increasing because of its proximity to the nearby urban centre of Horsham. It is likely, however, that an increasing number of residents are employed in service and other industries in Horsham.

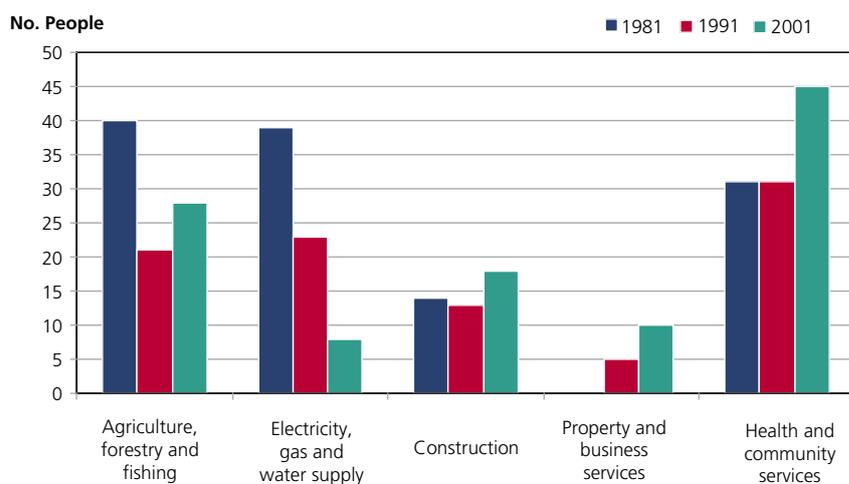
Table 13.6 Employment by industry sector, Murtoa 1981, 1991 and 2001

Industry sector	Number employed		
	1981	1991	2001
Agriculture, forestry & fishing	40	21	28
Mining	0	0	0
Manufacturing	33	24	26
Electricity, gas & water supply	39	23	8
Construction	14	13	18
Wholesale trade	9	4	16
Retail trade	39	47	29
Accommodation, cafés & restaurants	14	19	20
Transport & storage	47	32	35
Communications	14	3	7
Finance & insurance	9	10	7
Property & business services	0	5	10
Government administration & defence	10	21	17
Education	39	40	47
Health & community services	31	31	45
Cultural & recreation services	0	7	3
Personal & other services	11	11	3
Total	350	311	319

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.



Figure 13.4 Employment by selected key industry sector, Murtoa 1981, 1991 and 2001



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.

Table 13.7 Employment in selected industry sectors, Murtoa, 1988 and 2000

Industry sector	Number of positions	
	1988	2000
Manufacturing	37	42
Retail	44	36
Rural Water Commission ¹	30	3
Transport & cartage	21	39
Office	23	2
Schools (GS)	50	43
Hospital (GS)	28	7
Grain Elevator Board	19	40
Other ²	37	22
Total	289	234

Prepared by Wimmera Employment Promotions Inc. 1986 and consultant estimates 1987, updated March 1988.

Notes:

1 Figures provided by the Rural Water Commission (17 additional field officers work in diverse locations around the district).

2 Includes hotels, police and motor vehicle servicing.

The decline in employment in government jobs is indicative of the significant impact of remote decisions about rationalisation and service delivery, but growth in private sector employment can be equally as volatile, either up or down. These dramatic swings in small town workforces are often overlooked when broad scale employment trends are examined.

The story of Murtoa reflects the fortunes and changes of so many small towns. Yet like every town, Murtoa has its own unique story to tell. While government policy in the late 1980s saw Murtoa lose many jobs (through closure or relocation), the town has actually embarked on new roles and directions since then. Although declining population numbers initially tell a story of loss, the town is actually much stronger in many respects than it was at the time of the 1988 study.



Table 13.8 Major employers in Murtoa, 1988 and 2000

Employer	Number of positions	
	1988	2000
Murtoa High School	34	37
Solomit Strawboard	31	25
Rural Water Commission ¹	30	-
Murtoa Hospital	28	7
Barker's Cartage	21	37
Grain Elevator Board	19	40
Schiers Cabinet Works	-	15
Total	163	161

Prepared by Wimmera Employment Promotions Inc. 1986 and consultant estimates 1987 updated March 1988; Rural Water Commission 198; Grain Elevator Board 1988.

Physical form, land use pattern and appearance

Key changes in Murtoa's role and function commenced shortly after the 1988 study with the loss of many government jobs. By comparison, changes to the physical form and appearance of Murtoa have been slow and steady. There is a common view that small country towns change very little in appearance, and that the major elements of the built form and overall appearance of many small country towns exhibit little change. Few buildings appear to be constructed or renovated and the predominant change is the continuing neglect of buildings. In some cases, major changes in the main street appear to be more vacant shops as businesses close.

The unusual pattern and distribution of major land use areas in Murtoa is an important factor in understanding the role and function of the town. In most Australian country towns, a wide, long, usually straight main street supports most of the shops and businesses and often a range of civic and community facilities. This is not the case in Murtoa, where the street layout is heavily influenced by the original surveyor's grid pattern. Even so, this layout provides few clues as to how the town's functions developed, particularly the location of the retail facilities, which has considerably influenced the role and function of the town.

The main street plays a very important function in the economic and social life of many towns. Because it also serves as a route for through traffic, it often represents an important image of the town. Motorists passing through often judge the town by the appearance and presentation of the main street, and an unkempt appearance with vacant shops is often perceived as a town 'down on its luck'.



In contrast to most other small towns, the main street of Murtoa was never a through road. In fact, the main street of shops and businesses is located in one of the narrow streets forming part of the grid, some two blocks away from the Wimmera Highway. Unlike nearly every other country town in the Wimmera region, Murtoa's main street of shops and businesses and main through roads appear to have always undertaken separate functions.

Murtoa also has two other much wider streets that have elements of the main street function and which are physically separated from each other. A third location forms part of the Wimmera Highway and supports some businesses including the Marma Gully Hotel.

This pattern of land use and function is one of Murtoa's unique features, representing a pattern of settlement that has survived forces such as the growth in the role of through traffic. The narrow main street with its cluster of business is Murtoa's town centre, but it may have held back its service role because it has largely missed out on the economic benefits that usually flow from passing trade.

The loss of young people

As in many other small towns, young people from Murtoa are leaving for education and training, for employment and for social reasons, leaving an enormous gap in the population aged 17–24 years. Very few small towns recover from this loss in terms of age structure and the phenomenon is socially disruptive. One concerned parent highlighted the often hidden problem that for those who remain, their friends have left and social networks have to be rebuilt. And often there are so few left in the town that the social network has to be created across a much wider area, meaning that a car is now necessary to support the new social network.

Murtoa as a community accepts but resents that it will lose most of its young people at the end of schooling because their education and labour market ambitions cannot be met locally or regionally. But the town's community has realised that if it wants to attract some of these people to return to the town, then it has to do something. The town embarked on three initiatives in 2003, and these still apply today. The community undertook to maintain contact with the town's young people who leave, provide people who have left with reasons to come back on a regular basis, and maintain the older generation in the community because they are the key to keeping younger people coming back.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many people do return, sometimes as long as twenty years after having first left. Significantly, these people often return with a family, boosting the town with a new generation. To encourage and support a return, there has to be a job or at least some realistic entrepreneurial opportunity. But the real key to whether people return is whether there is family in the area. It is most unlikely that people will return if their family has moved out of the district.

The community is aware that some people who left the town as teenagers want to return to Murtoa to live and raise a family, even many years after leaving. Such people are welcomed back because they are seen as a stable part of the workforce and because they are more likely to volunteer for activities that are vital to the functioning of the town.

The view in Murtoa is that if young people regularly come back for local events, chances are that their permanent return to the town, or at least to the region, increases. The town has therefore put a lot of effort into regularly running community social events such as the Murtoa Races, the mini 'back to' events and the agricultural show. The first weekend in October has in fact become a mini 'back to', with events such as the Murtoa Races, the agricultural show, an arts show, Poets by the Pier, Octoberfest and the Wimmera sumpoiler's engine gathering.



The town's network and knowledge of its young people is so strong that in late 2001 the Murtoa Secondary College was able to organise a mail out survey to nearly every student who had left the college in the previous 10 years. The survey sought to identify what the students had done, what skills they had, where they were, how they viewed Murtoa and district, and whether they would consider returning as part of the local or regional labour market. The aim of the survey was to determine any relationships that might exist between these characteristics and to explore possible actions to enhance the attraction of Murtoa to past residents.

Of the 440 surveys distributed to past students whose final year at the college was between 1990 and 2000, 159 responses were received. Significantly, more than 95 per cent of all respondents had some family still living in Murtoa and district. Today, 29 per cent of respondents reside in Melbourne, 10 per cent in Murtoa, 30 per cent elsewhere in the Wimmera region and the remainder are highly scattered.

The majority of respondents living in Murtoa and the Wimmera region nominated employment and family as the main reason for remaining in the region, and indicated that they were likely or most likely to remain in the area. Employment was the primary reason for deciding on a particular location, regardless of where respondents lived, being only slightly more important among those living outside the region.

Family was a lesser influence among those living elsewhere. In relation to those living in the region, family (48 per

cent) was only slightly less important than employment. The scope and diversity of employment and higher educational opportunities were the issues most raised and the range and type of social, commercial and recreational opportunities were also noted as a limitation to returning to the area. Conversely, some of those living in the region noted the range of employment and activities available, as well as the lifestyle benefits of the region. Interestingly, some respondents noted that the very aim of Murtoa Secondary College is to develop and encourage students to pursue careers unavailable in the region (WDA 2002b).

For those respondents living elsewhere, employment was the main driver, while a range of other reasons (including education) were also nominated. Of those living elsewhere, 17 per cent stated they would not consider returning to the area.

Murtoa broadly follows the pattern of change experienced by most of the sheep wheat belt towns across Australia over the last twenty years; a declining population, a reduction in many services, and a continuing loss in the traditional nexus between the town and its surrounding rural area. Yet the lessons from Murtoa are clear: growth as a community is much more likely to come from within a town, building on what it does well and tackling key projects that can reposition it in the face of apparently overwhelming internal and external factors.

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