

## Charting a rural revolution

TOWONG SHIRE COUNCIL ON THE VICTORIAN-NEW SOUTH WALES BORDER IS CHANGING THE PERCEPTION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN RURAL COMMUNITIES.

ANGELA DORIZAS REPORTS.

■ A council in north-east Victoria is successfully boosting local employment and raising the profile of its small rural community through a number of cutting-edge projects.

Towong Shire Council acting director of development services Dave Barry says his council has challenged the perception of rural councils being on the back-foot of change through three innovative projects, all focused on technology or sustainability.

Firstly, to tackle problems with broadband availability in rural areas, the council deployed Australia's first wireless broadband network across Tallangatta, a town with a population of about 1000.

"The wi-fi mesh was essentially ubiquitous wi-fi coverage throughout the town, so that meant people could connect to the mesh and essentially all network together," Barry says.

The network was then linked to the internet. There was, however, a lack of competition when it came to sourcing a broadband supplier, so the council established its own competitive wireless link to Albury Wodonga to access a range of independent fibre-optic carriers.

"Now, no matter where you go in Tallangatta you get free internet," Barry says.

Having just received State Government funding, the council is working to expand the wi-fi mesh across the entire shire. The motivation, Barry says, is to install cameras to detect and monitor bushfires.

"That's really what the first stage of the project is focused on – using this new high-speed connectivity throughout the shire to deploy bushfire cameras as a fighting tool."

### PURE ENERGY

Another area in which the council is demonstrating its innovative nature is sustainability.

A few years ago, it recognised that when it came to solar power, local residents did not know where to find solar technology or how to finance such an investment.

The council soon filled the void, developing a home solar energy package through bulk-buying panels and securing competitive personal loans, called Pure Towong Energy.

"We thought there was a real opportunity for a council to demonstrate the role that renewable energy has in a community," Barry says.

**"WE THOUGHT THERE WAS A REAL OPPORTUNITY FOR A COUNCIL TO DEMONSTRATE THE ROLE THAT RENEWABLE ENERGY HAS IN A COMMUNITY."**

Towong Shire Council acting director of development services, Dave Barry

"That role is threefold. There's the community benefit, the economic benefit and the environmental benefit."

Zen Home Energy Systems was chosen as the sole supplier of solar energy technology. The council then partnered with the local WAW Credit Union, which provided finance at two per cent below the standard variable rate and six per cent below the standard personal loan rate.

"The only thing that makes it unique is the fact that we were the first council, as we understand it, in Australia to deliver a solution like this," Barry says.

The community was supportive of the move toward renewables, with 200 of the shire's 2000 households installing solar panels.

"At one stage we were generating 10 per cent of Victoria's solar electricity,

despite being only 0.1 per cent of the state population," Barry says.

Through the project Towong Shire Council created four full-time local jobs and prompted Zen Home Energy to establish a presence in the town of Corryong.

For each installation, \$100 was collected from Zen Energy and deposited in the Community Fund. The council and WAW matched each contribution.

Barry says the council has in excess of \$40,000 in the fund so far, with some proceeds already being directed towards planning the council's next sustainability initiative, the Zero Energy Village – Victoria's first zero energy estate.

"A project like this, we believe, will probably hit the market in about four to five years time," he says.

### POWERING ON

The wi-fi project, Towong Pure Energy and the future Zero Energy Village have raised the profile of the rural council.

"With the broadband project, one of the key drivers for that is attracting those tree-changers," Barry says.

"People moving to a rural environment typically might be remote workers. If they don't have access to anything other than dial-up internet, it's just not a proposition in today's day and age to remote work."

Towong Shire has consulted with more than 39 councils seeking to emulate the renewable energy project and has also caught the eye of state and federal government.

"It's certainly heightened our profile on state and federal government radar in terms of being able to deliver highly innovative projects – and deliver them well," Barry says.

"In terms of funding support, because of our good track record in delivering results we do out-perform other councils in attracting significant levels of funding."