

Benalla Sustainable Future Group (BSFG) Submission - 11 July 2023

Benalla Rural City Council Climate and Environment Strategy

Introduction

Benalla Sustainable Future Group is a local group of concerned Benalla citizens who work with all stakeholders towards achieving a sustainable future for our municipality, the region and globally. Through a number of Action Groups, we undertake targeted activities to achieve this objective.

The Council's Climate and Environment Strategy falls directly within our sphere of interest and focus, and we are very pleased to have this opportunity to follow up on individual contributions made through Have Your Say and the Community Information Sessions with a consolidated Submission set out below.

We commend the Council's work so far on developing this new Strategy and look forward to participating in the further stages of its development for the ultimate benefit of Benalla Rural City and beyond.

Proactive Measures

Waste Management

Explore opportunities for compost collection systems.

Waste reduction, reuse, and recycling strongly encouraged by council.

Waste levels reported on by council and targets created to reduce waste.

Capture methane from current waste sites.

Reduce Food waste by encouraging food system streams of food donation / processing by community groups.

Encourage and support the establishment of a Repair Cafe.

Investigate the feasibility of a 'Tip Shop'; implement if possible.

Set up "upcycling" points e.g. for plastic milk bottle tops which can be reprocessed into other products.

Keep abreast of and utilise research into recycling and reuse opportunities e.g. mealworms for digesting polystyrene.

Investigate ways to incentivise cloth nappies and/or disincentivise disposable nappies.

Energy Efficiency - Potential Projects with REB

Explore opportunities to work with groups such as Renewable Energy Benalla to achieve greater renewable energy usage in Benalla.

As an example, at Mt Alexander Shire a pilot project involving a partnership between the Council and the Mt Alexander Sustainability Group is retrofitting houses to improve their energy efficiency from 2 to 9 stars, and eliminate the use of gas for cooking and heating. The project is being undertaken under the auspices of the Victorian Energy Upgrade program of the State government.

Opportunities for collaboration in neighbourhood community battery projects auspiced by the State government are already evident, and REB would be very happy to actively pursue these with Council.

A project to aid households with older style electric HWS to transition from the old "off-peak" tariffs during nighttime to daytime use when solar power is abundant would be beneficial at the grid level; such projects are proposed elsewhere and REB would be prepared to collaborate with Council in a pilot in Benalla potentially with Commonwealth support.

Benalla is severely lacking in EV charging points (notwithstanding current projects in Denny St and at Woolworths), to our detriment economically as well as being a deterrent to local uptake of EV. REB again would welcome an opportunity to work with Council to address this gap.

Explore and implement a project to measure current levels of energy efficiency for council, industry and households, and encourage and incentivise reductions in consumption.

Environmental Sustainability Measures

Create more greening spaces: e.g. by nature strip planting, and increasing tree density in parks and reserves.

Lobby the Victorian Government seeking to elevate sustainability requirements for new buildings and subdivisions, and encourage a move towards net zero carbon housing development.

Create more bicycle paths to provide safer linked cycling routes around town. More people cycling improves health outcomes for the community at the same time reducing emissions. Make cycling more visible, improving awareness in drivers and improving safety.

Ecological Sustainability

Enlarge the scope of Sustainability to include Biodiversity and Nature, recognising that not only do we share the planet with other people but also other species of animals and plants, and that the human population is currently exceeding the capacity of the planet to both provide the resources we use and the ability to absorb our wastes.

The Global Footprint Network, Advancing The Science of Sustainability, estimates that

“Humans use as much ecological resources as if we lived on 1.75 Earths, <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/faq/#nfba-source>. The Ecological Footprint is the only metric that compares the resource demand of individuals, governments, and businesses against Earth's capacity for biological regeneration”.

Reducing Household Emissions

Hot water systems: support programs to introduce heat pump hot water systems as the primary choice for households.

Cooking, heating and cooling: initiate and support efforts to avoid installation of gas appliances in new builds and renovations. Initiate and support efforts to replace gas and old-style electric hotplates with induction cooktops.

Promote the small measures that can be undertaken by households to reduce their energy consumption (e.g. led lights, draught stoppers, sealing cracks and gaps around doors, windows and other entry points, shading west-facing windows in summer). (The Mt Alexander project mentioned above is an example of such a practical action benefitting the householder and environment.)

Addressing Energy Efficiency of Rental Properties

Provide information and incentives for landlords to invest in solar panel installations on rental properties.

Promote the use of Heat Pump HWS to replace gas or old electric HWS.

Promote the use of insulation and gap-stoppers around windows and doors.

Incentivise the uptake of vacant rental properties (residential and commercial). Vacant properties are a waste of resources.

Sustainable Housing design and sub-division provisions

Incorporating passive design and energy efficiencies to new developments.

Embedding renewable energy systems into new developments.

Acknowledge that the current planning requirements do not reflect the urgency needed to tackle climate change and advocate for change.

Lobby the state government for changes to planning provisions to facilitate improved climate goals.

Refuse permits for inappropriate housing designs (orientation, lack of eaves, dark roof colours, etc).

Require developers to fulfill a 30% canopy cover in subdivisions to effectively reduce the urban heat island effect. Developers should be required to retain all existing trees where feasible, provide publicly available information when this cannot be achieved, and in such cases plant additional stock. "Offsets" which do not provide trees in Benalla, are not guaranteed or necessarily followed through to maturity, and are not publicly accounted for, should not be permitted.

Engaging with Indigenous communities and consulting with Traditional Custodians

Pro-active engagement pursued on relevant matters e.g. any development which might fall within an area in a Cultural Heritage Management Plan.

Improving Food systems resilience

Regenerative agriculture opportunities should be explored with local farmers.

Support and promotion of the Food Co-op and Community Gardens.

Work with Benalla Food Network (Kathryn Mcqualter), and with BSFG Greening group (for example, on naturestrip gardens and greening existing open spaces).

Responses to Climate Change

Climate Resilience and Disaster/ Emergency preparation

Benalla Rural City is exposed directly to the impacts of flooding and bushfires. Climate change is exacerbating the existing threats faced by the community. Related threats include (for example) the vulnerability of Benalla's older population, coupled with the municipality's relative social disadvantage, to the consequences of more extreme temperatures on the community's health and wellbeing.

Council's strategies, plans and actions must recognise and respond directly to these threats.

Council declaring a Climate Emergency would assist the Community in guiding the development of strategies to achieve Net Zero by 2050, if not before.

Building energy resilience e.g. solar / renewable energy and battery storage, changes to grid system.

Explore opportunities for small scale local community batteries e.g. at the Senior Citizens building or Library, with provision for EV charging linked to the battery.

Explore opportunities to facilitate energy efficiency improvements to housing stock within Benalla Rural City - for example by participating in a Victorian Energy Upgrades project with BSFG.

Utilise and build on local interest groups with expertise and enthusiasm for bringing about change addressing climate and environmental threats.

Communications and Community Engagement

Connecting with Community members for education and awareness raising

Opportunity for a Steering or Reference Committee (c.f. Indigo Shire).

Report progress on targets and action items from the plan on the Council website with updates every 6-12 months. E.g. <https://www.strathbogie.vic.gov.au/environment/climate-action/>

Leadership / Reporting / Evaluation / Research

Establish a Community Reference Committee

As noted above, Council should establish a Community Reference Committee charged with supporting Council's actions under this Strategy, in particular by reporting progress to the community and referring issues back to Council.

Carbon Emissions reporting by council to community on emissions from council, community, agriculture and industry

Incorporation of solid targets and regular, systematic reporting to the community to enable charting of progress and achievements.

Incentivising Climate Emission Reductions

In conjunction with the above proposal, Council should introduce a program to provide awards to businesses and community groups that reduce carbon emissions and contribute positively to climate change resilience.

Council Declare a Climate Emergency

Council declaring a Climate Emergency would assist the Community in guiding the development of strategies to achieve Net Zero by 2050, if not before. Such a Declaration would have great symbolic leadership value as well as recognising that in excess of 600 ratepayers expressed a clear desire for Council to act accordingly in 2020.

Incorporating targets and actions with timelines in the Strategy

To enable the community to have faith in this Strategy, there need to be clear action plans and targets against which Council's performance can be monitored and reported (see above).

General Comment

The questions put through the website's "Have Your Say" and the community engagement sessions appear to be solely inward focussed. There needs to be much greater recognition of Council's role to provide leadership to and lobby on behalf of its community, both within this Strategy and elsewhere.

While Councillors have made much of the division of responsibilities between state and local government, there has been little obvious recognition or explanation of their role as representatives of the community responsible for lobbying for and seeking change as necessary at state and federal level to meet community needs.

We note that at every Community session the need for clear and strong leadership from Council has been a key point brought out by the participants.

Resources for further information

Energy Consumers Australia Resources on renewable energy
<https://www.energytechguide.com.au/>