



STARTING A COMMUNITY: SOME EARLY LESSONS FROM FRYERS FOREST

*Written in early 1997 for issue 10 of **Green Connections** published in March 1997, this article is an early description of the community formation process for Fryers Forest. At the time the planning was well advanced and the first gatherings of prospective community members were happening.*



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For many people, the idea of being a part of a community where we can contribute, feel supported and truly belong, has been a central theme of the strivings, over the last twenty years, to create a better future by design. However, the success rate, of creating and sustaining intentional communities has, by any measure, not been great. Not that unintentional (traditional) communities have fared any better in recent times. These poor results are largely a reflection of our culture of individualism and affluence, where we don't feel dependent on others, so when the going gets tough we give up and retreat to the apparent freedom of the autonomous lifestyle. It is hardly surprising that we have difficulty with sustaining the complex web of community relationships when our success rate at sustaining the more basic family and personal relationships seems to be at an all time low.

Despite the gloomy statistics, the interest in intentional rural communities in Australia has never been higher. I think this is partly a result of the now collective experience in "going it alone" on rural properties where there is never enough time, labour, skill, finance, ideas, inspiration and emotional support to tackle the interconnected issues involved in living a "simpler, saner" lifestyle. While many have responded by retreating to consumer urban lifestyles (in a rural setting), those of us who believe in the inevitability of a low energy future [see *Energy and Emergy: Revaluing our World (Article 25)*] recognise it is better to learn how to co-operate for mutual benefit while we still have time and choices, and before our children are forced to do so by declining social, economic and environmental circumstances.

At Fryers Forest, in central Victoria, we are in the midst of birthing our community, so it is difficult to develop a perspective on the subject. The following points cover some of the issues we have considered in this process.

INITIATORS

Firstly we have chosen a process where we (a partnership of two couples) use the hopefully complementary skills and personalities of a small and very committed group to forge the framework of the community and then invite others to join. We are halfway between the innovative developer/entrepreneur laying down a framework which others will inherit and the collective group where everything from philosophy to practicalities are worked through by consensus processes. (The guru/visionary which everyone obeys is another sometimes successful version of the entrepreneur model but one from which it is very difficult to continue to grow and change.)

On the other hand, large group collective approaches tend to be vulnerable to lowest common denominator decisions and solutions which restrict the ability of those with the creativity, skill and drive to contribute when and how they are most needed. Just the number of decisions which need to be made at the beginning is very difficult for a large group to deal with. Many of those decisions are very powerful in determining the future form and direction of the community and must be made with limited information. Starting a community is like birthing, in that it is inevitably risky and uncertain in its outcomes.

LAND TENURE

The way the land is owned and controlled (land tenure) is another critical element in communities. Its importance is reflected in the fact that the form of land tenure a community adopts is often used as a way to describe that community eg. rental housing co-operative, tenants-in-common, land trust, body corporate etc.

In Australia, freehold ownership of land (like money) is an unquestioned foundation of society. The current native title debate illustrates that Australians have great difficulty imagining how other forms of land ownership and land use rights can work.

At Fryers Forest we have chosen to use the Body Corporate structure (also referred to as Strata, Condominium or Cluster) where land is subdivided into a number of freehold allotments together with common land controlled by a body corporate, in which the owners of the freehold lots have one voting share. In our case small residential lots are surrounded by a large managed common forest.

This form of land tenure has mostly been used for common ownership of residential apartment and town subdivision but is also used in some shopping centres and industrial estates. Its application to rural residential subdivisions is less common but Crystal Waters and some other recent permaculture inspired communities (mostly in Queensland and NSW) use this form of land tenure.

Body corporates can provide collective ways of controlling agricultural and forest land as well as essential community infrastructure of roads, water supply, power, etc. while retaining freehold control of private homes and immediate gardens. This allows people to readily borrow money to build and for titles to be freely traded in the open market. Without this “security” many residential communities are slow to attract permanent residents or capital necessary for development work.

The body corporate is the formal decision-making structure of the community. As well as controlling the common land and assets it can make by-laws which reflect the values and functions of the community and apply to how owners use and develop their allotments.

Several fundamental things distinguish Fryers Forest from conventional body corporates:

- Firstly, the developers will be lot holders and residents. In other words we are committed to sharing in what we have designed while very clearly ceding control to the Fryers Forest Community Council (body corporate) as a majority of lots are bought.
- Secondly, a progressive and informal involvement by prospective lot holders in “gathering days” and other activities (instead of a marketing push through the mainstream media) has been used. (So far *Green Connections* magazine is the most public form of promotion of

Fryers Forest.) This organic process has allowed us to test our guidelines and rules against prospective community members' values and interests.

- Thirdly, the proportion of common land is very large, providing opportunities for extensive and multiple land uses such as forestry, grazing, aquaculture and horticulture to complement the passive use of the land for conservation, recreation and amenity. Our land management plan provides a basis for owners with the skill and motivation to gain a livelihood from the land and in the process, cover management work which would otherwise be paid for by annual body corporate levies on the owners.
- Fourthly, we have used early development works as a unique opportunity to begin implementing the forestry aspects of the land management plan so that as people join the community they will see sustainable forestry in action rather than just ideas on paper. Similarly, the community building will be already partly constructed providing a physical and conceptual shell from which on going development of shared facilities can develop. All of this involves more work and expense than that required for a bare bones development budget to cover council requirements.
- Finally, although as developers we expect to get modest payment for the input of capital, time and skill over the several years necessary to bring the community to self sustaining life, there is no entrepreneurial profit likely at Fryers Forest.

LAND CAPABILITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

Assessing the capability of the land to support residential development and the other proposed land uses was fundamental to our conception of the community. There is no doubt that Fryers Forest is fragile and mostly infertile land which still supports a broadly indigenous box (eucalyptus) forest ecosystem.

Any development of such land needs to be managed very carefully and although we have small areas suited to food gardens and orchards, Fryers Forest will never be the garden of Eden which many people associate with permaculture. Instead we are applying permaculture principles in a context which always considers what the land has to offer and what we can contribute to it.

Provision of many of the community's needs is important without a doctrinaire commitment to being totally self sufficient when there may be land elsewhere in the region better suited for providing some food needs.

PLANNING CONTROLS

While our assessment of the physical capabilities of the land is reasonably confident, our initial assessment of the issues and strategies involved in gaining approval from the relevant authorities have been a bit more than we originally expected.

Certainly the fact that our land had 10 existing titles gave us considerable leverage in gaining acceptance of our proposals under the existing local planning scheme zoning controls. All developers know that “lot yield” is the key issue in determining whether the return from subdivision of land will cover the costs of subdivision and provision of required services. The more lots, the greater the financial viability.

Apart from our own assessment of land capability from a permaculture perspective, gaining more lots would have required a change to the zoning of the land under the planning scheme: a lengthy, uncertain and costly process, unless it happens to fit in with larger changes which shire planners are already considering.

We committed ourselves to buying the land based on some rudimentary assessments of the likelihood of gaining planning approval. After eighteen months of research, design and documentation we submitted our planning application to Mt Alexander shire. It was approved in October 1996 with the usual and some unusual permit conditions attached. In particular, the Shire Planner recognised in the permit conditions that the body corporate was a suitable vehicle for ensuring that on-going issues such as maintenance of roads, a bushfire plan and particularly, forest and water management, could be dealt with to the satisfaction of the council independent of whether David Holmgren fell under a bus tomorrow. This was a vindication of our decision to use the body corporate structure rather than a private company, co-operative or other organisational structure.

Planning approvals are attached to the land not the person. Just because you are motivated by the highest social and environmental ideals doesn't make much difference to statutory planners. Planners aren't necessarily obstructionist power hungry bureaucrats by nature but their job requires them to work on the basis that development controls will be effective no matter who buys or inherits land and approvals attached to it. Consequently a lowest common denominator tends to apply in planning. In fact, while planning controls are reasonably effective at preventing the worst kinds of development they also tend to inhibit rather than foster innovative and progressive development.

Our planning application was probably one of the most comprehensive the local shire has ever received for any comparable development project. A more astute developer would have secured an option to buy the land at an agreed price, conditional on gaining council planning approval. This provides more financial security and less stress. However the advantage of our “Rolls Royce” planning application is that the internal planning for how the community will function, already has a firm foundation which, because it has council approval, is a reference point for the community to come back to in dealing with difficult or contentious decisions.

CLUSTERING OF SETTLEMENT: IDEALISM vs PRAGMATISM

Right from the start we were committed to a close clustering of residential lots and associated development. This is the single most important rural hamlet design strategy which;

- reduces adverse environmental impact
- maximises opportunities for broad acre land management
- encourages community interaction
- reduces the cost of provision of services.

In Australia, unlimited space and the early selector land tenure system created pioneer families on separate homesteads. Today, most people moving to the country expect space and privacy from neighbours. Gradually the problems of isolated rural living are leading to more people accepting the European co-housing and eco-village model, which builds on a tradition of small hamlets and villages with an urban nature surrounded by fields and forests.

In the end, the assumptions built into planning schemes that space between dwellings solves land management and social problems, defined the limits to how small we could make residential lots which at Fryers Forest average one acre.

Design for adequate privacy and outlooks while encouraging pedestrian social contact to avoid the evils of excessive car traffic, has been a critical issue. How close do people need to be to the community building to make use of a common laundry? How much car parking at each residence is really needed and how close do common car parking areas need to be to residences to really work? Of course there are no clear answers to these questions and many of them must be answered through a design and development process which starts with typical behaviour, but facilitates the growth towards a more sustainable and co-operative lifestyle.

When I say “typical” I do not mean the average suburban dweller but the environmentally and socially aware rural or prospective rural dwellers, who are the likely residents of Fryers Forest. However, all my experience has taught me to accept that while some distance between our ideals and practice encourages us to strive, ideals too removed from current reality tend to fail. Over the decades of ‘back to the land idealism’, those with more modest aims seem to be the survivors, while many of the environmental or social purists are now cynical reactionaries.

At Fryers Forest a balance between shared vision and pragmatic acceptance that people will apply and express that vision in different ways and to varying degrees, will be important to the development of true community.