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C61**OVERVIEW OF THE MOUNT ALEXANDER SHIRE**

Mount Alexander Shire is located in the historic goldfields of central Victoria approximately 110 kilometres north of Melbourne. In the year ending 30 June 2011, the estimated resident population of the Shire was 17,872 people. Approximately half of the Shire's population live in Castlemaine, the largest town in the Shire. The balance of the population reside in smaller towns including Maldon, Harcourt, Newstead, Chewton, Guildford, Taradale and Elphinstone, smaller settlements and the Shire's rural areas.

The settlement pattern and Crown Allotment structure of the Shire is diverse, with small townships and farming areas that were developed in response to the demands of the gold rush era. This development has left a legacy of dispersed small allotments, which have proven popular for hobby farming and rural lifestyle activities.

The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (Victoria in Future 2014) estimates that the population of Mount Alexander Shire will reach 21,112 by 2031. These figures also estimate an additional 2002 dwellings will be required over the same period (approximately 100 dwellings per annum). This additional dwelling figure may be conservative, as it predicts a falling increase in unoccupied or second dwellings. Recent data suggests this figure is increasing.

The Shire is well known for its heritage townships, buildings and places, which are of local, state and national significance. The notable and extensive Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park is a cultural landscape of national heritage significance. Maldon was recognised as Australia's first Notable Town in 1966. Significant natural and cultural landscapes include Mount Alexander goldfields Mount Tarrengower, Mount Alexander, Mount Consultation, Barfold and Muckleford gorges, the Guildford plateau, Vaughan Springs and Lake Cairn Curran.

The Shire is ideally located within Central Victoria and has extensive road and rail transport links to Melbourne and Bendigo via the Calder Highway and the Melbourne-Swan Hill railway line. Other major centres linked to Mount Alexander include Ballarat (Midland Highway) and Maryborough (Pyrenees Highway).

Mount Alexander Shire has a strong manufacturing, engineering and food processing base including Don/KR Castlemaine and the steel fabrication and design engineering at Flowserve.

New opportunities exist in the expansion of cluster industries, such as the modified motor vehicle sector, the arts, tourism, special engineering and the "land repair" sectors and provision will be made to encourage the development of these and other emerging sectors.

The main employment sectors within the Shire are agriculture (including horticulture), manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade, community services and tourism. Tourism is a growing industry, which is built around heritage, gardens, festivals and events.

Investigation into wastewater management options is needed in Elphinstone, Taradale and Guildford. The lack of infrastructure presents major problems for the environment and constrains the further development of these towns.

The whole of the Shire is within the Murray Darling basin catchment with the Campaspe River catchment generally east of Mount Alexander supplying Lake Eppalock. The western two-thirds of the municipality is in the Loddon River catchment with the Cairn Curran Reservoir on the Shire's western boundary.

The Loddon Campaspe catchment is ranked as one of the nations four most degraded catchments; dryland salinity, poor soil structure and erosion are prevalent throughout the Shire while the catchment has the highest incidence of algal blooms in the State.

The catchment has poor water quality, which threatens a range of activities (aquatic and riparian ecology, recreation, tourism, aesthetic values, urban water supply, domestic and stock and irrigation uses) throughout the catchment.

There has been a 40 per cent reduction in the extent of wetlands, including freshwater meadows and shallow and deep water marshes, since settlement, while 61 per cent of all rivers and streams are in poor to very poor condition.

The Shire of Mount Alexander comprises parts of three Bioregions: Goldfields, Central Victorian Uplands and Victorian Volcanic Plain. It contains 23 Ecological Vegetation Classes of which 15 are 'vulnerable' or 'endangered'. It also contains 65 threatened flora species and fifty-four threatened fauna species.

The Box Ironbark forests of the region are important habitat for many threatened species. The bushland is also a most important recreational and tourism asset for the Shire, contributing to its unique character as a destination. The establishment of the Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park in October 2002 recognised both the natural and cultural values and assets of the area. Additional recognition has followed in 2003 with Victorian Heritage Register listing, and on Australia Day 2005 it was added to the National Heritage List.