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Changing up the housing mix on offer in the Wimmera Southern Mallee (WSM)

Large backyards, quarter acre blocks and traditional three-to-four-bedroom family homes have historically formed the basis of our WSM housing stock.

Over the last ~ 60 years the region's population has grown by approx. 8.7%¹, whilst the number of homes occupied is estimated to have almost doubled, increasing to 24,200 in 2020 from 12,118 in 1961^{2#}.

Household sizes have evidently changed relative to the WSM's population growth, with an average occupancy in 2020 of 2.2³ people per house, although it is understood 75% of the region's homes have 3 or more bedrooms. This clearly highlights the requirement for greater alignment of available housing with the needs of current and future residents.

WDA Executive Director and Housing Taskforce Committee Member Chris Sounness said, "There is an overwhelming need to diversify the region's housing stock to reflect changing home occupancy statistics, as reported within our Housing Blueprint. Medium density housing provides some significant opportunities to enhance the region's growth, liveability and economic strength.

"There are many family sized homes in the region that are currently occupied by one to two people, they may be retirees or young single business people. The size and architecture of these homes may not necessarily suit current and changing lifestyle requirements, although occupancy in many cases is likely to be driven by a potential lack of smaller suitable options, said Chris."

"An increase in the availability of strategically located, smaller, fit for purpose and affordable houses can provide lone or dual home residents with additional choices. Particularly ageing community members, where increased options could enable easier access to healthcare and retail services, whilst being low maintenance, energy and cost effective.

"Resident movement from larger homes has the capacity to increase the potential availability of family homes within our regional towns, encouraging new families to the WSM to take-up employment opportunities, and start their journey, and enjoy living within our thriving communities and vibrant region, said Chris."

WDA's recent Housing Blueprint highlights that the current proportion of medium density housing across the region is estimated at 7%⁴. The Housing Taskforce reports that it is targeting an increase of 3% by 2031⁵, with delivery through implementation of the Blueprint's innovative foundations in collaboration with key regional stakeholders.

Chris said, "The provision of smaller townhouse sized housing, in addition to the range of larger housing available all adds to the region's attractiveness and liveability.

"We want to be able to offer potential new residents with a range of options including smaller and open plan homes that they would be able to access in other areas.

Chris also commented, "In regular discussions with the region's local councils and their planning teams, it is recognised that small township planning processes require an immediate review by the state government to support further development of well-placed medium density housing.

Over the years medium density housing in the region has attracted some negativity, and while the concerns raised have been acknowledged, the focus needs to be on the significant opportunities that medium density provides. An increase in the availability of well-designed one to two bedroom, fit for purpose housing, close to central business areas offers substantial social and economic benefit for WSM towns.

"We're proud of the character of our region's towns and preservation of our area is a priority. With effective planning processes, new medium density housing developments should result in only subtle changes to the town streetscapes that we know and are very fond of, said Chris."

The delivery of the region's recent Housing Blueprint is considered a valuable step in addressing the region's housing crisis. WDA have projected an average 1.9%⁶ regional population growth over the next 15 years, and there is a need for innovative housing solutions which provide the choice of housing stock demanded by new and existing residents.

The success of the Blueprint opportunities and proposed deliverables involves strong stakeholder and regional collaboration with WDA a key driver behind the outcome delivery.

For more information on medium density housing in the WSM and the Housing Blueprint please visit: <https://www.wda.org.au/housing>

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PHOTO: Mr Chris Sounness WDA Executive Director

Sources:

1,2,3 & 6 Reported figures are as per the Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Housing Review, 2020 summary document. Figures are sourced from based on the ABS 2016 Census of Population and Housing

4 & 5 Wimmera Development Association (2022) Housing Blueprint https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/WDA/e5aa7945-c8ed-472a-811e-4c208a68285f/UploadedImages/Reports/Infrastructure/2022_The_Housing_Blueprint.pdf

**The WSM region in 1961 excluded a few of the current region's towns and figures are an approximation only.*

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ABOUT WDA

Wimmera Development Association is the peak economic development organisation for the Wimmera Southern Mallee region - encompassing the Horsham Rural City municipality and Hindmarsh, Northern Grampians, West Wimmera and Yarriambiack shires. Wimmera Development Association works with the community and governments to attract new investment, further develop existing business and promote the Wimmera's sustainable development opportunities - both within and outside the region. Wimmera Development Association is a vital link between industry and government and has a proven track record of advocating for and attracting new development to the region.

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