

18 May 2022

Ms Kylie Zanker
Mayor
Yarriambiack Shire Council
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Dear Ms Zanker and Ms Smith

Thank you for facilitating the public meeting at the Murtoa & District Neighbourhood House on 12 April 2022. We were pleased to hear about the projects for the Murtoa and Dunmunkle region; the housing and Child Care projects are two which are a major need for families in Dunmunkle.

At this meeting, Emma Kealy informed the public about the changes to the Child Care Project, these being for a new Child Care Centre and the Murtoa Kindergarten to be relocated and built on the Murtoa College F-12 School site.

We fully understand and support this project as there is a desperate need for child care in the area to keep families living and working in Murtoa and surrounding towns. We have previously written a letter to support this project (appendix 1) on the understanding that the Child Care project would remain on the current neutral site. The proposed relocation came as a worrying surprise to us.

At the public meeting Ms Zanker, expressed the importance of keeping small communities thriving, not just surviving. We strongly support this view and believe it is vital to retain choice and diversity in small towns such as Murtoa, whether that is in the form of supermarkets, farm supplies or education. We believe it is of tremendous benefit to the local community to have two thriving and sustainable schools in Murtoa, as is currently the case.

Following the public meeting we sought a meeting with Ms Smith, to understand the situation more fully and to put forward our concerns regarding the viability of Our Lady Help of Christians (OLHC) Primary School should the child care facility be relocated and built on the Murtoa College F-12 School site. On 5 May 2022, myself and the Principal of OLHC Primary School Cathy Grace met with Ms Smith where we were advised that while the proposed relocation to the Murtoa College F-12 School site was under consideration, it was not a "done deal".

We believe the proposed relocation will lead to the closing of OLHC Primary School and possibly the small government schools in Minyip and Rupanyup. Families who attend Early Childhood facilities on a school site tend to enrol in that school, without considering other schools. In essence, this means families in Murtoa and surrounding districts would no longer have education 'choice' in their communities. This would be detrimental to the three towns and their families as the current choice of education in Dunmunkle is crucial for student growth and future development.

The Murtoa College would create a 'one stop shop' for families where they would have the ability to drop their children off for Early Childhood provision, with the expectation that children would continue their educational journey with their group of friends through to Year 12. This is based on the experience of similar relocations across the state, for example, in Warracknabeal, the Early Childhood facility was relocated to the government school site in 2007 following the State Governments commitment to relocating F-12 Government education on to one site; we understand this project is not far from completion.

Since the announcement and funding of this project, the Diocese have seen the enrolments at St Mary's Primary School steadily drop. While there are often many factors leading to an enrolment drop, the relocation of the Early Childhood facility is a significant factor in this case.

2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
102	106	105	98	82	75	62

As another example, Catholic Education Ballarat (CEB) also holds grave concerns for the viability of our Catholic school in Sea Lake, a school of very similar size to OLHC Primary School. The Early Childhood facilities in Sea Lake were relocated to the local government P-12 school this year and with this, the enrolments of our Catholic school are now beginning to decline.

We put forward the following points in support of keeping Early Childhood provision in the current neutral location in Murtoa:

- a. Educational choice. We believe having two schooling options in Murtoa provides choice to families in the local area.
- b. Employment and economic activity. OLHC Primary School employs 13 staff (6FTE) and has recurrent income of approximately \$1million per year, which primarily stays in the local community. CEB and our schools have a preference and tradition of using local businesses wherever possible. We are passionate about this point and believe that every effort should be made to keep small towns viable.
- c. While we cannot quantify the employment and economic impact on the government primary schools in both Minyip and Rupanyup, we believe if the proposed project progressed, they too would see an impact on their enrolments as those modelled for OLHC.

OLHC Primary School has submitted an application to Catholic Capital Grants Victoria to rebuild the school on its current site. The project cost is approximately \$2million and if successful, the project would commence in 2024. As you would appreciate, this is a significant investment in a school of this size. This rebuild was a priority for CEB on the understanding that Early Childhood provision for the town would remain on a neutral site. CEB needs to be assured of OLHC Primary School's long term future before it can confirm this project as a priority. Put simply, if the Early Childhood facility is placed on the Murtoa F-12 school site, then OLHC Primary School's long term viability will be at threat and this project will not receive funding to proceed.

Ms Smith also briefed us on the potential sand mining project that may be located in the area. We are very excited about the positive impact on Murtoa and surrounding districts and believe along with a suitable supply of housing, the choice of two local schools would make Murtoa more attractive to workers with families.

Should the current site prove to be unviable in the long term, the opportunity to relocate the facility to vacant land between Murtoa F-12 and OLHC is available. This land is owned by the Catholic Church who would be willing to negotiate a mutually beneficial arrangement for all parties.

Murtoa currently has two great schools and their families, along with those in surrounding districts, have 'choice' of education. This needs to be sustained not only in Murtoa, but also in Minyip and Rupanyup and can be done by ensuring the provision of Early Childhood remains community based on a neutral site.

We would be more than happy to expand on these points, in person, as we all seek to continue to make a positive educational impact on Murtoa.

Yours sincerely



Mr Tom Sexton
Executive Director
Catholic Education Ballarat



Ms Cathy Grace
Principal
Our Lady Help of Christians

cc: Ms Tammy Smith, CEO, Yarriambiack Shire Council