# Golden Plains Shire Council

**Submission to the Independent Review of Regional Development Victoria**

The Hon. Jaala Pulford

Minster for Regional Development

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## Golden Plains Shire – Overview

*The Shire is one of the State’s fastest growing regional municipalities with a growth rate in our main centre Bannockburn of 4.5% and an overall growth rate of 2.0% across our 56 small communities and 16 townships.*

Golden Plains Shire is a rural municipality within the neighbouring orbit of two of Victoria’s major regional centres, Geelong and Ballarat. The Shire is one of the State’s fastest growing regional municipalities with a growth rate in our main centre Bannockburn of 4.5% and an overall growth rate of 2.6% across our 56 small communities and 16 townships.

This growth is driven by our proximity to Geelong and Ballarat, jobs available in those centres, more affordable housing and the rural lifestyle.

Golden Plains Shire Council plays a strong role in economic development and recognises the key role that the State and Federal Governments play in providing substantial funds to support economic growth.

# Our Submission

## Infrastructure Development

Public infrastructure investment is essential to support Council’s population growth. Hard infrastructure such as roads, rail, bridges and airports provide access to market, connectivity and remove ‘blockers’ to private investment and business growth. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is just as important with growing community and business reliance on mobile phones and high speed broadband.

Other forms of hard infrastructure such as libraries, schools, community centres and recreation facilities are vital for community development as are the education programs and community activities enabled by these types of facilities.

## Strategic Priorities

The State Government is reviewing Regional Development Victoria’s (RDV) strategic priorities to better drive jobs, investment and growth in regional Victoria. Golden Plains Shire Council recognises the important role that RDV plays and appreciates the support given by various State Governments through this body to facilitate growth and investment in the Shire and the broader region.

Regional economic development depends on:

* Regional strategic planning
* Regional service delivery
* Enabling infrastructure investment
* Liveability enhancement programs
* Business support programs and services
* Policy alignment across departments

*Local Government alignment on priorities for regional development is essential to enable effective investment by the State and Federal Governments and the private sector.*

## Regional Strategic Planning

Regional strategic planning is prospering in Victoria with the G21 Region Alliance leading the way in collaborative planning across its five member municipalities.

Geelong was the first region to develop a strategic plan and the benefits have been in the achievement of funding for priority projects and the ability to gain access to the highest levels of Governments to advocate for the region and communities.

## Business Input to Regional Partnerships

While business input to regional collaborative relationships is critical, it is mixed across the State and over time. Business leaders have less time to devote to travel and meetings.

An agile structure to engage business interests independent of the municipal partnerships would be of value in adding to the Government’s understanding of where best to invest to achieve the jobs and growth that it desires. This is addressed below in more detail, however it is important that business support programs develop their criteria in a way that emphasises job creation as a chief assessment component.

## Regional Service Delivery

One of the strengths of RDV has been regional service delivery through the regional and sub-regional offices of RDV across the State.

Local knowledge, local community and business networks and a sound relationship with Local Government economic development teams enable staff to identify opportunities and advise on optimisation through various state government programs.

*A most beneficial part of the collaborative engagement is for RDV officers to provide advice on projects at an early stage so that resources are not wasted on projects that are unlikely to be supported at higher levels.*

## Enabling Infrastructure

### Golden Plains Food Production Precinct

*Local Government alignment on Government funded enabling infrastructure is vital to lead private investment.*

A prime example of the importance of Local Government alignment with Government funded enabling infrastructure is the Golden Plains Food Production Precinct, located in the plains area immediately west of Lethbridge.

The Precinct has received $4.17 million of Commonwealth funding and $2.94 million of State funding plus $3.44 million from Barwon Water and $1.23 million of Golden Plains Shire’s funds.

Together, this funding collaboration will provide an 18km potable water pipeline to support the development of intensive agriculture.

The Golden Plains Food Production Precinct is expected to deliver 775 jobs and $160 million in new private investment in the G21 region over the next ten years. Early evidence indicates that these targets will be met. This is an example of specific infrastructure provision.

### Roads, Bridges and Networks

Government funding is also vital in regional and rural areas for roads, bridges, rail and other networks that enable communities to commute and producers to transport goods to market in a cost competitive manner. This will be one of the key factors in Australia’s global competitiveness as a food and fibre supplier. Producers may continue to improve productivity and farm gate price competiveness but farm gate to market is a major contributor to the price the consumer pays in Australia or overseas.

### High Speed Broadband

The other key area of government infrastructure funding is in the provision of high speed broadband to support the growth of the knowledge economy in regional and rural areas. While a Federal responsibility, it is important that the State Government advocates strongly for this to support existing business, to encourage local emerging businesses and to attract people from Melbourne and other cities out to provincial Victoria.

## Government Support for Growth

Population attraction in regional and rural Victoria is also dependent on the attractiveness and amenity of the area and essential to this are liveability enhancement programsfunded by State Government to improve community infrastructure. Parks and gardens, playgrounds, sporting reserves and streetscapes are important elements in creating local pride and in attracting new residents. Aligned to this is funding education and health. Population growth builds economic growth and strong communities build strong economies.

*A threat to the provision of Government funds to provincial Victoria is the decreasing capacity of local councils to match funding.*

The Federal Government has decided to suspend the indexation of Financial Assistance Grants and the State Government has announced a rate capping policy. These policy decisions both independently and together will severely reduce Council’s ability to deliver the range of services and infrastructure to meet the needs of the community. This is especially so in rapidly growing areas such as Golden Plains Shire. Most importantly, it will also severely limit local governments’ ability to find matching funds.

*If grant programs are made available to provincial Victoria to replace the former State Government’s Regional Growth Fund, very few small rural municipalities will participate.*

The same will occur for the Federal Government’s Stronger Regions Fund. Only major centres such as Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo are likely to have the resources post rate capping to apply.

## Support for Small to Medium Enterprise (SMEs)

*RDV should continue with its suite of business support programs and services to small businesses through Business Development Officers and Small Business Victoria.*

Support for small to medium enterprise is essential. This is vital to support the development of SMEs that will drive job growth in regional and rural areas in the future. The days of large scale industry establishment in these areas are over, and existing industries like Ford and Alcoa in the Geelong region are closing down.

A significant boost could be given to food and fibre producers who wish to enter the export market by funding research and development and providing funds to assist in production capacity upgrades. One of the key constraints to this has been that the funding criteria exclude businesses that have substantial turnovers through success in the domestic market and are not eligible due to a judgement that they are of a size that does not warrant Government assistance. Regionally located businesses should be given every support.

## Policy alignment

The State Government like Local Governments has a broad responsibility across all areas of economic, social and environmental concern.

*Policy alignment across departments is vital for place based solutions to economic and community development.*

Separated into departmental responsibilities, these concerns are considered discretely and without genuine reference to other vital areas. This is often the case where development is at question. For example the Coastal Management Plan may determine areas as development nodes but the State Planning Scheme may still restrict development.

Lack of consultation between departments can be detrimental. Water infrastructure being built within the Precinct will enable $160 million in investment and 775 jobs over ten years; the majority of which will be intensive agriculture such as poultry. While the broiler industry is covered by the Broiler Code within the State’s planning regime, unfortunately other poultry sectors such as layer farms, breeder farms and the growing number of free range poultry farms are not covered by a Code. This has the potential to make it more difficult to attract investment in intensive poultry farming in Victoria which is already losing market share to South Australia and Queensland.

*RDV lack of consultation between departments during policy development has the ability to impact negatively on investment and job creation, particularly with regard to projects that have numerous departmental cross overs, such as the Golden Plains Food Production Precinct.*

It would be timely for the State Government to convene discussions between DEPI, EPA, DTPLI, Local Government and industry to examine how to address the State’s planning regime and how to encourage investment in intensive agriculture in Victoria.

The following tables relate to Golden Plains Shire’s Economic Output and Jobs profile.

Over the next ten years we aim to increase the number of jobs in the Shire through agriculture, manufacturing, food processing, logistics and other investment. The support of RDV will be vital to achieving this aim.



