



## EAST GIPPSLAND RECOVERY 2030 PLAN

### **Introduction**

By any objective socio-economic measure, the East Gippsland region is tracking behind most parts of Australia and is failing to achieve its full potential. The region requires major private and public investment to achieve sustainable growth.

The combined impacts of drought, bushfire, coronavirus and government policy decisions has added to the poor outlook and a greater sense of urgency is required by all levels of government to initiate and complete job-sustaining projects.

This draft paper is intended to promote community discussion as it highlights both the opportunity and the urgency for practical action by the Federal and State Governments yet-to-be delivered funding promises to assist in bushfire recovery. While simply delivering on existing funding commitments in a timelier manner would stimulate economic activity, there is a need for additional funds over the next decade to help East Gippsland achieve its full potential.

The draft paper is effectively a 'jobs to do list' and it focuses on projects that are most likely to create long-term, sustainable jobs and build the social, economic, environment and cultural resilience of the region.

Critically, the plan highlights the requirement for partnership funding from all levels of government and the private sector to maximise the benefits over the next 10 years.

The coronavirus is highly likely to result in increased demand for regional travel destinations and a heightened interest in relocating to regional communities with the capacity to telecommute to work. East Gippsland needs to be ready to capitalise on those opportunities.

### **The plan**

#### ***Our region was already struggling***

The broader Gippsland electorate has been adversely impacted by government decisions affecting traditional industries such as commercial fishing, timber harvesting and energy production. Job losses have been concentrated in some of the more remote parts of East and Central Gippsland, within the Local Government Areas of Wellington and East Gippsland shires. Latrobe City also has experienced



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major disruption and the flow on economic impact to the rest of the Gippsland electorate continues to be felt.

A significant funding package is continuing to deliver a wide range of infrastructure and other upgrades in both Latrobe City and Wellington Shire, most recently the \$252 million commitment to complete the duplication of the Princes Highway between Traralgon and Sale. Federal funding of \$31 million and state funding of \$10 million for the Macalister Irrigation District is available and there have been various announcements under the Drought Communities Program and Building Better Regions Fund.

There needs to be greater urgency in delivering every project which has already received funding.

It's important to note East Gippsland Shire was excluded from the Latrobe Valley recovery package and has not received an appropriate level of funding to adjust to state government-driven job losses over the past 20 years.

In addition, the combined impacts of drought, bushfires and coronavirus has highlighted East Gippsland's lack of economic resilience and the need for a major funding package targeting both short and long term economic opportunities, over an extended period of time.

### ***We need to generate new opportunities***

While there are obvious opportunities to build on the region's traditional strengths, growing the visitor economy has been identified in numerous strategic plans as critical to the future economic prosperity of the region. To date, these plans have not been supported with major capital funding and have largely failed to deliver projects on the ground to replace the employment opportunities lost in traditional industries.

There is a need for a strategic approach to projects that add value to the region and are not simply maintenance or business as usual initiatives that could be funded from other sources. The visitor economy lacks resilience as the current attractions are seasonal and heavily focussed on the warmer months. The summer bushfires would not have been as devastating to the economy if East Gippsland had year-round attractions, and a better spread of visitor numbers. Consequently the focus of projects in this discussion paper is on initiatives that strengthen traditional industries and bolster the off-season opportunities across the region, and promote East Gippsland as a great place to live, work and visit.

### ***Upgraded amenity and enticing features to make people stop and stay***

In 2018, the Greater Gippsland region attracted 6.4 million visitors who spent over \$1 billion supporting more than 10,000 jobs.



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There is a recognised demand for high quality visitor experiences with the *Gippsland Destination Management Plan 2030* highlighting the need to invest in new and existing markets and to invest in 'place making' to support the visitor economy.

The strategy identifies Gippsland as 'predominantly a drive destination' with the Princes Highway described as a 'major road spine'. There is no regular passenger transport air services in Gippsland and rail services east of Traralgon are severely limited. Current upgrades to the Gippsland rail line, predominantly funded by the Federal Government, are not transformational in nature and will not significantly improve travel times to East Gippsland.

The Sydney Melbourne Touring Route provides one of Australia's greatest touring routes but has undeveloped potential in terms of visitation by all sectors of the tourism market, particularly in East Gippsland. An historic lack of investment in quality infrastructure on public land by the State Government has undermined the potential growth in the visitor economy.

The opportunity to improve drive touring routes and investing in high quality public infrastructure which encourages the touring public to stop and explore the region's natural attractions is critical to increasing the appeal and extending the length of stay in the region.

The tourism strategy emphasises that this includes signage, parking, roads, pedestrian walkways, cycle paths, lookouts and public amenities. There is also a compelling case for promoting the region's indigenous heritage and making Gippsland's tourism industry more accessible for older travellers and people with a disability.

In addition, improving the liveability of the region with high quality public infrastructure will assist in attracting and retaining skilled professionals and securing a larger share of the active retiree market.

### ***We're securing the infrastructure to get there***

Current upgrades across local roads in Gippsland, major works along the Monaro and Princes Highways, and rail upgrades such as the Avon River Bridge are helping to better connect the region. We are improving the road, rail, air and telecommunication connectivity which will encourage more people to choose to visit, and potentially move to Gippsland.

The Federal Government's commitment of an additional \$60 million to the Princes Highway corridor has provided another opportunity to improve road safety and enhance the visitor economy in the region. But it must be more than road upgrades if the region is going to benefit socially and economically.



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At this point, half of the Federal funding has been allocated from that commitment and various proposals have been put forward to utilise the remaining funds, with a focus on active transport opportunities such as rail trails, boardwalks and shared pathways.

The Federal Government has also committed \$448.5 million for Local Economic Recovery Projects in bushfire-impacted regions but there are no publicly available details on eligibility criteria or an indication of the share of funding East Gippsland will receive. It is understood that the State Government will need to match any funding but seven months after the bushfires, no projects have been announced.

From an East Gippsland perspective, the recovery projects need to go beyond the visitor economy, and explore ways to add value to existing strengths and the potential to support growth in primary industries such as fishing, agriculture and timber.

This discussion paper provides some of the immediate, medium and longer term practical opportunities which have been identified in consultation with local government and the community. It recognises that some projects are shovel ready and can begin almost immediately while other opportunities will take longer to develop and require additional planning and community consultation.

It is not intended as a final or complete list and new opportunities are likely to be presented as the community engages more fully in the bushfire recovery process in the months and years ahead.

## PROPOSED PROJECTS

### **Immediate Opportunities (construction to start within six months)**

#### **Metung Hot Springs**

**Total funding:** \$10 million

**Status:** Shovel ready

A well advanced proposal to develop Metung Hot Springs has the potential to provide a major boost to the tourism industry and support the growth of towns including Metung, Swan Reach and Lakes Entrance.

The project proponents operate the highly successful Mornington Peninsula hot springs and an application was made to the heavily over-subscribed Regional Growth Fund. The project was deemed eligible for funding but was not successful in receiving any funding support.



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Developing hot springs less than 15 minutes off the Princes Highway will provide an all-season attraction for the region which is currently subjected to fluctuating visitor numbers. The Metung Hot Springs project is likely to proceed on significantly longer timeframes and a much smaller scale, if government funding is not available.

It is understood that a Federal-State Government investment of \$10 million is likely to be matched by a further \$10 million from the project proponents to fast track the project.

## **Mallacoota abalone co-operative**

**Total funding:** \$3 million

**Status:** Shovel ready

The Mallacoota abalone co-operative processing facility was completely destroyed by the bushfires, severely impacting the largest private employer in Mallacoota.

Plans to reinvigorate the co-op and 'build back better' with a tourism experience added to the facility has left the co-op with a shortfall of \$3 million in capital funding.

The abalone industry is a long term, sustainable industry in East Gippsland and adding value to this facility will improve the resilience of the industry. The co-operative is providing more than \$3.2 million of its own resources to the rebuild project.

## **Lakes Entrance Fishermen's Co-operative and Gippsland Ports upgrade**

**Total funding:** \$3 million

**Status:** Commence September 2020

Lakes Entrance is one the largest commercial fishing ports in Australia and home to the southern and eastern scale fish and shark fishery, as well as other commercial fishers who land more than 4000 tonnes annually.

The unloading facilities at Bullock Island are in disrepair and in danger of failing and undermining the future viability of the industry.

A plan to replace existing jetties and enhance the tourism experience is designed to improve safety for vessel operators and boost opportunities to sell fresh seafood to visitors. This project would complement the first stage of the Bullock Island Master Plan which will result in more than \$8 million being spent on long-awaited infrastructure upgrades.



### **East Gippsland Rail Trail redevelopment**

**Total funding:** \$6 million

**Status:** Commence immediately

The East Gippsland Rail Trail provides a safer alternative to cycling on the Princes Highway but some sections of the trail are in poor condition and the proposed link to Lakes Entrance has never been established.

The growth in cycling tourism is an opportunity for East Gippsland to develop a year-round attraction with several unique features along the 100km route. The rail trail traverses many of the region's most adversely impacted by the bushfires and provides a safe off-road link for pedestrians and cyclists in an era when cycling tourism is growing and East Gippsland has natural advantages.

### **Bushfire environmental recovery package**

**Total funding:** \$10 million

**Status:** Commence immediately

The Federal Government has announced a funding pool for bushfire environmental recovery works including habitat restoration, pest plant and animal control and catchment restoration activities.

A scope of works needs to be developed to partner with Landcare and other environmental organisations to support practical work across the landscape impacted by the 2020 bushfires.

Training opportunities and longer term contracts for Landcare coordinators will help to maximise the benefits of working in partnership with private landholders.

### **Orbost Trestle Bridge restoration and associated works**

**Total funding:** \$5 million

**Status:** Scope of works to be finalised, commence January 2021

The historic Snowy River railway trestle bridge is in danger of being demolished by neglect. Constructed in 1916, and unused since the 1980s, the bridge has the potential to become an iconic pedestrian and cycling destination and a highlight of the East Gippsland Rail Trail.

A community group has commissioned an independent report which estimates the cost of restoration at \$3.5 million and associated works are needed to better link the bridge to the rail trail and an enhanced Forest Park in Orbost.



**Mallacoota Golf Club re-development**

**Total funding:** \$1 million

**Status:** Shovel ready

The volunteer led Mallacoota Golf Club was directly impacted by the bushfires and is undergoing a complete redevelopment.

Club volunteers have been successful in securing heavy equipment to undertake extensive clearing of dead trees and will be seeking funding to undertake a major re-planting program, develop a wildlife sanctuary corridor and walking circuit, and restore the popular golf course and associated facilities. The project aims to incorporate the course and walking circuit into the natural landscape, creating a tourist attraction for both golfers and wider public.

Reconstruction work is underway with in kind labour and machinery support but capital costs in the vicinity of \$1 million are anticipated to bring the project to fruition.

**Lakes Entrance all-abilities boardwalk**

**Total funding:** \$6 million

**Status:** Feasibility/concept plan draft released for public consultation

The indigenous themed boardwalk and shared pathway will provide a circuit around the eastern end of Cunninghame Arm, linking Main Beach to Eastern Beach and enhancing safety.

The Federal Government has provided \$50,000 to develop concept plans and the first stage of the boardwalk construction could begin this calendar year. The circuit would deliver long term social, cultural, economic and environmental benefits and entrench Lakes Entrance as a peak retirement destination.

**Buchan shared pathway and streetscape**

**Total funding:** \$2 million

**Status:** Scope of works to be develop. Construction possible 2021.

The Buchan Township has never fully capitalised economically on the high visitor numbers to the renowned Buchan Caves Reserve. As bushfire damage is repaired, and the reserve undergoes a \$2 million redevelopment (including the reopening of the pool), there is a need to better link the caves to the township with a shared pathway and streetscape improvements.

The Buchan Caves already attracts more than 150,000 visitors per year and the challenge remains to capitalise on that visitation and increase local job opportunities by encouraging visitors to stay longer and explore the region.



### **Stronger Communities Program**

**Total funding:** \$2.5 million

**Status:** September 2020, completed by July 2022

The existing Stronger Communities Program is heavily over-subscribed in each round across the Gippsland electorate. Given the widespread impact of the bushfires, it is going to be difficult for small community groups and sporting organisations to fundraise for necessary improvements to facilities.

It is proposed that a two year contract of \$2.5 million in East Gippsland Shire is provided under the design parameters of the existing program guidelines in 2020-21 and 2021-22 with an increase in funding per project to 'up to \$50,000' and a 'two for one' matching contribution.

### **Raymond Island-Paynesville Koala Experience**

**Total funding:** \$4 million

**Status:** Stage 1 to commence September 2020

Raymond Island offers a unique koala experience with an opportunity for visitors to observe the local colony at close quarters.

Plans are well advanced for improved walkways, interpretive signage and a Koala Research, Education and Discovery Centre along with rehabilitation for sick and injured wildlife. There is a need for extensive habitat restoration and revegetation activities on the island and opportunities to work with the community on a whole-of-island koala plan

The project has a staged plan as below:

*Stage 1 – habitat restoration, wildlife care, education & training, visitor experience & interpretation boost local visitor economy*

*Stage 2 – road & pedestrian pathway modification, additional visitor amenities R.I & Ferry Park, installation of koala art trail*

*Stage 3 - business case for a research, rehabilitation and interpretive centre.*

### **Paynesville foreshore redevelopment**

**Total funding:** \$4 million

**Status:** Work can commence September 2020 and be completed 2021.

The East Gippsland Shire Council and State Government have both committed funding to the Slip Rd and Foreshore redevelopment opportunities to capitalise on Paynesville's unique location at the heart of the Gippsland Lakes.

Establishing a maritime precinct with linking infrastructure to the town's CBD has been planned for more than 20 years and requires public funding to stimulate





private investment. Developing boardwalks and shared pathways is an essential element of the plan.

### **Mallacoota-Genoa Rd safety upgrades**

**Total funding:** \$10 million

**Status:** Scope of works to be developed for projects to commence in 2021

The Mallacoota-Genoa Rd is sub-standard for a significant arterial route and does not meet the needs of the residents of Mallacoota, Gypsy Point and Genoa, or the significant tourist population.

The road requires major safety improvements including widening, corner realignment and surface reconstruction.

### **Great Alpine Road safety upgrades and streetscapes**

**Total funding:** \$10 million

**Status:** Scope of works to be developed for projects to commence in 2021

The Great Alpine Road is a major touring route with a critical role to play in the social and economic life of the Tambo Valley and high country. As the only sealed access road in emergency situations, the road has benefited from significant upgrades over the past 10 years.

The next stage of high priority safety works should include streetscape improvements in Bruthen and Omeo that would deliver long term benefits for locals and visitors.

### **Boating and recreational fishing facilities**

**Total funding:** \$5 million

**Status:** Work can commence September 2020

East Gippsland has highly-prized onshore and offshore fishing grounds but relatively poor infrastructure to support the growing demand.

This fund would be managed locally by Gippsland Ports, and involve state/local government or industry funding agreement, to improve boat ramps, provide accessible fishing opportunities and other infrastructure upgrades.

### **Bonang Rd sealing**

**Total funding:** \$8 million

**Status:** Work can commence September 2020

The remote communities of Bendoc, Bonang, Tubbut and Goongerah were severely impacted by the bushfires and the main link to Orbost has 12km of unsealed road. It



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is regarded as a road safety hazard with the interaction between heavy vehicles, local users and visitors to this wilderness area.

The Federal Government has committed \$2 million to the project but work has not started, and can only allow for the sealing of 2km of the 12km remaining. Sealing the remaining section of the Bonang Highway and various safety upgrades would enhance the road's appeal to touring motorcycle groups and provide a sealed loop from Canberra-Cooma-Bombala-Bendoc-Orbost-Cann River and return to Bombala on the Princes and Monaro Highways.

## **Parks Victoria facility enhancement**

**Funding sought:** \$20 million

**Status:** Scope of works to be developed.

Support a five year program to train and deploy a local workforce to upgrade visitor facilities on Parks Victoria land with a focus on highly bushfire impacted locations such as Buchan Caves Reserve, Cape Conran, Mallacoota and Tamboon.

An opportunity to focus on developing the natural resource management skills of local young people, particularly indigenous Australians, with a career pathway in the public service. The vast majority of land in East Gippsland is owned by the Crown, but there has been a reduction in staff numbers to actively manage the reserve system.

We need more boots on the ground undertaking practical projects to improve the environment and enhance the visitor experience.

The current works program to replace burnt assets is primarily funded by insurance claims but that will not meet the expectations of modern travellers. The visitor experience in East Gippsland would be enhanced by increased investment in better accommodation options and improved infrastructure on Parks Victoria managed assets.

The chronic under investment in natural resource management should be a priority project with a focus on practical works and projects that employ local residents as the custodians of the natural estate.

## **Nowa Nowa-Wairewa revitalisation program**

**Total funding:** \$1 million

**Status:** Work can commence September 2020

Nowa Nowa experienced a significant downturn in visitor economy during their peak tourist season whilst neighbouring Wairewa was directly impacted by the bushfires.



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Eleven of the 37 homes were destroyed along with devastating losses to local businesses.

The Wairewa community hall was the place of last resort for over 30 residents and Country Fire Authority (CFA) strike team members. The hall requires significant upgrades to its amenities and surrounds.

The iconic O'Grady's Bridge along the rail trail, a tourist destination in its own right was also severely damaged. The communities of Nowa Nowa and Wairewa have a number of shovel ready projects. The focus of these projects will be to improve resilience and boost the local economy.

## **Medium Term Opportunities (1-3 Years)**

### **Pictorial signage package and marketing campaign**

**Total funding:** \$5 million

The existing signage is poor and fails to inform or excite the travelling public to take a break and appreciate more of Gippsland's attractions.

The package would develop and implement:

- Directional and product signage to help travelling public navigate attractions both on, and adjacent to the Princes Highway
- IT based solutions to alerting the travelling public of attractions in each town and short walks/trails.

Motivating visitors to detour to explore the attractions at towns such as Mallacoota, Bemm River, Marlo, Lake Tyers, Metung and Paynesville will improve road safety and increase visitor yield.

A concerted three year marketing campaign is required to ensure the region capitalises on the anticipated increased interest in domestic travel, given ongoing restrictions and consumer reluctance to travel overseas, related to the coronavirus.

### **Omeo Livingston Park and mountain bike trail**

**Total funding:** \$2 million

The remote isolated community of Omeo and its surrounds were impacted by the bushfires.

The redevelopment of the natural swimming hole and the main park plus a mountain bike trail for this community will improve the liveability and recovery for this remote town.



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## **Mallacoota revitalisation package**

**Total funding:** \$10 million

This package is aimed to be a holistic revitalisation package for the Mallacoota community which was the hardest hit during the recent bushfires.

A new democratically elected group has been formed and is in the process of identifying local priorities. It is anticipated that a final list of projects will be available by September 2020, but an indicative list of projects which can be expected to be included are:

- Aged Care Facility
- Surf Club
- Trail revivals
- Skate Park and community hall upgrades

The focus of these projects will be to improve resilience and boost the local economy. The projects will upgrade existing amenity for the community and create year-round tourism attractions to the region.

## **East Gippsland Recreation Reserve package**

**Total funding:** \$5 million

This package involves upgrades to the community facilities within the below townships:

- Buchan
- Bruthen
- Sarsfield
- Omeo
- Bemm River
- Cann River

During the peak of the recent and devastating bushfires, local recreation reserves became a place of relief for the community as temporary evacuation centres, however many of the facilities are aged or ill equipped. Upgrades to these facilities allow for a known safe space, in addition to areas for local sport for the community.

## **Gippsland Agricultural Support Package**

**Total funding:** \$1 million

**Status:** Commence September 2020

Gippsland is well known for its diverse and high quality agricultural sector. Gippsland farms alone produce over \$2 billion worth of agricultural outputs each year, with the food processing sector adding a further \$1.6 billion annually.



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With increasing pressures of a prolonged drought, devastating bushfires and other sectoral uncertainties, East Gippsland has an opportunity to create sustainable connections between existing tourism, food and wine, investment and retail industries. These connections can ultimately drive awareness of East Gippsland being a region of quality produce, increase the demand of such produce, and increase year round tourism.

The objective of this package is to increase capability and capacity of East Gippsland agri-tourism businesses, through creating alternative pathways to markets, embracing new opportunities, and building resilience through diversification and value adding by taking their business beyond the farm gates.

## **Marlo to Orbost shared pathway**

**Total funding:** \$8 million

**Status:** Review existing scope of works and commence construction in July 2021

Linking Orbost and Marlo with a shared pathway along the Snowy River has been the subject of detailed design work but capital funding has failed to materialise. The opportunity to improve drive touring routes with high quality infrastructure alongside iconic natural assets such as the Snowy River needs to be a priority to encourage travellers to stop and/or extend their length of stay.

## **Lakes Entrance indoor recreation expansion**

**Total funding:** \$2.5 million

The community of Lakes Entrance has been advocating for several years for the expansion of its existing single court indoor recreation facility.

This investment would allow the Shire to expand the existing indoor recreation facility, improving liveability and boosting visitor economy by host sporting carnivals, potentially attracting up to 1,000 people over a weekend.

Improving the liveability of our regional towns with better sporting and community infrastructure assists in attracting and retaining skilled professionals in a range of industries.

## **Gippsland Lakes Research, Education and Discovery Centre**

**Funding sought:** \$4 million

A Gippsland Lakes Research Education and Discovery (RED) Centre developed on Bullock Island would provide world class research focussed on the Ramsar-listed Gippsland Lakes and catchments and include an iconic tourism destination in the form of an interactive Interpretive Centre.



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The centre would provide up-to-date research and work with natural resource management agencies throughout the region to see a coordinated approach to the management of the lakes system and catchments, coordinate best practice habitat protection and restoration, and enhanced the world-renowned lakes system for future generations.

The RED Centre would also offer a visitor experience at the Interpretive Centre, promoting the Gippsland Lakes and its unique species, such as the Burrunan dolphins.

## **Lake Tyers Beach Rd upgrade and pathway redevelopment**

**Total funding:** \$2 million

Lake Tyers Beach Road provides the only access to the residential community of Lake Tyers, popular beaches and estuary. The area is surrounded by forest making access difficult.

The focus would be on upgrading and widening the road, and linking the existing trail network along with new routes in highly visited locations. This work can improve liveability and boost the visitor economy with the redevelopment of the Lake Tyers cliff top walk.

## **Princes highway clearing**

**Total funding:** Cost unknown, ongoing maintenance

The Princes Highway was significantly impacted during the summer bushfires, resulting in its closure for over a month. The Princes Highway is the critical transport artery of East Gippsland and a vital link from Gippsland to southern New South Wales and Canberra, and from East Gippsland to Melbourne.

The closure of our major transport and supply route highlighted the urgent need for the highway to be more resilient. It took a huge toll on our towns, communities, businesses and families who rely on that stretch of highway, jobs were lost and lives were put at risk.

Verge clearing will assist in ensuring resilience of our major transport artery as well as providing an extensive strategic fire break along the Princes Highway from Nowa Nowa to the New South Wales border.

## **Secondary education package**

**Funding sought:** \$30 million

The three largest public secondary colleges in East Gippsland have major capital works requirements which are currently unfunded and contributing to poor education outcomes for students.



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A lack of quality facilities undermines efforts to recruit senior staff and attract students to choose the public system, resulting in a continuous cycle of unrealised potential.

Bairnsdale, Lakes Entrance and Orbost Secondary Colleges all require major packages of works with Mallacoota, Swifts Creek and Cann River in need of targeted investment to ensure students are not unfairly disadvantaged compared to other Victorian students.

Additional resources to allow more students to choose to undertake their first year of university or higher learning without leaving East Gippsland also requires investment by governments and the tertiary education sector.

## **Longer Term Priorities**

The longer term priorities are a series of planning and feasibility studies to prepare the next generation of projects to be shovel-ready when opportunities arise to secure government funding.

An allocation of \$2 million over the next three years would allow for the development of business cases and designs for the following priority projects:

1. Alpine Hall of Fame - explore Omeo option.
2. Design water-based emergency services centre, evaluate Lakes Entrance and Paynesville options.
3. Design of all-weather road between Bemm River and Cape Conran.
4. Design of shared pathway between Marlo and Cape Conran.
5. Design of shared pathway between Bairnsdale and Paynesville.
6. Transport connectivity study - develop a priority list of transport projects including Bairnsdale freight intermodal, airport upgrades and strategic road links.
7. Telecommunication connectivity study - develop a priority plan for investment in an upgraded telecommunication network to support social and economic outcomes.

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