

# **Report on the past years activities to the MASG AGM November 2011**

**MASG supports and facilitates a number of working groups and projects, the highlights and challenges they faced during 2011 are outlined in the following report.**

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- Comfy Homes Project
- Solar Hub Project
- Local Food Project Working Group
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### **B. MASG core: Organisational structure**

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- Operations Committee
- Mobilising Committee
- MASG Inc.
- Vital Signs
- Sustainable House Tours
- MASG community liaison and partnerships
- MASG communications
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## **MASG ADVOCACY ACTION in 2011**

### **Getting Renewable energy supported**

Convenor and Worker Dean Bridgfoot and many MASG members

#### **MASG official support to 100% campaign**

MASG was part of the National 100% renewable community campaign along with 70 groups across Australia. The campaign was instrumental in getting \$10B of funding to renewable energy as part of the carbon price, along with the establishment of two renewable energy independent bodies and an agreement to have the Australian Electricity Market Operator model what it would take to power Australia by 100% renewable energy.

MASG was on the Committee of the campaign and seconded Dean to the campaign to assist with the campaign in:

- Working with groups in vital seats of MPCCC (Multi Party Climate Change Committee) members in Newcastle, Lilley and New England

- Deliver training sessions to regional Victorian groups around advocating for renewable energy in Daylesford in March (30+ participants)
- Delivering national leadership training to 20 participants in February 2011.
- Mentoring and assisting 12 groups across Victoria working on renewable energy.

#### Participation of MASG members in renewable campaigning.

1. Doorknocking and street surveying  
780 + surveys were done in Castlemaine and Bendigo by over a dozen volunteers, culminating in the presentation of a report to Steve Gibbons, Bendigo MP, during the carbon price negotiations in June.
2. Letter writing  
A letter writing group initially worked well, but has fallen away more recently. However MASG members and others are still supporting action on climate change in our local press.
3. Letter writing, emailing and telephoning MP offices  
As part of the 100% campaign MASG members rang and wrote to MPCCC members and local federal MP Steve Gibbons at critical periods of the carbon price negotiations. Discussions with Steve Gibbons and other MPs by the 100% campaign have highlighted how those letters and calls along with other activities of the campaign were important in shifting the negotiations towards a much better deal for renewable energy.
4. Rallies at public MP offices.  
MASG members rallied to draw attention to action on climate change on several occasions this year, providing political pressure at important times and generating positive media coverage.  
Steve Gibbons presentation of survey results. June 2011  
Office of Premier and Cabinet, Bendigo, Oct 2011.  
Tony Abbott meeting and rally, Bendigo Oct 2011
5. Meetings with MPs.  
MASG members met with MPs this year to provide pressure for more progressive policies for renewable energy. MPs met with included:
  - Steve Gibbons, Bendigo electorate, House of Representatives
  - Damian Drum, MHR Northern Victoria
  - Maree Edwards, Bendigo West, Victorian Parliament.

## **COMMUNITY WIND WORKING GROUP**

Convenor Mike Lewin and Worker Jarra Hicks.

Drawing on the expertise of the group, this year the Community Wind Working Group has focused on preliminary site studies and business modelling in order to scope project viability. Building on the MASG-Council Memorandum of Understanding, the Group has also worked to successfully develop a supportive relationship with the Mount Alexander Shire Council.

This year has also brought significant changes for the Mount Alexander Community Wind (MACW) project. The Group was successful in negotiating a funding agreement with Embark which, matched with funds from MASG, provides a budget to employ a 4-day a week staff person to advance the community wind project. In August this year we successfully recruited a Project Coordinator, Jarra Hicks, who started her role with us on the 10<sup>th</sup> October. A key aspect of Jarra's role is to coordinate community engagement, which has begun with membership collection and

holding regular community stalls. Next year will see the expansion of community engagement and local involvement in the project through workshops and surveys etc.

The context for wind development in the shire changed significantly with the introduction of new Victorian Wind Development Guidelines by the Ballieu Government. These Guidelines put a wind exclusion zone on the Eastern half of the shire and give the right of veto to anyone living within 2km of a proposed wind development. Despite this, the group is proceeding with site investigations believing there are still viable sites available. In addition, the group will be actively campaigning to have the Wind Guidelines revised or revoked through direct contact with our political representatives and the broader wind community.

## COMFY HOMES PROJECT

Convenor and Worker Deanna Neville.

The **Comfy Homes Project** is working with the community's tradespeople, businesses, workplaces, groups and householders to make improvements to homes so that they are more comfortable, energy efficient and with lower power bills.

The key achievements:

- Held a Tradies' Day on Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> May, an opportunity to trial the interest in a sustainable building expo event. Was attended by local architects, owner-builders, energy assessors, energy efficient building materials, lighting, waste water and hardware. The response was great – many keen to exhibit with us again, found they made new contacts with other tradies and enjoyed the personal intimacy of local connections.
- Following the Tradies' Day, a Sustainable Building Tradies' Expo was run on Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> November at the footy club. It was well promoted, well attended and already outgrowing the new space. The exhibitors, again, really enjoyed the local and intimate space, feedback reflected the 'buzz' going on in the room.
- There is the opportunity to continue this event annually. A good partnership with Footy Club has been established and Council and we will be meeting with the Economic Development staff regarding future events that will enable them to build links with local tradies.
- A Comfy Homes link has been added to the MASG website. This includes a growing list of local builders, tradies, products and services to help householders find out about sustainable building and to help promote the local businesses working in sustainable and energy efficient design.
- There are great opportunities to link with the Solar City program which helped inform more householders about the Comfy Homes Project.
- There is now increased awareness across the shire of some of the work MASG does.
- There is the potential to expand the Comfy Homes role into a business model, seeking paid advertising on the MASG website (to support staffing this role) (see report under MASG Inc)

Some challenges:

- The initial plan to link Comfy Homes with the 6 major employers proved to be difficult and challenging and proved not to be an approach ready for pursuing at this stage of the project.

The future for the Comfy Homes Project:

Deanna's role finishes at the end of the year. MASG has the capacity to keep this project going with the assistance of self-generated funds (from developing the paid ads on the website). It will, however, depend on how that this is managed. Some funds from Comfy Homes are available for

setting up a short-term paid role and then it will depend on the generation of funds from the payment of the online ad space. This role would also be responsible for developing new tradie/product links on the site, which could potentially expand across the Bendigo region via the Bendigo Sustainability Group.

## **SOLAR HUB PROJECT**

Participant and Worker Mike Reeves

MASG is a partner in this project with the Bendigo Sustainability Group. This project began in early 2011 and Mike Reeves has been engaged on a contract to provide Solar Hub 'Sunny Sessions' to our community.

The SolarHub project was launched at a time when solar PV was the cheapest it had ever been, and there was also a generous feed-in-tariff and an alternative tariff available following installation. These conditions were not to continue. This initial environment caused a strong interest in grid-connect PV and SolarHub saw a strong uptake in round one which began in the first quarter of 2011.

In running this project the issues that were dealt with on a regular basis were the complexity of the grid-connect paper work, choosing tariffs and dealing with both retailers and the distributor (Powercor). Managing peoples' expectations in regards to realistic time-frames was and still is an issue and a useful document showing timeframes was created in response to this.

This year saw two major reductions in incentives to solar uptake: the Federal Government's reduction in the RECs multiplier (serious but manageable) and the State Government's capping of the Premium Feed in Tariff (expected, but more serious). For these two events, the capping of the PFIT has had the most effect on the SolarHubs program, causing a slowing in demand and strong competition in the PV sector from other supplier/installers.

Explaining the new tariff has become something of a priority, given that for many of the latter participants, the financial aspect has a high priority. The attractive PFIT option is no longer available, and the Standard Feed in Tariff has been removed for the vast majority of systems (i.e. those under 5 kW), and so what remains is the Transitional Feed in Tariff at 25 cents for export energy which has a sunset clause of 5 years. A simple calculator has been developed which has proved useful in explaining the benefits of going over to grid-connect PV.

It is hoped that the market will now stabilize following the changes in the feed in tariffs, but there also is a state government review pending for next year, so there is still some uncertainty until that review is completed. At the time of writing, there are some signs that the market is recovering, and a fierce price-cutting war will no doubt encourage people to keep considering grid-connect PV as a good option.

In the meantime SolarHub continues to work hard to promote the benefits of grid-connect solar and the support offered to participants. Over 330 systems have been installed in the target areas and the total continues to grow. **Nearly one megawatt of quality renewable energy has been installed.**

## **LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION Working Group**

### **THE HUB PLOT: Demonstration food garden**

Convenors Heather Barrett and Peter Sansom

This project has gone from strength to strength over the past year, thanks to a dedicated (and increasing) group of volunteers who are keen to take some immediate practical action on climate change.

The group meets in the garden at the rear of The Hub on most Monday mornings. Jobs get done and at the end of the work, produce and recipes are shared over a cup of tea. There have also been visits to other “food producing” gardens.

The group has also run a series of interesting very well attended workshops with the generous financial support of the Mount Alexander Shire Council. Aspects of gardening covered so far have been: **composting, pruning, soils, and wicking beds**. We also conducted a “sell out” session at BudaFest. All our sessions have been either “revenue neutral” or “revenue positive”.

We work with the Growing Abundance project – one of our members being a volunteer on the Steering Committee and the Community Kitchen Project.

In the future:

- We are considering increasing the “productive” part of our project so that we can continue to be self supporting.
- We will be conducting the biennial **Growing The Harvest** Festival on 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of April in 2012.

Challenges:

- A major challenge for us has been to try and encourage MASG’s Committee of Management to show a greater level of interest in this long standing, popular and “climate action positive” working group.
- Another challenge: Knowing where this group sits in the overall organisational structure of MASG. Are there other groups within the organisation who are attempting to do similar things? For instance, what does the “Resilient Communities” working group do? There seems to be no readily obvious and easy to understand organisational strategic plan so that all those involved, know the overall direction of the organisation and where each group fits in to that plan.

## **WASH AGAINST WASTE TRAILER**

This year the Wash against waste trailer was used at the following **events**:

- Steiner School Fair
- Woodend Sustainable Living Festival
- Peppergreen Community Festival
- Taradale Food & Wine Festival
- Castlemaine Festival

The Big Event in April for the Wash Against Waste Trailer was the Castlemaine Festival in the Botanic Gardens. Despite the fact the preparations were very last minute, the day was a success. Ten Food Vendors participated and there was 28 extraordinary volunteers!

**Maintenance:** There has been quite a bit of maintenance on the Trailer this year. A new battery and replacement glass for the solar panel. These are the major items. We also needed to top up the stock.

**Advertising/Marketing:** We would like to approach the various Festivals and Events in the area and encourage them to use the WAWT. It is currently being under-utilised.

**Sponsorship:** A work in progress! It would be great if we could find a sponsor with a four-wheel drive to tow the Trailer to events.

**Volunteers:** We need more of these so that the Trailer can attend as many events as possible. Especially, we need someone who is dedicated to marketing the Trailer. Those volunteers who are currently involved are wonderful, enthusiastic and hardworking!

**Finances:** Due to the cost of maintenance we are currently running at a loss.

**Special Request:** We need a four wheel drive vehicle with a towing capacity of 2000kgs minimum, to enable us to tow the trailer.



**Special Thanks:** Rex Odgers – a legend!

## **GROWING ABUNDANCE**

MASG is involved with this project in partnership with the Castlemaine Community House

Convenor and Worker Lucy Young, CCH.

Growing Abundance is hosted by the Castlemaine Community House but as this project, like others, is a community project with shared objectives and vision it is supported also by MASG and so a report is given here.

Growing Abundance has had a great year of establishing and implementing:

- The Harvest Group of this project has harvested about three tonne of fruit and establishing partnerships with great volunteers, fruit owners and gardening educators.
- Food for Thought, an information program has run 10 film nights about food with over two hundred people attending. More are planned for next year.

- Castlemaine Abundance Kitchen Enterprise (CAKE) has established a strong working group and delivered 10 skills workshops and provided local produce catering for a range of community events. CAKE is experiencing increasing demand for its services and is still in the process of exploring a 'space' and expanding its team of cooking experts.
- The Local Produce Guide project has established strong working relationships with six local retailers who have worked together to produce the guide which includes over 100 local producers. The Local Produce Guide is a key tool in enabling consumers to make informed decisions to lower their carbon footprint as it relates to food.

The key challenge:

- For all aspects of Growing Abundance has been keeping up with the success of the project. It seems that *food* is the sexy end of sustainability and Growing Abundance 'hit the spot'. We are pleased to contribute to the 'sustainable food' space and look forward to thriving into the future and strengthening relationships with all our partners and more.
- Our major challenge at the moment is accessing further funding ... or patiently waiting....

We have attended a few COG meetings and have been impressed with their efficiency and information sharing capacity. MASG undertook to cross promote our activities and this has for the most part been successful. It would be great to further develop the idea of a 'sustainable events' calendar across organisations to enable easy planning of events. Should GA continue as a funded project, it would be great to re-visit the 'partnership' in respect to mutual expectations.

The attendance of Heather Barrett at our Project Reference Group and a member of CAKE is valuable and a great opportunity to cross pollinate with the Hub Plot and Harvest Festival. We remind each other that none of us 'own' sustainable food and are all working towards the same outcomes – a low carbon future....or something like that!

## **WASTE Working Group**

Convenor Carolyn Neilson

A number of MASG members are meeting on waste issues as part of the shire based waste management group which started earlier this year and is currently working on improving composting of green and organic waste in the Shire. The group meets approximately once a month and is attended by MASC Healthy Environments Manager, Calder Waste Management Group rep, Waste consultant Bill Grant, interested organic farmers, Shire Landfill Operators, other interested parties.

The key achievements:

- We will start a "fast" aerated system of composting soon in Hub garden and improving the pre land fill diversion of waste.
- This shire based waste management group has harnessed energy and input from a larger variety of stakeholders and interested parties which no doubt will have better outcomes for future waste management systems.

The key challenges:

- The management of the various waste streams in the shire is complex, complicated and fragmented. Much time and energy has been spent gaining an understanding of how the systems work so that we know more about what we can actually achieve.

- This group can be challenged by issues associated with volunteerism (insufficient time, energy, management or drive)

## **B.The Core of MASG**

These are the activities that MASG undertakes to keep the organization running and able to deliver the above achievements.

### **Co-Ordinating Group (COG), Convener Jacinta Walsh**

The accountability group/committee of management of MASG commenced having COG meetings as part of the implementation of restructure of MASG. This was informed as a result of the MASG Future Focus Review conducted in 2010. COG meetings are open to all members. Working group conveners, staff and accountability group/COM representatives are expected to attend.

Monthly COG meetings have been held since March 2011. Meetings take place for two hours and swap between Thursday evening and daytime meetings.

The role of the COG is to make decisions for actions that Mount Alexander Sustainability Group (MASG) takes. The actions are to achieve MASG's aims of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and promoting sustainability in the shire.

The COG has been trialing different and more inclusive meeting processes. This has included:

- Asking participant members permission to try a few new things and for everyone's patience.
- Consensus decision-making (specifically, consensus minus 1), and
- Talking Rounds (method for getting people's input in timely and fair way when discussing an issue. The person introducing a topic gets 5 minutes. Then we do 2 rounds – 2 minutes each, not everyone has to talk, and we use a timer.

## **THE COMMITTEE OF MANAGEMENT / ACCOUNTABILITY GROUP**

In the new structure of MASG the Committee of Management has a changed role of overseeing the core functions of MASG ensuring that it is safe and legal. Many of the discussions and decisions previously made by the COM have now shifted to the COG.

Some of the key achievements COM are:

- We all work well together
- Got down to only a few face to face meetings a year
- Handed over work to COG
- Most Committee of Management members are keen to stay on the committee due to the more shared workload.

Some key challenges were:

- There are some silent members, need to get better at contacting them via phone and keeping them engaged
- COM members need to find their passion or a particular interest to be engaged with.

**Under the new structure MASG has two Committees that meet fortnightly and keep things happening at MASG on a day to day basis:**

## **OPERATIONS Committee**

This committee is responsible for finance, administration and HR and general operations of MASG. Kerry our finance and admin officer works to this committee. Susie is the Convenor.

## **MOBILISING Committee**

This Committee is responsible for mobilising and engaging with the community generally and on campaigns. Dean works to this committee and Susie is the Convenor.

## **MASG Inc**

As part of new fundraising efforts and as a result of interest shown in the Future Focus Review in 2010 a number of people have been interested in setting up MASG Inc, a business arm of MASG. A number of people have been meeting to make this happen.

### **Key activities and achievements:**

- Attended workshop on setting up Social Enterprises
- Looking at feasibility of social enterprise options (house tours, expos, veets, waste management enterprise, bulk buying, consultancy sustainability services)
- Collaborating and networking with other sustainability social enterprises
- Evolving a business plan
- Started income raising with expos and group skills workshops VITAL SIGNS.

### **Key challenges**

- Undertaking these activities with volunteerism
- New realm for an NGO of running a business and all the skills and knowledge that that entails.
- Require a bit of market research/pilot studies to understand the price the community are prepared to pay for a particular service or product and whether that is economically viable.

## **VITAL SIGNS**

One of the business or income generating and service providing activities of MASG this year has been Vital Signs which was a series of seven 2-hour workshops to support community workers and volunteers by increasing their communication and interpersonal skills and providing mentoring and support to assist them in their work within the community. The workshops cover the topics of communication, group facilitation, conflict resolution and self-care to enhance member's abilities to work effectively and efficiently with colleagues and participants.

### **Key achievements**

- We held 7 workshops in the middle of 2011
- The workshops were on 'golden rules for groups', 'communication skills' (4 workshops on

reflective listening, self-awareness, influencing others, and communication problems), 'facilitation', 'consensus decision making'.

- The workshops were rated highly by participants.
- 20 participants from the Mount Alexander Shire attended at least one workshop. Most people attended at least 2 or 3 workshops.
- We had 3 workshop facilitators participate in the program, and more offers in the background.
- We have been invited to run VITAL Signs in partnership with Sustainability Victoria, for their Regional Community Facilitator (CF) teams to provide regionally relevant opportunities for communities that build the skills and capacity of groups to engage with sustainability in practical ways. This will raise over \$2,000.00 for MASG Inc.

## **Sustainable House Tour**

### **The key achievements:**

- The foundation work has been undertaken to roll out sustainable house tours
- A register of house owners interested in including their houses in future tours has been collated
- MASC is a funding partner
- The project has established networks with new environmental agencies
- The project has established a keen engaged volunteer team for the house tours

### **Some challenges are:**

- There are sustainability issues with volunteerism
- Choosing an appropriate price for the house tour

## **MASG community liaison and partnerships**

MASG signed an MOU with the Mount Alexander Shire Council in June 2011.

The MOU has meant that MASG can work more collaboratively with the Council on a range of issues, whilst preserving our independence and ability to offer constructive feedback about Council decisions.

## **MASG communications**

Newsletter and website.

The MASG newsletter underwent a revamp this year and is sent out electronically each fortnight to over 800 members and supporters. It has been doing so for over 5 years. It has a consistent open rate of over 30%, which is considered to be a high opening rate for enews of such long standing and reach.

The MASG website underwent a revamp in 2011 and is now cleaner and more accessible. Ongoing work needs to be done on the website to maintain its relevance and usefulness.

The website was visited by over 20,000 unique visitors in the 11 months so far this year, an average of 1,800 new visitors each week. The average visitor stayed more than 7 minutes on our website. The site was visited by people in over 25 different countries, the four most common being Australians, the USA, Germany and China and included visitors from Poland, Latvia, India, the Philippines and Brazil.

MASG as a notable authority.

MASG has developed a strong media profile in the region, both with local radio, TV and print and MASG is often asked to provide comment on issues related to sustainability and climate change, and our opinions and events are mostly well covered by the media.

MASG stories, comment and events have received coverage in The Bendigo Advertiser, Win TV, ABC regional Radio, ABC state radio, The Weekly Times, The Age, The Castlemaine Independent, The Midland Express & Castlemaine Mail during 2011.

Social Media.

A notable “gap” in MASG communications is in the social media space and MASG should look at developing a social media profile and audience.

## **VOLUNTEERS**

Effective volunteer recruitment and management is vital to the organization and yet hard to do by volunteers! It would be good to have a funded volunteer manager who’s position is also to look for funding.

## **FUNDRAISING**

We are regularly applying for grants to support specific ongoing projects. We are currently waiting the outcome of 4 grant applications – two from the Shire (gardens; waste), one from the QR national community giving fund (for a sustainability education officer), and one from Helen McPherson Trust (survey and support for people with new solar systems on roofs in Shire).

We held a fundraising event at the Castlemaine Steiner School in June 2011 and raised \$16,000 from donations from participants.