

Colac Otway

# CONNECTION

Summer/Autumn  
2025



**FORREST  
MOUNTAIN  
BIKE TRAILS**

# 2025-29 Council Plan

Help shape the future  
of Colac Otway Shire

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# A Message from the Mayor



## Welcome to the latest edition of Colac Otway Connection!

Our newly-elected Council has hit the ground running with some extensive induction sessions and briefings on major initiatives, opportunities and challenges across the shire.

Every Councillor is available to talk with you about your suggestions to make our shire a better place to live and we will do our best with the resources available to make improvements as we go. And don't forget if you have an urgent issue after business hours, you can contact the Council via the after hours number on 52329400.

We have some major planning underway to focus on and we need your input. Throughout January, Council has encouraged the community to contribute their ideas to the draft 2025-26 Council Budget. We will review that feedback and form a draft

Budget for further consideration.

Now, we're inviting you to contribute to the development of the 2025-29 Council Plan. Read the article on page 3 and find out how you can participate in shaping the future of the Colac Otway Shire.

In this issue we highlight the importance of learning to swim, a vital skill for safety and enjoyment in our beautiful waterways.

Lastly, but most importantly, is a reminder that our shire is in the middle of Fire Season and to please stay vigilant. Have a fire plan in place and make sure you have downloaded the VicEmergency app to your phone.

You can read about what Colac Otway Shire Council's role is in an emergency and how we collaborate with our neighbouring councils to support emergency services and the Colac Otway community during a crisis.



*Pictured are Mayor Cr Jason Schram, Deputy Mayor Cr Phil Howard, Cr Chrissy De Deugd, Cr Chris Potter, Cr Zoe Hudgell, Cr Mick McCrickard and Cr Charlie Buchanan.*

## Our new councillors

**Our new team of Colac Otway Shire councillors have hit the ground running at the start of their four-year Council term.**

Council meetings, briefings, training and tours have kept

councillors busy since they took office in November 2024.

The team looks forward to a productive and positive time working together to progress our shire, ensuring Colac Otway remains a fantastic place to live, work, invest and visit.



Council is commencing the development of the 2025-29 Council Plan. The 2025-29 Council Plan will also incorporate the Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan. Take the opportunity to participate in one of our community engagement sessions and help shape where you live, work and play.

# Many voices, one vision for the Council Plan 2025-29

## Want to be a part of shaping the future of your community?

In January 2025, Council started the development of its new Council Plan 2025-2029, which will outline the strategic direction and priorities for Colac Otway Shire and guide us through the next four years.

The Council Plan will inform the decision making regarding how the Council invests in facilities and infrastructure, and what services and programs are needed to support the social, economic and environmental sustainability of the Shire.

The new Council Plan will also incorporate the Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan which is focused on improving the health and wellbeing of our community.

Although it's a requirement of the *Local Government Act (2020)* to develop a new Council Plan every four years and review and update several key Council documents including the long-term financial plan and asset management plan, Council is also testing the 2050 Community Vision developed through extensive community engagement in 2021 to confirm its relevance and currency.

To ensure our new Council Plan 2025-2029 reflects the

priorities, goals and aspirations of our community, we are calling for community members who would like to be part of the engagement process to join us.

Council is designing a deliberative engagement process that will consist of several different ways to participate in the community conversation and engagement program including online surveys, quick questionnaires, shire-wide focus groups, pop-ups, drop in sessions and a deliberative engagement panel.

All members of the community are invited to participate in the process, and we will continue to promote the engagement activities as they roll out in 2025.

Deliberative community engagement is the cornerstone of designing and creating an effective plan for the future and your input and feedback will directly help Councillors and the organisation to shape the new Council Plan and capture the vision, aspirations and goals of our community.

If you would like to be part of shaping the future of your community, please scan the QR code below and complete the expression of interest form, or send us an email with your name, suburb or town and contact details at [councilplan@colacotway.vic.gov.au](mailto:councilplan@colacotway.vic.gov.au) and we will contact you to start the conversation.



Don't miss out on your opportunity to help shape Colac Otway's future.  
Find out how you can get involved in the preparation of the 2025-29 Council Plan.  
[colacotway.vic.gov.au/Council-Plan](https://colacotway.vic.gov.au/Council-Plan)





## Plan ahead for horse safety

**Horse owners must plan ahead to keep their animals safe and healthy in the fire season.**

Horses need a large open space to avoid bushfires. If there's an Extreme or Catastrophic fire danger day, move your horses to a designated safer paddock or area.

This could be a large eaten-out paddock, a series of smaller eaten-out paddocks with internal gates left open, or a large sanded area without vegetation. They need access to a dam where they can seek relief from the heat.

Horses can avoid bushfire if they have enough room to move freely and if there's minimal vegetation. Don't lock horses in a stable on extreme days, because the building could catch fire and the horses would be trapped.

If your property isn't safe enough, move your horses to a safer location before the fire weather hits, such as a neighbour's or friend's property.

On Extreme or Catastrophic fire danger days, remove all gear from your horses, because it can melt, catch fire or become caught on fences.

After the fire, check the paddock for dangers such as damaged trees or powerlines, and broken fences.

Get horses off hot ground, check their water isn't contaminated, make sure they have clean food, and get all burns treated immediately.



**Bushfire  
Place of Last  
Resort**  
Neighbourhood Safer Place

*Neighbourhood Safer Places are only for when all other bushfire plans have failed.*

## Last resort for safety

**Do you know where to seek refuge as a last resort in a fire?**

Colac Otway residents should be aware of the locations of nearby Bushfire Places of Last Resort, also known as Neighbourhood Safer Places.

A Neighbourhood Safer Place is for when all other bushfire plans have failed. These locations may provide some protection from direct flame and heat from a fire, but they do not guarantee safety.

Our shire has NSPs at Apollo Bay, Barwon Downs, Beeac, Beech Forest, Birregurra, Cressy and Gellibrand.

There is also a Community Fire Refuge at Lavers Hill, which is a purpose-built building that can provide protection from radiant heat and embers.

## Prepare your farm for the fire season

**Agriculture Victoria's new Fire Preparedness Toolkit is designed to assist farmers and land managers to prepare their farm for the fire season.**

The toolkit contains checklists and templates to help farmers prepare their farm business, livestock, staff, and infrastructure ahead of the season.

Learning from the experiences of farmers that have been impacted by fire, the checklists and templates published in the toolkit were developed with input from farmers.

It incorporates key things that, when documented or identified as part of a preparedness plan, can ease the process of recovery after a traumatic bushfire experience.

For example, having a documented farm asset inventory

can greatly assist in reviewing insurance cover before, as well as assessing loss and damage in the aftermath, of a fire.

Similarly, ensuring your farm documents are securely stored (on the cloud or off-farm) and on-hand, will help ease the pressure when it comes to seeking financial support or making insurance claims.

The Fire Preparedness Toolkit and other bushfire resources are available on the Agriculture Victoria website and should be used in conjunction with existing information and resources from the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and your local council.



[agriculture.vic.gov.au](http://agriculture.vic.gov.au)

# Strengthening support by training together

**We're working with neighbouring councils to ensure we can support the needs of diverse communities during emergencies like fires and floods.**

Colac Otway proudly hosted Corangamite Shire Council and Surf Coast Shire Council for the 2024 collaborative Emergency Relief Centre (ERC) exercise at COPACC in October. This annual event ensures our staff are ready to set up relief centres in times of crisis.

Relief agencies including Victoria Police, Ambulance Victoria, Red Cross, the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, and Emergency Recovery Victoria were also part of the annual exercise.

One of Council's roles during an emergency is to set up ERCs where people can gather for information and assistance. In recent years, we've successfully activated and supported ERCs during significant emergencies like the 2015 Boxing Day



*Sue Pigdon from Emergency Recovery Victoria, Ashley Ryan from Corangamite Shire Council, Victoria Police's Mick Ryan, and Gerard Black from Surf Coast Shire Council delivered inclusivity training during the Emergency Relief Centre Exercise.*

and 2018 St Patrick's Day fires, which impacted communities across South West Victoria.

This year's training exercise focused on cultural safety, inclusivity and accessibility at ERCs. Our guest presenters delivered insightful workshops on supporting culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, individuals with disabilities, First Nations people, youth, and

gender inclusivity.

During an emergency, people of all backgrounds, ages, and abilities can be seeking help and relief, and we need to support those diverse needs at a time when people are most vulnerable.

This could mean ensuring wheelchair access for relief centres, interpretation services, Sign Language support, assistance for people with complex health needs,

or culturally sensitive support for First Nations Australians. Support would also be necessary for overseas workers or tourists, particularly for emergencies along the Great Ocean Road and hinterland. We need to be prepared and flexible in our support.

Together, we're building a resilient and inclusive community, ready to face any challenge.

## Council's role during an emergency

**Emergencies like fire, flood and storms can have a huge impact on communities.**

Colac Otway Shire has a vital role to play, working closely with emergency services and other agencies to keep our community prepared, safe and supported before, during and after emergencies.

To prepare for emergencies, we focus on land-use planning, reducing hazards, fire prevention on private and council-managed land, and identifying bushfire places of last resort. We help the community understand threats and how they can prepare.

In the event of an emergency or disaster, we set up an emergency control centre to coordinate relief and recovery activities.

Under instruction from lead agencies, we will open emergency relief centres to support people who have evacuated their homes. These centres can help with food and clothing, temporary accommodation, personal support, and access to grants or financial aid.

We also help emergency services with tasks like hazard assessment, clearing roads, traffic management, animal welfare, volunteer coordination, and getting warnings and infor-

mation to the public.

After an emergency, we assist in ongoing recovery activities including clean-up, and repairing council buildings and roads. Our other tasks can include building and environmental health assessment, management of recovery centres, and support of community recovery committees and programs.

Colac Otway Shire's Municipal Emergency Management Plan includes specific sub-plans for fires, floods, heatwaves and pandemics.



# Embracing opportunity

**Raam Gowriswaran fled war-torn Sri Lanka as a child, but he's embraced opportunity in Australia.**

Now he's giving back to the community as the Project Management Coordinator at Colac Otway Shire.

Raam was born in the city of Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka, part of the Tamil minority, as a civil war raged in the country. His family had to keep moving, and he attended about 14 different schools before the age of 14.

He grew up in an era of conflict and tensions against the Tamil minority.

"We're talking about nearly 300,000 people died in the war over 30 years. And there are still people missing and we'll never know."

Raam said there were limited opportunities to prosper in Sri Lanka, especially for Tamil people like himself.

"Australia is a country of opportunity, if you have the hard work, and if you develop a talent, you're on. It's really hard in Sri Lanka."

War shaped Raam's childhood, and he recalls using his white shirt as a flag so he could roads and fields safely as a schoolboy to avoid gunfire. Conflict from a sentry camp next to his school even spilled over onto the school campus.

Raam's father, a Hindu priest, moved to Australia to lead a temple in 2006, sending money back home so Raam, his mother and his sisters could join him in 2007.

"We were among the luckiest people to get out of that top part of Sri Lanka, where I was from," he said.

But the family endured a tough journey to Colombo before their flight to Australia, having to pay a hefty sum and register with the army, including fingerprints and photos.

It led to a tense and uncertain leap of faith that the army would in fact allow them to depart the country.

Raam feels that a coincidence saved

them that day. A soldier noticed the Hindu holy threads they were wearing for protection, and knew from their name that they were the family of a well-known priest, and he asked for holy threads for protection too.

"So he wanted protection just because of this and the name, that's the only reason why we were saved. Otherwise we would have been gone that day."

Raam said he was in awe of his mother's strength bringing three children to a strange country. He said he felt both shock and relief when he moved to Australia.

"The trauma is there. To this date, if my mum hears a truck come, she will think someone's gonna shoot or something. The trauma's always there. It would never go out. And she's 66."

He said it could be tough to reflect on the past.

"Sometimes you have to do that. I feel like every day is like a new flower. It's fresh. Go start your business again."

The family started from scratch, living in The Basin near the Dandenong Ranges. Raam studied at Boronia Heights Secondary College while his dad worked at a temple.

Raam said he wanted to make the most of his opportunities.

"Being a Sri Lankan kid, you don't have much choice – either you be an engineer or a doctor or an accountant... or a disgrace. So I chose engineering."

He attended Swinburne University, then did work placement with a residential housing company, where he became aware of the roles of councils in linking developments into public infrastructure.



"I always had this thing with me - Australia as a country has given me opportunity. I'm coming from a Civil War background from Sri Lanka.

"I always had this problem of, do I want to work for another person and make that person rich, or do I want to give something back to the community which gave me a lot?"

Raam had considered joining the army as a graduate engineer and went through physical testing. But his dad had wisdom for him.

"My dad was like, 'Army, guns. That's what we just came from in Sri Lanka. Do we really want to go there again?'"

"Luckily I landed a position in Northern Grampians in Stawell as a grad engineer. I think that pretty much opened

up a lot of opportunities.”

Raam was with Northern Grampians for two years, working his way up to be a project engineer. A former colleague who moved to Hobson’s Bay Council saw Raam’s potential and asked him to apply for a project manager role there.

“The role I got given was a senior project manager. I’m like ‘I’m nowhere near that, I’m only about 24-25’.”

But the council saw his leadership potential and were willing to develop his skills.

“It was a brilliant setup. This is the best part of Council. Everyone is willing to help you, as long as you’re helping them. It’s a very collaborative combined effort in order to serve the community.” He then went to work at Port Phillip council as a senior project manager. A former regional council senior manager suggested he develop his career at a rural council like Colac Otway, so Raam discussed it with his soon-to-be wife and headed west to Colac.

“I’ve had very good mentors and very gifted, very good coordinators, very good managers in my life. The person who I am today is because of that.”

Raam now manages about 10 people at Colac Otway.

“I think the challenge that I’m having at the moment and loving at the moment is people management.

“I firmly believe in a happy environment in the team. So there’s talent, obviously, and there’s hard work, obviously, but happiness, that’s my first one. I want everyone in my team to come into work wanting to come to work.

“I want to connect with everyone in the team. Everyone has a story.”

His own story is inspirational.

Raam has taken trips back to Sri Lanka and said the country was improving since the civil war had ended.

He urged Australians to have more gratitude for living in Australia with its good health system, political freedom, clean water, secure food, shelter and safety.

“Travel to countries like Sri Lanka or Indonesia or whatever. See the lifestyle over there. Please don’t take Australia for granted.”

Monkey Baa Theatre’s Monday evening performance of *Josephine Wants to Dance* will be AUSLAN interpreted at COPACC in April.



## Roos in tutus are en point

The Colac Otway Performing Arts and Cultural Centre (COPACC) team is gearing up for a massive 2025 full of comedy, dance, kids shows, music, drama and more!

**COPACC’s Cocktails and Canapés Subscription Season** is now on sale, with a complimentary drink and snack during shows!

First up is Damon Smith’s piano pounding **Rock’n’roll Super Show** on Sunday 16 February.

Step into the electrifying world of Ray Charles, Fats Domino, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Winifred Atwell and Nina Simone in this mesmerising journey to the rockin’ 1950s.

The second Cocktails and Canapes act is **Frankly Sinatra**, on Sunday 16 March 2025, with the music and stories of Ol’ Blue Eyes, Judy Garland and Liza Minelli.

Buy a Cocktails and Canapes Subscription and choose the plan that suits you best. Contact the box office on 5232 9418 to find out more.

**Brown Women Comedy** will celebrate International Women’s Day at COPACC on Saturday 8 March. Laugh your heart out to an award-winning line-up of Indian, Sri Lankan and South Asian comedians living in Australia.

Kru Harale, Daizy Maan, Guneet Kaur and Urvi Majumdar will have you in stitches with their fearless humour.

No topic is too taboo. These women won’t be holding back on turning traditional family expectations into comedy gold.

Tickets to Brown Women Comedy are priced at \$80 (Concession \$72/COPACC Member \$64) and includes dinner. This show is recommended for people aged 15-years or older.

Based on the much-loved children’s book by Jackie French and Bruce Whatley, **Josephine Wants to Dance** is a hilarious musical about the importance of believing in yourself and realising your dreams and... a dancing kangaroo.

This award-winning adaptation by Eva Di Cesare, Sandie Eldridge and Tim McGarry runs for 60 minutes and is recommended for children aged four to nine and their families.

The 5.30pm performance on Monday 28 April will be adapted to be more accessible and welcoming to a wider audience. It will be AUSLAN interpreted and feature a relaxed setting.

**Josephine Wants to Dance** is on Monday 28 April and Tuesday 29 April 2025. Children’s tickets (12-and-under) are \$16.

# Council Meetings

At the December 2024 Council Meeting, Councillors voted to change the day and time for scheduled Planning Committee and monthly Council meetings held in 2025 to Tuesdays at 1pm.

Monthly Council meetings will commence at 1pm on the fourth Tuesday of the month (unless otherwise advertised\*).

Questions to Council must be submitted in writing by no later than 5pm on the Friday before the meeting. If you want to ask your written question out loud at the meeting, you need to request to do so. Otherwise, the Chair or officers will read it out.

FEBRUARY	DATE	TIME	MEETING TYPE
	11 February 2025	1 PM	Planning Committee
	11 February 2025	3 PM	Submissions Committee
	25 February 2025	1 PM	Council

MARCH	DATE	TIME	MEETING TYPE
	11 March 2025	1 PM	Planning Committee
	11 March 2025	3 PM	Submissions Committee
	25 March 2025	1 PM	Council

APRIL	DATE	TIME	MEETING TYPE
	8 April 2025	1 PM	Planning Committee
	8 April 2025	3 PM	Submissions Committee
	*29 April 2025	1 PM	Council



The Colac customer service team will temporarily relocate to the Colac Visitor Information Centre building from Monday 10 February until Friday 21 February 2025.

## Temporary Relocation

During February, the roof of Council's Rae Street Office Building is being replaced.

For safety reasons the building will have to shut down for the period the works are being undertaken.

The works are expected to take two weeks to complete and will commence from 10 February 2025 and are scheduled to be finished by 21 February 2025.

The Customer Service Centre will operate from the Colac Visitor Information Centre (VIC) during the period. The VIC is located at the corner of Murray and Queen Streets in Colac.

### Connect with Us

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ColacOtwayShireCouncil

colacotwaysc

Colac Otway Shire Council

A full list of Meeting Dates, Agendas and Minutes of previous meetings are available at: [colacotway.vic.gov.au/Council-Meetings](http://colacotway.vic.gov.au/Council-Meetings)

## Satisfaction Survey

Colac Otway Shire Council would like to inform residents that from Tuesday 28 January through to mid-March, households may receive a call from an independent market research agency, National Field Services.

They are conducting a community satisfaction survey, assessing Council's performance across a range of measures. Similar sur-

veys will be undertaken across Victorian councils.

The survey will involve 400 interviews among a representative sample of residents.

Personal details and individual responses are confidential. Overall results are shared with Council.

If you have any questions, please contact Council's Customer Service Centre on 03 5232 9400.