

Bendigo Advertiser

Pieces of CBD puzzle

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THE 2018 budget funds the beginning of a plan to revitalise Bendigo's CBD, particularly the northern end.

The City of Greater Bendigo, Regional Development Victoria and various industry groups have been working together to bring more people into the heart of the city - but to do so requires several significant projects to fall into place.

Last year's budget suggested election-year promises would come in relation to the Bendigo law courts, with a 2017-18 commitment of \$3.9 million to "develop plans to address current and future demand pressures so cases can be heard sooner".

Also provided was \$1 million for Bendigo to develop a proposal to "consolidate Victorians public service and council functions and agencies into a new customer service centre". It was a planning budget - and this year, the next pieces of the puzzle have been put in place.

Bendigo TAFE chief executive Trevor Schwenke is correct when he says \$59.9 million for a new-look city campus is a game-changer and will 'boost activity in the northern part of Bendigo's central business district'.

Not only will Bendigo have a state-of-the-art facility for TAFE students, but the development opens the door for a portion of the site to be used for other purposes.

The TAFE's city campus has been identified as the preferred site for new law courts for Bendigo - and this week's budget includes funding for the acquisition of land for a new court facility.

Court Services Victoria said in January it was in negotiations to use a portion of the McCrae Street campus for a 10 courtroom facility by mid-2022, complete with mediation suites, interview rooms and safe waiting areas.

Part of the precinct is TAFE land, while some is still privately owned.

Bendigo and Werribee will share in \$20 million for acquiring land for new courts - so it's reasonable to assume some of that will be spent in the current TAFE precinct.

City of Greater Bendigo mayor Margaret O'Rourke is pleased with Bendigo's financial allocations in the 2018 state budget, but remains hopeful of further funding commitments in an election year.

Voters head to the polls in November, with law and order issues expected to be a focus for the Liberal Party, who recently announced police officer Ian Ellis as candidate for Bendigo East.

Cr O'Rourke isn't surprised with what was funded this week for the new law courts, as there are "a number of areas that need to be pulled together in such a large project".

"We're all confident it will be happening," Cr O'Rourke says, adding the council will seek a firm commitment from the Labor and Liberal parties on fully funding the law courts before the election.

Relocating the law courts is a vital part of the plan for the heart of Bendigo.

The plan will see the TAFE and law courts bookend the northern part of the CBD, in a precinct which then circles around to the new GovHub on the site of the current City of Greater Bendigo offices in Lyttleton Terrace.

The GovHub will bring 1000 public sector jobs central Bendigo.

The precinct then crosses to Bendigo Marketplace and Bendigo Railway Station, down to Bendigo Bank, along the View Street arts precinct and around to the Golden Dragon Museum.

Funding for the Golden Dragon Museum to develop a dedicated Chinese cultural centre and the terminal building and utilities extension at Bendigo airport was not forthcoming, but council plans to continue to advocate for these commitments. It is hoped the revitalisation and increased foot traffic in the centre of Bendigo will also bring new energy and investment into Hargreaves Mall.

Member for Bendigo East Jacinta Allan says that 'as the new Bendigo Hospital project comes to a completion with stage two finishing soon, this budget provides funds for projects that will revitalise the heart of Bendigo'.

"Not everything gets funded in the budget but we will continue to work hard on other projects," she says. "It's good to see the treasurer and the premier support these projects for Bendigo. It's a balanced budget that supports our regional centres.

"A massive re-build of Bendigo TAFE's central city campus, the GovHub, land for new Bendigo Law Courts will create construction jobs in and around Bendigo."

Member for Bendigo West Maree Edwards believes the influx of workers and students in the Bendigo area will breathe a new lease of life into the CBD.

"More workers and more students will be in the Bendigo CBD. This will support our retail and hospitality industry," she says. "The budget confirms our on-going investment in schools, roads and bus services that support local families."

Cr O'Rourke is similarly positive, especially on aspects designed to improve the vitality of the CBD.

"The TAFE funding is excellent, it fits into the broader picture of revitalising the city centre," she says.

The Liberal party candidate for Bendigo East, Ian Ellis, has been contacted for comment.

Deputy leader of the Nationals, Steph Ryan, believes the state government has left it until six months before an election to show an interest in TAFE.

"Daniel Andrews' TAFE rescue has been a miserable failure with student enrolments crashing by more than 150,000," she says. "Now in an election year he's announced courses will be free in a desperate bid to save face and get students through the doors. A majority of Victoria's TAFEs are struggling financially, with many relying on government bailouts to stay afloat.

Making TAFE courses free has the potential to decimate adult education providers and goes against the advice of Labor's own VET funding review which found it would result in over enrolments in some areas of provision."

Shadow attorney general John Pesutto says the state budget also shows court costs and delays have blown out. "In both criminal and civil cases average case costs in the Supreme, County, Magistrates' and Children's courts have increased significantly," he says. "In nearly all of these courts, average case costs are forecast to increase even further. On top of mounting case costs, this year's budget shows clearance rates and timeliness across the court system must be improved, especially in the Magistrates' Court where capacity constraints are becoming clearer."

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