



Future proofing

CDO Paul Holtzschke reports on how Alphington Bowling Club is planning for the future to ensure more than just a centenary of happy bowling

I have recently had the privilege of attending both Eastern Park and Geelong West Bowling Clubs' Centenary celebrations. It made me wonder if, when these clubs began their journey, they ever imagined what the club may look like in 100-plus years. I doubt they really considered it, but deep-down they would have hoped that the newly established club would still be providing bowls for the local community. The question occurred, what do we need to be doing now to keep our clubs around for another 100 years?

To answer this question it's always good to look at what other clubs are doing. Lots of successful clubs and stories comes to mind, but the Alphington Bowling Club provides a great illustration of what can be achieved to best position clubs for at least another 100 years.

In 2006 Alphington Bowling Club found themselves in a situation not to dissimilar to the word famously used in the movie *Crackerjack* - 'DIRE'. The club membership had fallen to a critical level, the facilities were in drastic need of repair, the greens were substandard and a large debt was no reason for optimism. The club was on the verge of going under, just 15 years short of celebrating 100 years.

Fortunately the club hierarchy realised that for things to turn around they needed to realign their thinking, understand the club is a business and align themselves with 'Best Practice' principles and procedures. Mark Perry the club's Secretary stated: "If we didn't start to adhere to best practice legal requirements we weren't going to be around for much longer anyway, so the choice was made for us..."

The club began by compiling a very long list, which meant they dissected every aspect and operation of the club. This led to the creation of the club's first Strategic Plan in 2007-08 which has subsequently driven the club forward. A good plan is only as good as the implementation phase; thankfully the club had the foresight to review the club management structures which meant the establishment of a new Board of Management replacing non-functioning committees. Today the board of eight consists of a blend of old and new members, some who have only come into the club in the past five years, which is an amazing result.

The Strategic Plan set the club on a course to wipe out the debt while seeking to upgrade their ageing facilities. This involved re-establishing a relationship with its major stakeholder: Yarra City Council. The clubhouse is now used as shared space with the Alphington Community Centre. 30 hours a week are taken up by local providers using the clubhouse to conduct various community

activities. The club receives additional revenue as a result and the council perspective is very different to what it was in 2006. The hope is that in 2014 a new clubhouse will be built by the council.

The club has spent around \$300,000 on essential capital improvements to upgrade the club in areas such as the clubhouse, two new tiff dwarf greens, water tanks, solar power, landscaping and BBQ / serving area that is used extensively on Friday evenings. The majority of these finances were collected through various grants and fundraising efforts. The club is now debt-free with an increasing bank balance.

Membership has risen to more than 300 with the majority made up of social, family and junior members, while affiliated members are steadily increasing. But this is where the mindset of the club may differ to many other clubs. The club isn't just a place for Pennant bowlers, it's a place for all the community to use. Researching the demographics determined they needed to address the fact that the local community wanted more than a place to play bowls, it sought a meeting place or community hub. Friday night meals were established and the results have been outstanding; the club regularly serves meals for over 100 people.

Building bridges with the community was at the heart of the plan; creating partnerships with the local sports clubs, the two schools who attend regularly on Friday mornings and disability groups. The schoolchildren drag their parents along on Friday nights, which helps to create a family friendly environment for all. The club also joined the Good Sports program to help improve the culture of the club.

So how do you help keep your club around for another 100 years? As we have seen through the Alphington Story, creating and implementing a strategic plan has enabled the club to have a clear direction and purpose that has been absolutely critical to their success. Mark states "a plan doesn't mean a massive document, it's a roadmap, just like a Melways that helps us to understand our goals and how to reach them."

Refining and establishing better management practices and procedures makes decision-making and implementation more effective and transparent. Maintaining a good relationship with the local council is imperative. Conducting research into your local community will help your club to better understanding your community around you and identify their needs, which make community partnerships more effective.

Alphington has another nine years till its centenary, but at the rate they are going the club should be around for much much longer.