

THE **ABBOTSFORD** CONVENT FOUNDATION

News from the Chair



December 14, 2011

A Christmas Story at the Abbotsford Convent

A couple of Wednesdays ago, in the shadow of Christmas, a small miracle occurred at the Abbotsford Convent.

More than 180 workers from Melbourne Water and the Thiess company descended on the site for a day of volunteering that saved the ACF many tens of thousands of dollars in maintenance and site revival works. CEO Maggie Maguire described the effort as “transformational”.

There were arborists, plumbers, carpenters, bricklayers and tillers amongst the team which also brought machinery and hundreds of donated plants as well as soil, building materials, potting mix, crushed rock and timber.

More than 60 projects were completed, from landscaping to restoration works, on every corner of the site. To see the activity that day was inspiring. And it was humbling that the Convent had been chosen for such a generous outpouring of community spirit. There has been no more dramatic demonstration of the sense of community the Convent tries to inspire. The Christmas spirit arrived at the Convent on that day.

In a way, the Melbourne Water-Thiess effort was emblematic of the community effort at the Abbotsford Convent in the past 10 years. The site has been transformed by the combined efforts of individuals, organisations and companies who want to contribute to their community.

The other major works on the site in December was the final stage of a \$750,000 investment by the ACF to update power infrastructure over the past seven years was completed when St Mary’s became the final building to have its electricity and communications technology installed underground.

A total of nine power cables and a communications cable were pulled along 320 metres through conduits from the main Convent switchboard. New external lights to the Rosina and Sacred Heart buildings will be installed, using the latest LED technology to improve public lighting. New lighting poles on the south side of Rosina will be installed in the New Year.

The project allows the ACF to provide reliable power for tenants and visitors. The cost of the project highlights the special challenges on heritage sites for basic services and infrastructure.

The volunteer day capped another intense year for the Abbotsford Convent. The site's activities continue to grow at a pace that would have been inconceivable when the gates were opened just a few years ago. In 2011, new records were set for tenancies, visits, events, occupancy and media coverage.

The rapid growth brought growing pains which showed the ACF that it had to redouble its communication and consultation efforts to make sure the Convent's myriad communities and supporters were given a voice in the site's development.

The final draft of the five-year business plan will be released in the New Year after a consultation process which included a community meeting in July. The Vision and Mission Statement for the plan were developed in consultation with the new Tenant and Site Development Committee which includes representative of the Board and the tenant community

For a full report on the year's activities, achievements and challenges, I urge everyone to get a copy of the ACF's Annual Report from the ACF office. The staff is to be congratulated for the bright and innovative design and content of the report.

One of the most important challenges is car parking and traffic management around the site. In my last report in August, I made a strong commitment that the ACF would work hard to achieve the best possible outcome and would not allow its land to be used as part of any plan that made things worse rather than better. The Board stands by that commitment, but recognises that it will take time to achieve the right result. Meanwhile, parking and traffic issues will be fundamental considerations for the Board when it considers any plans to expand activities or open new spaces.

In the short term, the ACF will increase **all-day** parking fees from \$4 to \$6, early in January 2012 in an attempt to discourage use of the car park by people not connected with the Convent or Collingwood Children's Farm. The discount rates for tenants are not affected.

The ACF also welcomes the appearance of a car-sharing vehicle outside the Convent as a transport alternative for tenants. The vehicle is one of 120 cars operated by the Flexicar company to encourage alternative transport options at rents of only \$5 an hour. We wish the scheme every success in the six-month trial period. The ACF will offer to provide a car park space for an additional Flexicar vehicle if there is enough demand from tenants.

The ACF will also be encouraging bicycle hire operators to establish outlets at or near the Convent and will install more bicycle parking hoops on the site.

Over the summer, the ACF will be working closely with the Sophia Mundi Steiner School on the implementation plans for greater community access to the school as part of the conditions for the expansion of their building footprint.

Earlier this month, the Victorian Minister for Planning gave final approval for the school to build four new classrooms on its existing playground area and to use the Convent's derelict swimming pool to create additional playground and community space.

Earlier, Heritage Victoria had approved the plans subject to a number of conditions including heritage approval of the playground design and construction of a heritage interpretive display about the pool area.

The ACF Board's support for the proposal was also dependent on the school opening up the playground, the tennis courts and the old Nun's Walk area to public access outside school hours and the planting of new trees to replace those taken down by the building works. The ACF also stipulated that there would be no further expansion of the school.

With those conditions, the ACF Board welcomes a result that ensures the survival of an innovative school program as well as ensuring that the Convent maintains a strong education focus with a school dedicated to strong support for the arts. Steiner was a founding tenant at the Convent and was part of the Convent's future in our original submissions to the State Government to secure the site on the community's behalf.

The ACF is grateful to the Collingwood Children's Farm for the co-operative way it worked with Heritage Victoria and the ACF to achieve this result in a testing environment.

As part of the Steiner refurbishment, the school will use about 34 square metres of the Goat's Paddock to build a walkway from one part of the school to another. To compensate for this, the ACF has given approval for Steiner to surrender to the ACF an equivalent area of its St Mary's lease on the south-eastern side. The ACF will annexe this land to the Goat's Paddock for use by the farm.

Season's Greetings to all involved at the Convent and may the New Year bring good tidings for all.

Hayden Raysmith AM
Chair
Abbotsford Convent Foundation