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The Shameful Story of the Braidwood Heritage Centre Project

- \$2 million over budget.
- 3 Years behind schedule.
- No money spent in region.

The Braidwood Heritage Centre Project was awarded \$3.75 million as a bushfire recovery grant aimed at creating employment and economic stimulus for a district severely affected by the 2019-20 bushfires. The project envisaged homestay accommodation equipped with communal lounge/dining/kitchen areas and six rooms with ensuites; a functional blacksmith shop; a new reception area and shop for the museum, complete with air conditioning, disabled access including a lift, and museum toilets; a café; an exhibition area; and the conversion of existing sheds into artisan studios and teaching spaces for traditional crafts.

Unfortunately, the funding did not go directly to the Braidwood & District Historical Society (BDHS) but was allocated to Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council as the principal. According to the Grant terms, the project was to be managed by New South Wales Public Works Advisory. Initially, the grant amounted to \$2.5 million but was subsequently supplemented by an additional \$1.25 million due to underfunding issues. As costs escalated and inefficiencies persisted, the project had to be divided into two stages.

Stage 1 was intended to be completed with enough surplus to cover most of Stage 2. Regrettably, the funds have proved insufficient even to complete Stage 1. To date, \$2.5 million has been expended, resulting only in a shell for the accommodation block and a concrete slab for the blacksmith shop. The builder has been terminated following the issuance of multiple non-compliance notices by Public Works, and numerous subcontractors remain unpaid. Federal Member Kristy McBain recently likened the site to "The Somme," underscoring its disarray.

If a new builder is engaged promptly within the remaining funds, it is probable that only the accommodation block, new museum entrance/reception area, paths, and some landscaping can be completed. This limited progress must occur before the funding expiration date of June 30th.



New Power Pole for Heritage Centre – Plenty of power but nowhere to attach it.



A melancholy view from the museum kitchen window.

The Inside Story

It is imperative that the Government address these issues to prevent the imminent failure of the Braidwood Heritage Centre project. BDHS had provided the vision for a community project, including costings, conceptual plans, and archaeological surveys. The Government's role was to fund the construction through the Bush Fire Recovery Grant, yet the funding structure has proven flawed, demonstrating the inefficiency of multiple governmental divisions working together.

Had the funds been allocated directly to BDHS as initially proposed, a project manager could have been employed, ensuring timely and budget-conscious completion. However, governmental inefficiency, bureaucratic ineptitude, and waste have led to considerable disappointment. Few funds have been spent locally, contrary to the stipulations of the Bushfire Recovery Grant. The architect and builder are based in Sydney, NSW Public Works operate out of Wollongong, and many tradespeople on-site are not local to Braidwood.

Architectural designs exceeded budgetary constraints under Public Works supervision, accruing fees amounting to \$465,000. Heritage New South Wales significantly delayed the project and incurred additional costs, despite initial approval from Public Works' Heritage Advisor. These delays added over \$100,000 to the project costs. Public Works project management fees have reached \$265,000 to date.

No construction work has occurred since early October due to unpaid subcontractors refusing to return. The remaining funds for Stage 1 are insufficient, and there is no funding available for Stage 2. The project's financial viability hinges on completing Stage 2, which includes visitor attractions such as the artisan studios and blacksmith shop. Without these elements, the accommodation, café, and museum will not attract sufficient visitors.

BDHS maintains that the Government and its agencies mismanaged the funds rather than BDHS itself. Consequently, it is the Government's responsibility to rectify the situation and secure the additional funding required.

Kristy McBain, Federal Member for Eden Monaro, endorsed the project, stating: "The benefits that will flow from this project are both social and economic. The viable business model will reliably sustain the Braidwood & District Historical Society and museum into the future. The precinct will become an active creative hub that will engage the local community and will be a major tourist destination with obvious social benefits. It will create opportunities for others to build on, and existing businesses to benefit."

Steve Whan, State Member for Monaro, similarly supported the project: "This centre, once completed, will be a boon to the local tourism industry and build on the arts and heritage philosophy the Braidwood community has become known for. Additionally, because the site is not council-owned, this will come at no cost to Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council in terms of ongoing management and upkeep.

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Our Community Bank is willing to contribute \$520,000, contingent upon the project's completion. They recognize the benefits the Braidwood Heritage Centre will bring to the entire community. Politicians acknowledge these benefits but must take responsibility for resolving the current issues. It should not fall solely on BDHS to seek endless grants. It is incumbent upon those responsible for the current situation to address and rectify it.

Peter Smith

President Braidwood & District Historical Society



BDHS John Stahel, Councillor Bill Waterhouse and QPRC Mayor Kendrick Winchester

On site.