



Baw Baw's Big Switch

It seems like the world has turned tomato: the crowd's eyes are feasted on a sea of red with tomatoes at various stages from piles of ripe red fruit to bottles of passata at the Warragul Farmers Market in March 2030. It's passata day at the market and scores of people have come to join the group effort in transforming the huge crop of locally grown tomatoes from farms, backyards and even balconies. The richness of the harvest and the smiles of the community are a celebration of the effort of the last decade to get to this state of resilience.

In 2030 a quarter of the shire's population live in apartments, sometimes three or four stories high, up from 4% in 2016 (Statistics n.d.). Co-housing developments have blossomed as more people seek more communal living yet with their own private spaces. All new dwellings are net energy producers, saving their occupants up to \$5000 per year and 95% of dwellings built prior to 2026 have been retrofitted and electrified along the lines of Saul Griffith's book *The Big Switch* (Griffith 2022). The new developments that are still being built to cater for our increasing population follow the Sustainable Subdivisions Framework and Ecologically Sustainable Design guidelines after the local council endorsed them in 2024.

Apartment living, once shunned by country people has become attractive for those enjoying living just metres from the shops, cafes, restaurants, workplaces, transport hubs and with great rural views from their balconies. As I write this, I'm looking down from my own balcony over Williams Square in Warragul where a large family group is having a birthday party in the park in the space that was a car park until 2028. All around the square are three storeys of apartments, above the shops at street level. It's been transformed into a European style plaza- a welcoming, bustling place for the community to gather. Productive food gardening, even bee keeping is common on these balconies with the uptake of smart, lightweight wicking bed systems. Apartment block rooftops that aren't used for food production are covered in solar panels, as are the north facing walls now that panel efficiency and cost have made it economic to do so. Built into contracts for sale for these apartments are shares in local or distant solar farms so that all residents can share in the rooftop solar revolution that has transformed our electricity grid. With an eye to the near future where autonomous driving will be a reality and car ownership an oddity, smart developers have also made provision for not just vehicle charging in the basement carparks, but also to enable apartment owners or themselves to rent the car space to taxi fleet operators who need safe, secure charging and parking places all over the shire. Vehicle to home and vehicle to grid services which arrived in 2023 put a rocket under the renewables and electrification of everything as car batteries provided the perfect demand response to intermittent renewables, charging or discharging as needed by the grid. Although providing only a little bit of income for allowing the grid operator to control a percentage of your car battery in this way, it added to the attractiveness of ditching fossil vehicles for EVs in huge numbers by 2026.

Some of these changes that have happened in the last ten years were spearheaded by the local sustainability group, Baw Baw Sustainability Network (BBSN), formed in late 2007 as

the Trafalgar and Yarragon Sustainability Network. Early work focussed on helping people understand their energy bills and how they could reduce them. Domestic Energy Workshops were held in homes, community houses and the network's home base in Yarragon, followed by home energy assessments, air infiltration testing, thermography to aid assessment of insulation coverage, accreditation with the Residential Efficiency Scorecard program, Air Tightness Testing and Measurement Association (ATTMA) accreditation. It became obvious using the blower door and diagnosing the extent and location of air leaks that draught proofing homes was the next logical step. After that, installing underfloor insulation, secondary window glazing and project managing complete energy and comfort retrofits became a full time job for a small team of employees in BBSN which helped provide funds to employ a project officer who supported the volunteers in the determined advocacy effort that led to council making widespread use of Environmental Upgrade Agreements for both business and residents the norm by 2026. From 2022 until then, BBSN worked with other financiers including Good Shepherd Foundation for no interest loans to the less well off, Bank Australia and Bendigo Bank who provided discounted loans for electrification of hot water, heating, cooking and transport and of course, rooftop solar.

As more and more farming land turned into housing developments around our rural towns, more and more people became unhappy with the urban sprawl, the episodes of flooding, the increasing urban heat with black roofs, concrete and asphalt and the loss of grand old trees to make room for them all. A planning alliance project group sprang from the local ratepayers association and organised a series of community forums, posters, meetings and gradually grew support for the adoption of SSF and ESD as foundational steps for better, more liveable housing in Baw Baw. Council elections in 2024 resulted in a majority of councillors determined to positively enhance liveability for future generations and these basic measures were adopted soon afterwards.

The lag time between adoption of better building code standards, SSF, ESD and new builds being net energy producers while being naturally comfortable in hot or cold weather meant that there was a huge amount of retrofitting to be done which has kept BBSN and a hoard of small building companies busy for the last few years. Mandatory reporting of energy performance of homes prior to sale or rental from 2025 helped the community more easily recognise whether they were buying a lemon or not and savvy builders got ahead of the curve, ensuring all their homes were 10 star performers well before then.

The annual Passata day at the farmers market started in 2023 and has grown ever since. The pandemic years of the early 20's with some food shortages and lockdowns sparked renewed interest in home grown food and a local seasonal grower started with a small passata workshop powered by a home biogas set up. That proved popular but more energy was needed for the bigger events in following years and renewable power was delivered to the market area from the neighbouring council owned library centre with its substantial PV system perfectly suited to a weekend daytime cookup! Local food growing has become quite an industry, suiting large and small growers with the means of marketing and distribution facilitated by the shire through farmers markets, pop up farmgate shop trailers for hire, and a growing community interest in seasonal eating and cooking. That's not to say food from interstate is not available- far from it. Electrification and cheap renewable power means that trucks can transport mangoes from northern Australia at a fraction of the cost compared to the days of spiralling oil prices in 2022 when Russian supply was cut from the world markets and prices never seemed to fall much from there.