

**CONTEXT**

Horsham regional city is in western Victoria, located on the Wimmera River, approximately 300 kilometres north-west of Melbourne CBD (Adelaide is a further 450 kilometres west). Horsham is the largest urban centre in the Wimmera Southern Mallee Region, and provides a range of higher order commercial, community, entertainment, administrative and retail functions to an extensive rural hinterland.

The municipality has a population of 19,880 ( *Victoria in Future, 2019* ) and covers an area of 4267 square kilometres. Almost three quarters of residents live in the urban area of the regional city, where retail, community and government services are provided.

The main road transport corridor in the region is the Western Highway, which connects Horsham with Melbourne (via Ballarat) and Adelaide. Other important road and rail corridors include the Henty Highway, which runs north–south and provides access to the Port of Portland. The Wimmera Highway provides a regional east–west link.

The community is changing. There is some population increase, mainly with people moving to the Horsham Regional Centre from surrounding areas, while the rural areas of the municipality are experiencing population decline. The population is also ageing, and older residents are looking to retire to a place that better meet their needs. There is an increase in people from diverse cultures moving to the municipality.

Additional services are needed, including a range of public and private education facilities for all ages, as well as health and residential aged care services. Increased opportunities for social connection and physical activity are sought to improve the city’s liveability, such as through cultural venues, sporting and recreational facilities. More diverse and affordable housing, together with efficient public transport within Horsham and connecting to larger centres would also enhance the attraction of Horsham regional city for residents. Some areas within Horsham are highly disadvantaged, requiring a focussed investment in community services, economic activity and educational opportunities.

The economy is changing. While dryland and broadacre agriculture is the major industry, the farming sector is diversifying to adapt to global economic and climate changes and consolidation of farming enterprises is creating larger corporate entities. Mining may increase, providing economic activity and employment opportunities. The municipality has an international reputation in leading cropping research.

Water savings from the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline system and the development of the Wimmera Intermodal Freight Terminal and surrounding precinct will provide economic opportunities.

Significant landscapes within Horsham include the Grampians Ranges and Mount Arapiles, the Black Ranges and the Natimuk-Douglas Saline Wetland Depression. Some of these significant landscapes extend beyond the municipal boundary. Mount Arapiles attracts a large number of tourists each year, as well as new residents and the establishment of new businesses in nearby Natimuk.

Rivers, creeks, streams, wetlands and lakes are among the municipality’s most valuable natural assets. The Wimmera River is the largest watercourse in the municipality and north of the Polkemmet Bridge is classified as a heritage river under the *Heritage Rivers Act 1992* . Much of the remaining length of the river is in poor condition and the river generally has poor water quality in times of low flow.

The Natimuk Douglas Saline Wetland Depression is a significant nesting site for migratory birds. The wetlands are a former course of the Murray River and consist of more than 30 natural saline and fresh water lakes. The municipality also features other waterways and wetlands of high environmental value in the Millicent Coast Basin and the Wimmera River Basin.

The endangered South-eastern Red-tailed Black Cockatoo occurs as a single population in south-western Victoria (the area bounded by Portland, Casterton, Harrow, Kanagulk and Natimuk) and south-eastern South Australia. It uses large hollows in eucalypts for nesting and requires the Stringybark and Buloke trees for feeding.