

## Council settles on designer for tourist hub

### Beau Greenway

A MELBOURNE firm has won the contract for the design of Wangaratta's creative precinct.

The tender was awarded to Sibling Architecture at the Wangaratta Council meeting on Tuesday, following a process that started in May and involved 14 applications.

It will see Wangaratta Art Gallery, Wangaratta Performing Arts and Convention Centre and visitor services interlinked.

The project is expected to cost \$18.4 million if built all at once and \$19.9 million if developed across six stages, with \$8.2 million of that for a new gallery.

Acting mayor Harry Bus-sell said the development was overwhelmingly positive for the region.

"The creative precinct is an incredible project for our community, for regional arts, creative industries and tourism," he said.

"It will be a cultural destination of regional significance and will solidify Wangaratta's reputation and standing as a place for arts and creativity. In awarding the contract for the detailed design, council is one step closer to having the creative precinct project investment ready.

"The detailed design will enable us to seek funding to bring the project to life.

"We envisage the project will require multiple funding sources and we will pursue state, federal, private, and philanthropic opportunities."

A concept design was completed in 2022 and went through significant community consultation during November and December.



Jack Brockhoff Foundation's Louise Kuramoto, Upstream Australia's Tammy Hand, Wodonga Senior Secondary College principal Vern Hilditch, Associate Professor David Mackenzie and Junction Support's Rachel Habgood are thrilled to launch The Wodonga Project. Picture by Mark Jesser

## Boost to keep youth in safe place

### Beau Greenway

AN EARLY intervention program aimed to prevent school students from experiencing homelessness is gaining momentum in Wodonga thanks to a major investment.

The Wodonga Project, overseen by Junction Support Services, has adopted the Australian community of services and schools model to address significant youth-related issues in the Border city, specifically, homelessness and early school leaving.

It's welcome news for Wodonga Senior Secondary College, which has a huge demand for the program after seeing its student wellbeing team grow from one staff

member to eight in the space of four years.

"We are finding more and more young people where this is their safe environment. Every secondary age student is under a lot more pressure and we're seeing that in the schools," executive principal Vern Hilditch said.

The school has partnerships with service clubs to offer support and provide vouchers to services such as Albury Wodonga Regional FoodShare so students and their families remained well fed amidst the cost of living crisis.

He said around 25 per cent of students at Wodonga Senior Secondary College, Wodonga Middle Years College and flexible learning centres in Wodonga, Benalla,

Seymour and Shepparton required some form of support.

"We are dealing more and more with kids who are couch surfers, who, for whatever reason the family unit has broken down and they're turning up to school," he said. "This is the safe place, this is the place that's got continuity and that's the reason why they're here."

Mr Hilditch said there had been a huge issue around student engagement after COVID forced a switch to at-home learning.

"More and more young people are asking the question 'why?' 'Why do I need to knuckle down and what's the value of tertiary entry and all that type of stuff?'," he said.

"It's that immediate gen-

eration of 'I want it now' and we're having a lot of trouble convincing young people this is a great way to be. This is what you should be thinking about. It's about your future.

"Deferred gratitude is extremely important to get a pathway and work towards that pathway."

Project lead Rachel Habgood, of Junction Support Services, said the aim was to divert young people away from crisis.

"More young people are becoming homeless, more are struggling with mental health, and so this announcement for Wodonga is so exciting because it actually means we can get the services on the ground that we need to," she said.

"There hasn't been an increase in homelessness funding for such a long period of time, but the population that are experiencing homelessness is growing. Unless we actually intervene early, we're going to see a continual increase in young people struggling."

The Wodonga Project has been able to gain momentum thanks to Victorian health and wellbeing organisation Jack Brockhoff Foundation, which has come on board with a \$49,000 donation.

Executive officer Louise Kuramoto said successful outcomes from The Albury Project, which started in 2018, was a key factor for the foundation to commit to support for the Wodonga equivalent.

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