Mildura-Wentworth Chamber of Commerce & Industry

TOURISM STRATEGY 2026-2031

SUBMISSION TO MRCC



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Mildura-Wentworth
Chamber of Commerce & Industry

Submission to Mildura Rural City Council

RESPONSE TO THE DRAFT TOURISM STRATEGY 2026 TO 2031

Prepared by

Mildura Wentworth Chamber of Commerce and Industry

FINAL

September 2026

Executive summary

This is the first five-year tourism strategy prepared by Council since it took direct responsibility for economic development and tourism functions previously delivered by Mildura Regional Development. MWCCI acknowledges the work undertaken by Council officers and the Tourism Advisory Committee to reach this point. Preparing a strategy across a large, diverse and cross-border visitor economy is substantial work.

That context makes the quality of the decision now before Council more important, not less. The proposed strategy would guide approximately $13.5 million of public expenditure over five years. It should provide a considered basis for deciding whom Mildura will attract, why those visitors will choose this destination, when their demand is most valuable and how Council will know whether the investment worked.

The present draft does not meet that standard and MWCCI cannot support its adoption.

The central problem is not a shortage of activities. The draft contains many sensible ideas. The problem is that the fundamental analysis required to choose between them has not been completed. Broad MRT visitor categories, delayed historical statistics, a destination index and limited local consultation do not identify the priority visitor markets Mildura can win. They do not explain why an angler chooses Mulwala, why a water-skiing family chooses Echuca, why an arts visitor chooses Bendigo, or what would change those decisions.

MWCCI recognises the distinction between a Tourism Strategy and a Destination Marketing Plan. The Tourism Strategy should set the direction for the visitor economy. It need not contain every audience, campaign, channel or media decision.

It must, however, decide what research and market data are required, allocate sufficient resources to that work and use the resulting evidence to establish Mildura's competitive direction. The subsequent Destination Marketing Plan should translate that direction into positioning, audiences, campaigns, channels, partnerships, budgets and conversion measures.

Some detailed examples in this submission would be developed more fully through that later plan. They are included to show how knowledge of a visitor market changes decisions about products, infrastructure, accommodation, events, visitor servicing and marketing. They are not a request to place a finished marketing plan inside the Tourism Strategy.

This submission makes six principal findings:

- Council has consulted people delivering tourism locally, but has not sufficiently researched the people Mildura must persuade to come.
- Mildura needs its own competitive destination strategy. MRT can market the Murray; Council's job is to make sure Mildura wins within it.
- The strategy does not adequately establish the existing asset base, accommodation capacity, product readiness or the public and private investment that now needs a return.
- Marketing and events are not connected to precisely defined visitor markets, available capacity, conquest opportunities or a measurable acquisition pathway.
- A target of approximately 1.5 per cent annual visitor growth lacks ambition and could allow Mildura to meet its target while losing market share.
- Council relies heavily on rear-view information. Historical data may help Mildura understand tourism; forward-booking data would help Mildura manage it.

MWCCI has not simply criticised the gaps. The body of this submission and its appendices use fishing, powered recreational boating and tow sports, arts and culture, ballooning, motorsport, events and forward accommodation intelligence to demonstrate the more complete method required. These are worked illustrations, not a substitute strategy prepared by MWCCI. They show how Council should move from naming an asset to defining a market, understanding its choices, completing the visitor offer, acquiring demand and measuring the economic result.

MWCCI recommends that Council not adopt the present draft. Council should undertake a concentrated six-to-twelve-month program of market research, competitive analysis, asset and accommodation assessment,

commercial planning and measurement design, then return with a substantially rebuilt strategy. It should operate as a rolling five-year plan, reviewed annually as evidence, capacity and results change.

Mildura does not lack assets, investment or potential. It lacks a strategy that clearly identifies where it can win, sets an ambition worthy of the investment and measures whether it succeeds.

The decision before Council

MWCCI supports the preparation of a new tourism strategy. Mildura has strong natural advantages, a recognisable destination name, substantial public and private investment and businesses willing to invest further. The opportunity is real.

The present draft is not ready for adoption.

Council is being asked to approve a five-year program supported by approximately $13.5 million. Yet the draft does not identify, with useful precision, the priority visitor markets Mildura intends to win. It does not show why those visitors will choose Mildura over competing destinations, how large and valuable those markets are, what complete offer they require, or how Council will measure whether its spending changed the result.

This is the central issue. A tourism strategy cannot begin with a list of activities and broad regional visitor categories. It must begin with choices:

Who do we want to attract? Why would they choose Mildura? What will make the complete trip work for them? How will we reach them efficiently? What economic value can be won?

The draft contains useful observations and many reasonable activities. What it lacks is the analysis that would tell Council whether those are the right activities, in the right order, directed at the right markets.

MWCCI has reviewed the supporting strategies

MWCCI has considered the principal documents relied upon by the draft, including *Experience Victoria 2033*, *Visit Victoria Strategy 2030*, the *Murray Region Destination Management Plan*, the *Mildura-Wentworth Local Area Plan*, Council's *Events Strategy 2020-2025*, *Visitor Servicing Strategy 2021-2025* and *Mildura Riverfront Masterplan*, together with the Council Plan, Community Vision and relevant Traditional Owner planning.

Those documents contain useful principles and, in several cases, demonstrate the work that should have been applied to Mildura. They address market maturity, market share, visitor yield, seasonality, event acquisition, bookable products, accommodation capacity, visitor conversion, river access and the relationship between marketing and events.

The deficiency is that the draft does not apply those principles through a rigorous Mildura-specific competitive-advantage lens. It does not establish which visitor markets Mildura is best placed to win, why they should choose Mildura over competing destinations, what they require, when available capacity should be filled, or how Council's marketing, events, infrastructure and visitor-servicing expenditure will secure them.

The cited documents do not remedy the draft's deficiencies. In important respects, they demonstrate them. **Appendix 9 identifies examples of earlier strategic work containing disciplines that the present draft has not adequately carried forward.**

The Tourism Strategy must direct the Destination Marketing Plan

The distinction between the two documents is a matter of sequence and responsibility. The Tourism Strategy should identify the important unanswered market questions, specify the research and data required to answer them, allocate money and staff to that work and state who is accountable for completing it.

That evidence should inform the destination-level choices: where Mildura intends to compete, which visitor markets warrant priority, which advantages and products should be developed, when additional demand is most valuable and what economic outcomes Council expects. The Destination Marketing Plan can then determine how the selected markets will be reached and converted through positioning, campaigns, channels, partnerships and budgets.

The detailed campaign choices belong in the Destination Marketing Plan. The strategic direction and commitment to the research needed to make those choices belong here. If Council defers the market questions entirely to a later document, the Tourism Strategy will have already committed to products, events, services and expenditure before establishing whom those decisions are intended to serve.

Council's own consultation material says the Tourism Strategy incorporates strategic tourism marketing, events and visitor servicing. The draft also proposes micro-campaigns, an interstate campaign and other marketing activity. Scrutiny of the market evidence and strategic direction supporting those actions is therefore within the proper scope of this review.

MWCCI uses the term Destination Marketing Plan in full because DMP is also commonly used to mean Destination Management Plan.

Source location: *MRCC Tourism Strategy consultation page; Draft Tourism Strategy, pp. 46-47.*

The Local Government Act reinforces the need for strategic discipline

The *Local Government Act 2020* is principles-based and does not prescribe detailed contents for a tourism strategy. Section 89 nevertheless requires Council's strategic plans to adopt an integrated approach to planning, monitoring and performance reporting; take account of the resources needed for implementation; identify implementation risks; and provide for ongoing monitoring and regular review as circumstances change.

Those principles support the central argument of this submission. A Council strategy can remain appropriately high-level while still making clear choices, connecting resources to intended results, identifying risk, measuring progress and changing course when evidence changes. Calling the document an LGA strategy does not answer the absence of the market, competitive, capacity and economic analysis needed to make those choices.

Source location: *Local Government Act 2020 (Vic), s. 89.*

MWCCI cannot support adoption of the draft in its current form. This is not a request for another edit or a longer action list. The missing work sits underneath the proposed actions and expenditure. Council should undertake a concentrated six-to-twelve-month program of market research, competitive analysis, capacity assessment, industry engagement and commercial planning, then return with a substantially rebuilt strategy. The replacement should operate as a rolling five-year plan, updated annually as evidence, capacity and results change.

Questions councillors should be able to answer

Before approving the strategy, every councillor should be able to answer these questions:

1. Which precisely defined visitor markets does Mildura intend to win?
2. Which destinations currently win those visitors, and why will Mildura take a greater share?
3. How large is each opportunity, what is each visitor party worth to the regional economy, and when is that demand most valuable?
4. What additional visitors, nights, real expenditure and private investment will the proposed $13.5 million program produce beyond what would happen anyway?
5. What is next month's confirmed accommodation demand, how much capacity remains, and which periods are likely to be weak?
6. How much marketing expenditure is directed at acquiring the selected priority markets, and what proportion converts into enquiries, bookings and completed visits?
7. Which strategically valuable events is Council actively working to secure, including opportunities that may take years to win?
8. What has Council learnt from past campaigns and events, and what has changed because of that learning?

9. What does each Visitor Information Centre function cost, whom does it reach, what does it convert and how much visitor spending does it direct into regional businesses?
10. When an activity does not perform, who decides whether it is improved, stopped or whether its money and staff are redirected?

These are practical questions about a significant public investment. The draft does not allow councillors to answer them with confidence.

1) The strategy has not identified the priority visitor markets Mildura can win

The draft adopts broad visitor descriptions from Murray Regional Tourism and presents them as target markets. They may be useful for regional reporting or broad campaigns, but they do not provide the precision required to make Mildura's product, marketing, infrastructure and event choices.

If the same description fits likely visitors to Echuca, Swan Hill, Yarrawonga, Albury Wodonga, Renmark and Mildura, it tells us very little about why a person would choose Mildura.

Demographic and lifestyle descriptions tell us something about people. A priority visitor market must also explain the decision Council wants to influence:

- the motivation and event that trigger the trip;
- the experience and service standards that matter;
- the destination currently chosen and why;
- Mildura's particular advantage;
- travel tolerance, party size, timing and length of stay;
- likely spending retained in the regional economy;
- accommodation, infrastructure, services and packaging required;
- where the prospective visitors can be identified and reached;
- the cost and likelihood of attracting them; and
- the events and partnerships that could strengthen Mildura's position over time.

Without this work, the strategy cannot rationally choose products, campaigns or events. It can only produce activity.

The draft does propose niche micro-campaigns, including outdoor adventure and gastronomy, and campaigns aimed at neighbouring states and school-holiday periods (*Draft Tourism Strategy*, pp. 46-47). MWCCI acknowledges those actions. The measure—two micro-campaigns and one interstate campaign—records production, not whether a precisely defined market was reached, converted or delivered economic value. **Appendices 1 and 2** show the additional analysis required before a campaign is commissioned.

This does not require the Tourism Strategy to contain a finished Destination Marketing Plan. It requires the strategy to allocate resources to the market research needed to make defensible destination choices and to give the later marketing plan a clear mandate.

Source location: *Draft strategy, pp. 33, 36 and 38, including reliance on regional alignment, nominated product gaps and targeted marketing.*

Pages 34 and 35 present consultation as market understanding

Page 34 says the strategy was underpinned by “in-depth stakeholder engagement” that enabled a “comprehensive understanding” of local conditions, challenges and opportunities. The engagement may help Council understand local relationships, operating frustrations and institutional views. It does not provide the market intelligence required to choose priority visitors.

The table records three Council workshops involving 8 Tourism and Events staff, 15 other Council staff and 7 Tourism Advisory Committee participants. It records two industry workshops involving 10 tourism operators or related businesses and 12 event organisers or industry participants; the proposed Ouyen workshop was cancelled because of insufficient attendance. It also records four one-to-one stakeholder meetings and the 63-response public survey reported on page 35.

A substantial part of this process was Council speaking with itself, its committee or other institutions. The external participants may have offered valuable experience, but the draft does not disclose whether workshop attendances were unique, which sectors were absent, whether people participated more than once or how representative the participants were.

Most importantly, Council staff, local stakeholders and regional organisations cannot tell Mildura why an angler chooses Mulwala, why a water-skiing family chooses Echuca or why an arts visitor chooses Bendigo. To understand those decisions, Council must research the people making them.

Consultation tells Council what participating stakeholders think. Market research tells Council whose travel decision it can influence, why that person might choose Mildura, when they can be attracted and what economic value may result. The draft repeatedly treats the former as though it has accomplished the latter.

Source location: *Draft strategy, pp. 34-35.*

Page 35 gives disproportionate weight to a limited stakeholder survey

The draft gives an entire page and polished charts to a survey of 63 respondents. Only 25 respondents reported owning or operating a business in the region.

The issue is not merely that the survey attracted only 63 responses, of whom 25 owned or operated a business in the region. The draft does not demonstrate that the respondents form a representative sample of the tourism industry, the wider community or any defined visitor market. The findings therefore have limited statistical weight and should be presented as a small collection of stakeholder views, not as evidence capable of supporting broad conclusions about the market.

The respondents combine people with different roles, knowledge and interests. The number answering each question may also vary. Percentages shown without the relevant number of respondents create an impression of precision that the exercise cannot support. For example, a preference for low-cost collaborative marketing may be unsurprising, but it does not establish which market should be pursued or which message will cause a booking.

Nor does the survey appear to have been designed to investigate visitor choice, and it should not be criticised for failing to do so. The problem is that the strategy gives this limited consultation exercise considerable prominence without supplying the separate visitor and prospective-visitor research needed to determine who Mildura should target, why they choose competing destinations and what would change that decision.

Residents and local operators are valuable sources of experience, but they cannot substitute for research with actual visitors, prospective visitors, lost visitors and people choosing competing destinations. Council has consulted people delivering tourism locally. It has not sufficiently researched the people Mildura must persuade to come.

Council should publish the questionnaire, recruitment method, respondent composition and response count for each question, and state the limitations plainly. More importantly, it should undertake the market research the strategy presently assumes has already been done.

The prominence given to this survey matters. It reveals a broader problem with the analytical standard of the draft: attractive presentation is being allowed to stand in for strong evidence.

Source location: *Draft strategy, p. 35.*

The Destination Performance Index does not make the strategic choices

The Urban Enterprise Destination Performance Index on page 29 may be correct within its own methodology. Even if every ranking is accepted, it does not tell Council which visitors Mildura should pursue, why they would choose Mildura, the size of the opportunity, or what Council should do next.

A high overnight ranking may partly reflect the distance visitors must travel. A seasonality score may hide periods when accommodation is full and other periods when capacity is unused. A low product-development score does not identify which missing product could create profitable demand. A rank is a prompt for investigation, not a substitute for it.

Council should require the methodology, inputs, weightings, comparator set and sensitivity of the index to be transparent. More importantly, it should require the causal analysis that turns an index into a decision.

Source location: *Draft strategy, p. 29.*

The strategy looks backwards while travel behaviour may be changing fundamentally

Distance is a real constraint for some markets and an advantage for others. Specialist travellers routinely accept longer journeys for a superior experience, and for clubs or touring groups the journey can form part of the experience itself.

The strategy runs to 2031, yet it shows little inquiry into some of the largest changes in work and travel behaviour in a generation. Hybrid work, remote work, flexible hours, four-day-week experiments, digital connectivity and changing expectations about where work occurs may alter the days people travel, how long they stay, how far they are prepared to drive and whether work and leisure can be combined.

For Mildura, this is not a peripheral trend. Distance has traditionally constrained short breaks from Melbourne. If a visitor can leave on Thursday, work remotely on Friday or Monday and stay for three, four or five nights, the effective distance to Mildura may change. The implications extend to accommodation, reliable connectivity, workspace, family travel, midweek and shoulder demand and the timing of campaigns.

The Victorian Parliament is presently considering legislation that would give eligible employees a right to work from home for up to two days each week where reasonable. Whatever its final form or outcome, the proposal demonstrates the scale and immediacy of the changes occurring in working arrangements during the life of this strategy.

MWCCI does not claim that these changes will automatically benefit Mildura. That is the question Council should research, test through scenarios and monitor. A strategy written now should be curious about how the next visitor will behave, not simply describe how the last visitor behaved. Otherwise it risks spending five years marketing to yesterday's traveller.

2) Mildura needs its own destination and competitive strategy

Mildura is a destination brand. It is more important to Mildura's visitor economy than its membership of a large administrative region called the Murray.

Murray Regional Tourism can provide some value through training, operator readiness, shared research tools, distribution, government access, advocacy, crisis coordination and genuinely regional products. A coordinated grass-court tennis program, junior competition or Golf on the Murray style initiative may be stronger when several destinations work together.

That value has limits. MRT serves a long cross-border region and many councils. Its definitions and campaigns naturally tend toward what the destinations have in common. Regional awareness can therefore be broad; Mildura's visitor acquisition must be precise. MRT's institutional preference should not determine Mildura's brand, its priority markets or the visitors it seeks to take from competitors.

Destinations cooperate and compete at the same time. Increasing visitation to the Murray as a whole by 10 per cent is an exceptionally difficult task: it requires the region to create new demand against every destination outside the Murray. Winning a greater share of a well-defined market is a more focused task. Mildura can identify the anglers, boating families, event travellers or other visitors it has a credible prospect of winning, understand where they go now and make a proposition designed to change that choice.

Even if total Murray visitation increased by 10 per cent, that result would not tell us whether Mildura gained or lost. Mildura could grow more slowly than the region and lose market share, remain flat while competitors gained, or help fund destination-neutral promotion that is converted more effectively by Echuca, Swan Hill, Yarrawonga-Mulwala or Albury-Wodonga. Regional reach and impressions do not establish a return to Mildura.

MRT can market the Murray. Council's job is to make sure Mildura wins within it. Council should know what Mildura contributes to regional marketing and what measurable reach, enquiries, bookings, visitor nights, expenditure and market-share change come back to Mildura. Mildura should cooperate when scale produces a genuine advantage and compete where its own assets and conditions give it an edge.

The governing principle should be:

Collaborate where the product is naturally regional. Compete where Mildura possesses a destination-specific advantage.

The revised strategy should retain control of the Mildura brand, undertake Mildura-specific market research, define the destinations against which visitors actually compare us and state what measurable value Council expects from MRT.

MRT's role should be recognised, but it should not replace Mildura's responsibility to think. Broad regional marketing asks people to visit the Murray. Competitive destination marketing gives a particular person a compelling reason to drive past other Murray destinations and come to Mildura.

Source location: *Draft strategy, pp. 31, 33, 36 and 38.*

Mildura and Wentworth form one visitor economy

Visitors do not experience the Victorian and New South Wales boundary as government does. Trentham Waters Resort, FOSO, Buronga, Gol Gol, Wentworth's accommodation and river assets form part of the functional Mildura destination. Mildura's dining, retail, accommodation, riverfront and attractions increase the value of stays on both sides.

MWCCI welcomes Action 5.4 and its proposed stronger operational relationship with Wentworth Shire Council, including an MOU or alternative arrangement, stronger working relationships and partner projects or packaging. That commitment recognises an important reality, but it is not itself a complete coordinated destination strategy.

Council does not need to own an asset or approve of every development before recognising its economic importance. Cross-border cooperation should connect accommodation, attractions, river access, events

and visitor movement. It should not blur Mildura's brand or remove MRCC's responsibility to establish Mildura's own priority markets and competitive position.

Source location: *Draft strategy, pp. 53-54, Action 5.4.*

3) Council has not established what tourism assets and accommodation capacity exist

The strategy lists many assets and product gaps, but it does not establish two basic facts: what tourism assets Mildura and its functional visitor region already possess, and how much accommodation capacity exists or is coming. These are separate pieces of work. Both should precede decisions about products, markets, events and expenditure.

Council should establish the tourism asset base, including:

- the existing tourism assets, their condition, accessibility, use and unrealised potential;
- the utilisation required for commercial sustainability;
- products or operators that have disappeared and the reasons why;
- public and private investment already committed; and
- opportunities to connect assets that are currently treated as isolated attractions.

That audit should recognise the destination as a network rather than a single riverfront. Ouyen Community Lake is a comparatively new, purpose-developed 14-hectare recreation lake approximately 100 kilometres south of Mildura, with boating, water-skiing, wakeboarding, fishing and camping facilities and demonstrated competition use. Lake Cullulleraine, about 56 kilometres west of Mildura on the Adelaide route, supports boating, fishing, swimming, sailing, paddling, camping and caravan accommodation. At Wentworth, the meeting of the Murray and Darling Rivers is a nationally significant natural, cultural and river-trade story. These assets do not remove the need for market testing, but omitting them produces an incomplete view of the region's water, touring and event potential.

Council should separately establish accommodation capacity, including:

- supply by type, location, quality and season, including commercial, informal and river accommodation;
- new, renewed and committed capacity;
- present and forward occupancy, booking pace and remaining capacity;
- the periods when the destination is full and the periods when demand is weak;
- the visitor markets capable of filling available capacity; and
- the further private investment that credible demand growth could unlock.

A perceived product gap is not automatically a commercial opportunity. Agritourism, nature, First Nations experiences, luxury accommodation and every other proposed theme should be compared on market size, Mildura's advantage, visitor value, timing, feasibility, cost and risk.

Source location: *Draft strategy, pp. 25 to 28 and 36 to 38.*

The strategy does not provide a usable assessment of market and product maturity

The supporting regional work describes some products as primary, secondary or emerging, and the draft repeats parts of that language. That is recognition, but it does not tell Council whether a market is understood, whether Mildura's product is ready to compete, or what must happen next. By comparison, *Visit Victoria Strategy 2030* uses an explicit Protect, Own, Grow, Watch and Leverage framework to connect market potential, readiness and investment. The draft does not apply an equivalent discipline to Mildura.

Every opportunity should be tested on two separate questions:

- **Market maturity:** Do we know the addressable market, its value, timing, behaviour, competitors and an efficient way to reach it?
- **Product maturity:** Does Mildura have a complete, competitive and visitor-ready offer, including access, accommodation, services, packaging and delivery capability?

That distinction should determine sequence. A proven market and ready product may justify immediate acquisition. A proven market with an incomplete offer requires practical product work. An existing asset with uncertain demand requires testing. An immature market and immature product should be developed cautiously rather than placed beside established opportunities as if all were equally ready.

The next five years should first make the most of Mildura's strongest natural and demonstrated advantages. The economic benefit and capability created by getting those fundamentals right can then support future markets that need time to mature. This is not an argument for water sports instead of arts, First Nations cultural tourism or agritourism. It is an argument for sequencing, evidence and knowing which opportunities Mildura can hit out of the park now and which must be built properly over time.

Arts, culture and First Nations heritage require the same serious analysis

Mildura has a substantial arts and cultural history. The Mildura Arts Centre, Rio Vista, the Elliott Collection, public art, the nationally important Mildura Sculpture Triennials, a notable body of Art Deco and Moderne architecture, festivals, Trail of Lights and FOSO form a meaningful base. The Elliott Collection helped establish the Mildura Arts Centre collection and includes important Australian and international works.

The strategic questions remain open. How large are the relevant arts and cultural visitor markets? Which parts of the collection and program cause travel rather than simply enrich a stay? How does Mildura compare with a destination such as Bendigo, which has spent years building a measurable reputation for major exhibitions? Is Mildura's offer visible, accessible, packaged and marketed strongly enough?

Trail of Lights and FOSO may each attract a primary arts or light-experience market. They can also add depth, spending and an extra night after another visitor market has chosen Mildura. Both roles should be measured.

First Nations cultural heritage deserves recognition in its own right and may form an important part of the visitor offer. Development should be Traditional Owner-led or co-designed. Its potential as a primary trip driver, supporting experience or educational product should be researched and measured rather than assumed in either direction.

This submission does not seek to preselect water sports over arts, culture, nature or First Nations experiences. It asks Council to apply the same disciplined market test to every opportunity.

Appendix 4 uses a working Great Gatsby concept to demonstrate how Mildura's Art Deco architecture, heritage rail, ballooning, public art, sculpture history, Rio Vista, the Elliott Collection, classic vehicles, dining, river experiences and after-dark attractions might be connected over time for an identified visitor market. It is an illustration of the method, not a finished event recommendation.

4) The draft does not show how Mildura turns advantage into a complete offer

The absence of detailed market thinking is easiest to see through examples. These examples are not MWCCI's final selection of priority markets. They show the work that should be undertaken before Council decides.

Some campaign, channel and conversion elements discussed below would properly be developed through a Destination Marketing Plan. They are included because marketing cannot be separated from the products, infrastructure, accommodation, events and services that the Tourism Strategy must prioritise. The examples test whether the strategy provides enough direction for those connected decisions.

Fishing and Murray cod

Fishing is an obvious and unusually broad visitor market for Mildura. Murray cod is the hero species. The market ranges from people fishing from the bank or while free camping, through grey nomads and families staying in caravan parks, to tournament anglers, guided experiences and travelling parties towing sophisticated boats and equipment.

Those visitors cannot be treated as one statistical overnight category. Their party size, accommodation, fuel, equipment, food, guiding, attraction and secondary-experience spending may differ substantially. A boating family staying for two or three nights may purchase accommodation, fuel for the towing vehicle and boat, meals, tackle and tickets to evening attractions. A bank angler may enter the market at a much lower price point. Both may be valuable at the right time, but they require different offers and measures.

The strategy does not establish the size or value of the contestable fishing market, identify which destinations currently command it, explain why anglers choose those places or test what would make them choose Mildura instead. Local and regional stakeholders cannot answer that on anglers' behalf. Council must research the people making the choice.

Other jurisdictions have used tagged-fish promotions, valuable prizes, industry partnerships and seasonal campaigns to turn a hero species into a reason to travel. These tools are not a prescription for Mildura. They demonstrate what competitive marketing can involve once the market, competitor, season, economics and complete visitor offer are understood.

Appendix 5 examines the Northern Territory's Million Dollar Fish campaign, Victoria's Golden Tag promotion and the Yarrawonga-Mulwala cod-event model, then illustrates the mechanics of a possible Mildura market-share campaign. The example is deliberately substantial: it shows the standard of work required to compete for a nationally significant fishing market, not a finished campaign recommendation from MWCCI.

Powered recreational boating and tow sports

Powered recreational boating and tow sports include slalom water skiing, barefooting, wakeboarding, wakesurfing, ski racing, family tubing or biscuiting, recreational powerboating and personal watercraft such as jet skis. Pontoon boating is related but has a different use pattern.

Mildura has long straights, a wide river, warm water, river beaches, comparatively low congestion and favourable periods of smooth water and low wind. Those conditions support a longer season, particularly in spring and autumn when participants elsewhere may be waiting for their season to begin or trying to extend it.

The proposition is also broader than one stretch of the Murray. Ouyen Community Lake provides a competition-tested inland venue about an hour closer to Melbourne and central Victorian markets. Lake Cullulleraine adds boating, camping and water recreation on the Adelaide approach. They may support junior development, training, complementary competition or a staged journey, subject to proper assessment of dimensions, operating rules, infrastructure and demand.

The Mildura 100 has historically been an important part of Mildura's water-sports and motorsport heritage. MWCCI acknowledges that the event currently faces insurance and broader industry constraints. Its history as an exceptionally fast and long-running ski race nevertheless demonstrates physical characteristics of the river that may transfer to the much wider recreational tow-sports market. The strategic asset is the river, not a single race format.

A serious skier or barefooter values different things from a general holidaymaker. Dawn and dusk water quality, uninterrupted runs, warmth, wind and congestion can determine the choice of destination. People travel five or six hours for the right ski run, just as committed snow-sports participants travel long distances for the right alpine conditions.

Once the visitor is properly understood, the complete offer changes. It may require safe ramps, trailer parking, secure high-clearance storage for expensive wake boats, fuel, repairs, recovery services, boat-friendly accommodation, clear rules and easy access to food and evening activities. A family may ski early, wakeboard or tube during the day and visit Trail of Lights, FOSO or a restaurant at night.

This is also an identifiable market. Clubs, competitions, boat dealers, owner groups, specialist media and digital communities allow precise targeting. Council can measure audience, enquiry, booking, completed travel, expenditure and repeat visitation. Better definition reduces wasted marketing.

The work still required includes vessel and participant geography, market size, competitor waterways, travel behaviour, infrastructure, river conditions, regulation, spending, repeat potential and the reasons participants choose or reject Mildura.

That is the method missing from the draft: identify an inherent advantage, understand the people who value it most, size the prize, complete the offer and then market with precision.

Source location: *Draft strategy, pp. 25, 26, 36 and 37. The official visitor guide mentions water skiing, wakeboarding and jet skiing only in general terms.*

Connecting the river to the city

Trentham Waters Resort and other river-based visitors also expose a practical gap. Mildura should examine how pontoons, wake boats and other valuable vessels can stop safely near the riverfront and gain convenient access to Feast Street, Langtree Mall, dining, retail and attractions.

This idea is not absent from all previous planning. The *Mildura Riverfront Masterplan* sought to "realise Mildura's potential as a City by the River" and said connections to the CBD were "a key component of the success" of the riverfront. It contemplated 100 marina berths for houseboats and other craft, four paddle-steamer berths, boat maintenance, launching and fuelling, short-term mooring and associated parking (*Mildura Riverfront Masterplan*, pp. 1, 8, 28 and 33). The later *Mildura-Wentworth Local Area Plan* identified boat ramps, public pontoons, public temporary moorings, water taxis and riverfront activation (*Mildura-Wentworth Local Area Plan*, pp. 15, 16 and 18).

The draft acknowledges this history only generally. Action 4.4 proposes seeking funding for remaining relevant Riverfront Masterplan actions, while Action 4.2 concentrates on fishing platforms, kayak launching and passive water activities (*Draft Tourism Strategy*, pp. 50-51). It does not identify which earlier boating and commercial-connection proposals remain relevant, what has been delivered, what has been abandoned or how visiting powered craft will connect with the city's economy.

Renmark provides a useful comparison because river visitors can connect more readily with its town centre. Mildura does not present an obvious integrated network of suitable short-stay mooring, lighting, wayfinding, security, fuel and water transport. For someone responsible for a $250,000 boat, the difference is material.

The long-term opportunity is to connect river journeys, accommodation, the city, Wentworth and evening experiences into one usable system. At Wentworth, that journey can culminate where the Murray and Darling Rivers meet, linking the junction, riverfront, FOSO, paddle-steamer history and the wider story of two great river systems. Specific mooring or water-taxi proposals require feasibility work, but the strategy should at least recognise the economic connection it is trying to create.

Action 5.4's proposed stronger operational relationship with Wentworth Shire Council is welcome (*Draft Tourism Strategy*, pp. 53-54). That relationship should be used to turn the existing cross-border planning into a practical visitor journey: where people can moor, how they move between accommodation and attractions, and how spending reaches businesses on both sides of the river.

Ballooning shows how proven capability can be overlooked

Mildura hosted the 16th FAI World Hot Air Balloon Championship in 2004. Its contemporary Mildura International Balloon Fiesta and Night Glow show that specialist competition can also become a public event. Yet ballooning is absent from the draft's account of opportunity.

This history does not prove that ballooning should become an immediate primary market. It does show why the strategy must look for demonstrated capability before defaulting to generic product themes. Mildura's open landscape, aviation history, climate, event experience and public appeal justify proper investigation of training, recurring competition and longer-term international opportunities.

The visitor party is larger than the pilot. Ballooning brings crew, vehicles, equipment, officials, families and spectators, often over several days. Market size, flight reliability, competitor locations, event rights and economic value still need to be established.

Motorsport is a destination asset not a collection of unrelated events

Mildura has a deep motorsport heritage across karting, Supercars, motorcycle speedway, road racing, drag racing, desert and off-road competition, motocross, speedway cars and high-performance competition on the river. Council's own *Mildura Motorsports and Community Precinct Investment Prospectus* says local involvement dates to the 1930s, participation is four times the national average and more than 100 motorsport events are held in the region each year. It says Mildura “could well be described as Australia's home of motorsport”.

The record includes Todd and Rick Kelly and the Kelly family's team ownership, Cameron Waters, Josh Waters, Phil and Jason Crump, Leigh Adams, John Hederics, Phil Lamattina, Darren Morgan and Warren Smart. It is supported by Olympic Park Speedway, Timmis Speedway, Mildura Kart Club, Sunset Strip, motorcycle and off-road facilities, the Hattah Desert Race and the Mildura 100.

This is not proof that “home of motorsport” is the final destination position. It is proof that the proposition deserves disciplined assessment. Council should establish the relevant participant and spectator markets, competing destinations, annual calendar, facility use, accommodation and equipment needs, economic value and the opportunities to connect separate disciplines into a recognisable market position.

The strategy does not treat motorsport heritage as a coherent tourism asset. Hattah and the Mildura 100 should not be reduced to recurring events that receive grants and then disappear from strategic view. Their competitors, crews, officials, sponsors and families are identifiable visitors from whom current, accurate information can be collected.

Travelling events reveal needs hidden by visitor totals

The Hattah Desert Race, veteran or masters cricket, harness racing, tennis, ballooning and touring car or heritage rail groups each bring different combinations of participants, equipment, support crews, families and spectators.

A useful planning framework should identify:

- the primary reason for travel;
- secondary and tertiary activities undertaken during the stay;
- the participant, support and accompanying cohorts;
- their preferred and fallback accommodation;
- vehicles, trailers, horse floats, boats or specialist equipment;
- parking, storage, servicing, security and access needs; and

- the full spending pathway across the regional economy.

For Hattah, the rider may be the primary participant, the support team a second cohort and family or supporters a third. A caravan park may be the preferred accommodation, with camping and commercial rooms serving other needs. Show and Shine, dining and Trail of Lights may extend the stay and distribute expenditure. The same framework can be adapted to harness-racing participants, trainers, owners, support crews and spectators; cricket teams; balloon crews; and boating families.

Harness racing should be recognised as an important established regional asset. The Mildura Harness Racing Club conducts a substantial annual program, including the Mildura Pacing Cup Carnival. Visiting horses, trainers, drivers, owners, officials, support crews, spectators and families create needs for accommodation, food, fuel, stabling, float parking, security and specialist services. Council should know the facility's utilisation, the number and origin of visitors, their nights and expenditure, the difference between ordinary meetings and the Cup Carnival, and whether further meetings or associated activities could increase its contribution. The point is not to prescribe the sport's program; it is to ensure that an existing asset and visitor market are properly understood and included.

The missing question is also when

A travelling market cannot be understood without knowing when and where it moves. MRT and MRCC describe grey nomads and road-trip visitors, and MRCC's RV and caravan work recognises that Mildura often forms part of a wider journey. What is still missing is a usable calendar of movement: when travellers head north or south, which routes they use, when they return for events or family occasions, how far ahead they decide, and when Mildura has capacity to capture them.

Calling a market year-round can hide the very flows that make it commercially useful. Mildura needs to understand northbound and southbound movements, shoulder periods, Christmas and event-driven return travel, then match offers and communication to those moments.

Action 4.6 proposes a Southern Outback Touring Route from Melbourne through central Victoria (*Draft Tourism Strategy*, p. 51). That may become a useful mechanism for attracting touring and RV visitors through Mildura. However, the draft does not connect it to the road-trip and grey-nomad markets, analyse their seasonal movements, or explain how passing traffic will be converted into overnight stays and local spending. Earlier material refers to a Great Murray and Outback Touring Route linking Melbourne, Mildura and Broken Hill. Council should explain whether Action 4.6 revives that former route, originates from a current regional partner or is a new proposal, and what previous experience teaches us.

Mildura also does not need to own every event to capture its economic value. The Deni Ute Muster, Mundi Mundi Bash and Finke Desert Race create before-and-after travel by participants, crews, families, vehicles and equipment. Mildura should identify every realistically contestable traveller whose route can include the region and design the overnight stop, supply, repair, secure-parking, recovery or extended-stay offer they need. Economic value does not depend on owning the event. Sometimes the opportunity is to own the journey.

This is enough to demonstrate the required thinking. Council and its advisers should undertake the detailed market and product work.

5) Events should be used to acquire visitors and build a position

Events are not a calendar sitting beside the marketing strategy. They are one of the principal ways a destination acquires priority visitors, fills available capacity and builds a long-term reputation.

MWCCI acknowledges that the draft proposes a signature major event, an event-attraction prospectus and proactive pursuit of annual events aligned with regional strengths (*Draft Tourism Strategy*, p. 48). Council's earlier *Events Strategy 2020-2025* went further. It connected hallmark events and event acquisition with Mildura's competitive advantages, shoulder and low seasons, overnight expenditure, bids, event-organiser capacity and economic impact (*Events Strategy 2020-2025*, pp. 18-22 and 29-34).

The question is therefore not whether Council has ever considered proactive event acquisition. It is what became of that work. Which actions were completed? What measurable results did they produce? Which remain outstanding? Why does the new draft not report those results or carry the earlier discipline into a current market-led event pipeline?

Mildura cannot operate only as a receiver of proposals. Council should identify the events it has deliberately attempted to secure and the events it intends to pursue. Some conquest events may take five or ten years to win. During that period Mildura may need to build facilities, delivery experience, governing-body relationships and credibility through smaller events.

Once a priority visitor market is chosen, the event pathway should support it. A validated tow-sports position might progress through training, club events, state championships, national titles and carefully assessed international opportunities. Ballooning may follow a similar ladder. Tennis, education travel, arts, motorsport, cricket and harness racing each require their own pathway.

Council should maintain a measurable events pipeline: opportunities identified, approached, qualified, bid for, negotiated, won or lost, delivered and evaluated. Commercial detail can remain confidential while councillors see the number, stage, purpose, probability and estimated value of opportunities.

Appendix 6 shows the event-acquisition pipeline that would connect these principles to accountable delivery.

That pipeline should include four distinct groups: events Mildura already hosts, events it is actively seeking, larger events it is building the capability to win, and external events whose before-and-after travel Mildura intends to capture. Conquest may take five or ten years. Progress can still be measured through relationships built, smaller events delivered, facilities improved, bids advanced and reasons for wins and losses retained.

Easter, Christmas and Australia Day may already constrain capacity. The strategic question is which events and markets can be activated when accommodation, hospitality and attractions have room to grow.

Schools illustrate the opportunity. They are identifiable prospects, travel outside school holidays, follow known decision processes and can become repeat visitors. Trail of Lights, FOSO, art, river systems, environment, astronomy, agriculture and regional history could form a curriculum-based itinerary. Feasibility must be tested, but the addressable market, contacts, conversion and repeat business can all be measured.

Council's support for established events also needs to be connected to this learning system. Council records confirm grants of $50,000 to the North West Victorian Motorcycle Club for the 2024 Hattah Desert Race and $50,000 to the Mildura District Ski Club for the 2025 Mildura 100, each in the third year of a three-year agreement. MWCCI recognises that substantial support.

The grant should not be the end of Council's tourism role. These events bring readily identifiable competitors, crews, officials, sponsors, families and spectators into the region. Entrants register and the organising clubs have direct relationships with them. Where is the accurate and timely research with those visitors? What caused them to come, where did they stay, what did the travelling party spend, what frustrated them, what would add another night and what would bring them back outside the event?

MWCCI can see no evidence in the draft of a systematic process to conduct post-event research with these visitors, benchmark performance, retain lessons and agree improvements with the clubs. Council has funded the events. Has it also learned from the visitors it helped bring here?

The North West Victorian Motorcycle Club and Mildura District Ski Club possess substantial delivery expertise. Council should work with them, not displace them, to strengthen capability, marketing, visitor experience and annual performance. The objective is continuous improvement: what was learned, what will change next year and how will the event produce greater tourism and economic value over time?

Source location: *Draft strategy, pp. 31, 32, 37, 38 and 41; MRCC Council minutes, 23 May 2024.*

6) The proposed growth target lacks ambition and economic logic

The draft proposes returning to pre-pandemic visitation by 2031, expressed as approximately 1.5 per cent annual visitor growth. Compounded over five years, that is approximately 7.7 per cent growth. In 2031, Mildura would return to a visitor number achieved in 2019.

That is recovery over twelve years. It is not an adequate ambition for a five-year strategy supported by approximately $13.5 million.

Nor is Mildura starting from an empty tourism landscape. Governments, councils and businesses have already committed substantial capital to attractions, accommodation, cruising, hospitality and enabling infrastructure. The investment and improvement pipeline includes Trail of Lights, FOSO, Australian Sky, accessible luxury houseboats, caravan-park rebuilding and redevelopment after the floods, the Kar Rama Hotel refurbishment, The Boathouse redevelopment and Trentham Waters Resort. In MWCCI's assessment, recent, committed and emerging tourism-related investment is in excess of $50 million—arguably the greatest concentration of tourism investment Mildura has experienced in the past 25 years.

These assets require visitors, occupancy, patronage and expenditure. Private operators need a return if they are to invest again, and governments need evidence that public capital produced additional economic activity. A visitor-growth target that falls behind the wider market does not provide a convincing return on that confidence.

Visit Victoria forecasts total Victorian visitation to grow faster than 1.5 per cent annually. MRT's own destination plan adopted a materially stronger visitor-growth ambition and included expenditure and overnight-yield measures. Mildura could therefore meet its target every year and still lose market share.

Inflation does not change a visitor count. It does, however, expose the weakness of relying on nominal expenditure and modest visitor growth. Prices, wages, insurance, construction, marketing and operations rise. If visitor expenditure grows only because prices rise, real tourism activity has not necessarily improved. If demand growth remains weak, the real return on public investment deteriorates and further private investment becomes harder to justify.

Council cannot celebrate substantial public and private investment, commit another $13.5 million and adopt a target that allows the destination to fall behind its market. Businesses are committing capital and accepting risk. The demand ambition should be commensurate with that confidence.

Action 4.3 illustrates the contradiction. The draft proposes attracting boutique and luxury accommodation and supporting at least two new accommodation businesses by 2031 (*Draft Tourism Strategy*, p. 50). That may be sensible, but what demand case will Council present to an investor when its own strategy anticipates only 1.5 per cent annual visitor growth and provides no current or forward occupancy, room-yield, seasonal-capacity or market-specific demand analysis?

A modest visitor-number increase could be defensible if Council deliberately pursued higher-yield visitors, longer stays, stronger midweek demand and improved off-peak occupancy. The draft does not establish that case either. It presents neither an ambitious volume-growth strategy nor a measurable value-over-volume strategy.

Action 4.5 deserves support in principle. A properly tested major-events and conference facility could attract higher-yield business and event travel and help fill weekday or off-peak capacity. Its feasibility must be connected to demonstrated delegate demand, accommodation capacity and the air services available through Mildura Airport, including fares, flight frequency, schedules, reliability, seat capacity and group-transfer arrangements.

Mildura Airport is also a substantial publicly owned regional asset. Increased leisure, event and conference travel is one of the principal ways in which its utilisation could be improved. The tourism strategy should therefore explain how its selected visitor markets, event pipeline and conference ambitions will generate additional passenger demand, support viable air services and produce a stronger return from the community's investment in the airport. Completing only a feasibility study by 2031 is not an economic outcome; it delays until the end of the strategy period the work needed to decide whether and what to build (*Draft Tourism Strategy*, pp. 50-51).

The revised strategy should present three scenarios:

- the result expected if Council continues without the proposed program;
- the growth required merely to maintain Mildura's market share; and
- the stronger result Council expects a successful strategy to achieve.

Each scenario should state visitors, nights, inflation-adjusted and nominal expenditure, locally retained value, employment and private investment. Council should then identify the additional result it reasonably expects its program to cause.

Source location: *Draft strategy, p. 41.*

7) Tourism data describe the past but do not manage the next month

Tourism Research Australia provides valuable information about broad tourism trends and longer-term direction. Its estimates become less precise and less useful for operational decisions as the geography and visitor segment become smaller. The TRA data is survey-based, local figures may be modelled or averaged across years and publication occurs after the activity. At Mildura level it may be directional rather than sufficiently accurate for narrow market, campaign or operating decisions.

CommBank iQ and related transaction analysis can add more timely information about where visitor spending occurred. It is still a record of past transactions and has coverage and classification limits.

These sources should be used for the questions they can answer. Mildura presently has several incomplete rear-view mirrors and no reliable forward windscreen.

Appendix 3 explains in plain language the distinction between historical reporting and forward tourism management, including the limits of potential accuracy at a small geographic and market level.

With the permission of participating accommodation providers, existing reservation-management systems could contribute limited, de-identified information to a secure destination-wide view of forward occupancy and available capacity. This uses information businesses already hold and could give Council and industry a practical tourism forecast for the coming days and weeks without revealing an individual property's commercial information.

That signal could identify weak periods, improve campaign timing, reduce unnecessary promotion when commercial accommodation is close to capacity and help event planning. It could also help hospitality, retail and service businesses decide staffing, stock and opening hours. For a small hospitality business, knowing that accommodation is likely to be 80 per cent occupied may determine whether an additional waiter is rostered and whether the service period is profitable.

Tourism is not an end in itself. Its purpose is to bring economic activity into the region and distribute it through accommodation, hospitality, retail, transport, attractions and services. A forward tourism forecast would help more businesses capture that value.

MWCCI would welcome the opportunity to explore a properly governed partnership with Council and industry. Participation, aggregation, minimum reporting groups, secure handling, permitted uses and commercial confidentiality would be essential. The concept complements official statistics; it does not replace them.

8) The Visitor Information Centre purpose should be supported and its model tested

MWCCI supports the core purpose of visitor information: expert advice, itinerary development, accommodation and attraction bookings, ticketing, packaging and directing visitor expenditure into regional businesses.

Support for that purpose does not settle whether the current delivery model is efficient.

MWCCI's working estimate is that the Visitor Information Centre costs approximately $1 million each year. We stand to be corrected and invite Council to provide the actual fully allocated figure. If our estimate is broadly correct, the VIC represents approximately 37 per cent of Council's proposed annual tourism investment while directly serving around 14 per cent of visitors.

The precise figures should be confirmed. The apparent disparity still requires examination. The central question is whether visitor servicing is becoming more efficient with limited resources and increasing expenditure per visitor throughout the regional economy.

Council should separately report the cost, reach and results of:

- the Deakin Avenue face-to-face service;
- the riverfront face-to-face service;
- digital information and bookings;
- accommodation, tour, paddleboat, event, Trail of Lights and FOSO transactions;
- distributed Visitor Inspiration Points;
- merchandise retailing.

Useful measures include total and staff cost by function, visitors per paid labour hour, cost per enquiry, booking conversion, transaction value, commissions, referrals, additional nights influenced, regional operators receiving business and expenditure directed into the local economy.

Retail should be accounted for separately. The VIC stocks a substantial range of local products and visitor merchandise. Council should know the sales, gross and net margin, inventory value, turnover, aged or damaged stock, losses, markdowns, refunds and fully allocated result. Local provenance may produce community benefit, but it does not prove commercial efficiency.

Every dollar absorbed by avoidable retail loss is a dollar unavailable for visitor research and acquisition. If the capability and return cannot be demonstrated, Council should test whether private retailers, concessions, consignment arrangements or an online marketplace can provide that function more efficiently while the VIC concentrates on information, conversion, bookings and distribution.

Source location: *Draft strategy, pp. 31, 32 and 35.*

9) Council needs measures that expose results, learning and choices

The draft measures workshops, campaigns, meetings, products, plans and case studies more readily than changes in visitor behaviour and economic performance. Activity tells councillors that work occurred. It does not show that the work succeeded.

A tourism strategy funded as economic development should report:

- additional visitors and nights;
- inflation-adjusted expenditure and value retained locally;
- yield by priority visitor market and visitor party;
- qualified demand, conversion and cost of acquisition;
- accommodation capacity, forward bookings and periods of weakness;
- event opportunities, wins, losses and economic results;
- private investment and productive capacity activated;
- visitor-service cost, reach, conversion and value influenced; and
- activities expanded, redesigned or stopped because of evidence.

Day visitor, overnight visitor and international visitor are statistical categories, not measures of value. One day visitor buying event tickets, meals and retail may contribute more than a low-spending overnight visitor. A premium guided nature visitor may be highly valuable. A boating visitor may contribute little if nothing is bought locally.

The proper unit of analysis is the visitor party and its complete trip behaviour. Potential markets should be compared by locally retained spending, timing, length of stay, party size, repeat potential, acquisition cost, capacity use, infrastructure cost and contribution to Mildura's long-term position.

Council should know not only what worked, but what did not work and what changed as a result. A strategy that cannot cause money or staff to be reallocated is only an activity list.

Appendix 7 provides a suggested annual scorecard that measures economic and visitor outcomes rather than the completion of tasks.

Source location: *Draft strategy, pp. 31, 32, 38 and 41 to 54.*

10) Required work before a new strategy is considered

MWCCI recommends a concentrated six-to-twelve-month program which:

1. defines and evidences the priority visitor markets Mildura can credibly win;
2. researches actual visitors, prospective visitors, lost visitors and competitor choices;
3. commits the budget, staff, data access, timetable and accountability required to complete that research;
4. establishes Mildura's destination position and visitor-relevant competitive set;
5. defines MRT's supporting role and measures the value it provides to Mildura;
6. treats Mildura and Wentworth as one functional visitor economy while retaining a clear Mildura brand;
7. completes separate audits of tourism assets and accommodation capacity;
8. maps existing and committed public and private investment and the demand required to sustain it;
9. ranks opportunities by addressable demand, visitor value, timing, competitive advantage, feasibility, cost and risk;
10. replaces the 1.5 per cent target with market-share, real-growth and investment-return scenarios;
11. connects marketing and event acquisition to the selected visitor markets, available capacity and destination position;
12. gives a subsequent Destination Marketing Plan a clear mandate, including the selected markets, destination position, priority periods, economic objectives and budget parameters;
13. prepares that plan separately, translating the adopted strategy into audiences, campaigns, channels, partnerships, budgets and conversion measures;
14. maintains a measurable events pipeline and records learning from bids and delivered events;
15. establishes timely local intelligence about forward accommodation demand and capacity;
16. replaces activity counts with measures of visitor behaviour, conversion, yield, investment, productivity and learning;
17. publishes the five-year budget and staffing allocation by major tourism function;
18. evaluates VIC information, booking and retail functions separately for cost, reach, conversion and value;
19. assigns clear owners, baselines, targets, reporting cycles and rules for changing or stopping activity; and
20. operates the strategy as a rolling five-year plan, reviewed and updated every year.

Requested outcome

MWCCI cannot support the Draft Mildura Tourism Strategy 2026 to 2031 in its current form and recommends that it not be adopted.

This is not a request for another editing pass or a longer list of actions. The essential analytical work that should determine those actions has not been done. Council should ask officers to complete the missing market, competitive, capacity, economic and measurement work through a concentrated six-to-twelve-month program and return a substantially rebuilt strategy for consideration. Existing services and time-sensitive opportunities can continue while this work is completed.

Before committing approximately $13.5 million over five years, Council should be able to demonstrate who Mildura intends to attract, why those visitors would choose Mildura over competing destinations, what economic value they are expected to create, how they can be reached efficiently, when capacity exists to accommodate them and how performance will be measured. This does not demand certainty. It demands a considered basis for spending public money.

The revised strategy should then operate as a rolling five-year plan. Each annual update should incorporate new market research and forward-demand information, compare results with targets, record lessons, revise priorities and resources, identify activities being expanded, changed or stopped, and add another year to the planning horizon.

Once Council has adopted a rebuilt Tourism Strategy, it should prepare a separate Destination Marketing Plan. That plan should apply the strategy's market choices, destination position, timing and economic objectives through detailed audiences, campaigns, channels, partnerships, budgets and conversion measures.

This approach does not require every answer to be perfect on day one. It requires Council to do the fundamental work before committing substantial public resources to another five years of activity, then make the best choices available, test them honestly and improve them as evidence emerges.

MWCCI is willing to work constructively with Council, Wentworth, industry and regional partners. In particular, the Chamber would welcome discussion about forward accommodation intelligence and the wider distribution of tourism benefit through the regional economy.

Mildura does not lack assets, investment or potential. It lacks a strategy that clearly identifies where it can win, sets an ambition worthy of the investment and measures whether it succeeds.

Appendices

The appendices contain worked examples of the analysis and connections missing from the draft. Some marketing elements would be developed in greater detail through a subsequent Destination Marketing Plan. Their purpose here is to test whether the Tourism Strategy provides a clear destination direction and commits the research and resources needed to support it.

Appendix 1 A practical market test

For every proposed priority visitor market, Council should be able to answer:

Question	Evidence required
Who exactly is the priority visitor market?	Motivation, participant or interest level, geography, party and purchasing behaviour
What triggers the trip?	Direct research with visitors and prospective visitors
Where do they go now?	Visitor-relevant competitor analysis
Why can Mildura win?	Measured or verifiable destination advantage
What complete offer is required?	Product, accommodation, access, services, events and packaging
What is the size of the prize?	Addressable market, realistic share, nights and locally retained expenditure
How can they be reached?	Identifiable channels, partners and cost of acquisition
When are they valuable?	Capacity, seasonality and displacement analysis
How will success be known?	Baseline, conversion, yield, repeat visitation and cost per result
What happens if results are weak?	Review date, decision rule and resource reallocation

Appendix 2 Worked examples of the missing method

Opportunity	Possible inherent or proven advantage	Market questions still to answer	Complete offer considerations
Fishing and Murray cod	Hero native species, established fishing culture, accessible bank and boat fishing, river and billabong environments, broad price points	Addressable market, current Mildura share, strongest competitors, catch reputation, travel triggers, season, party value and repeat behaviour	Bank and boat access, ramps, trailer parking, guides, tackle, fuel, accommodation, competitions, packages and verification
Powered recreational boating and tow sports	Warm water, long straights, wide river, river beaches, comparatively low congestion, low-wind periods and a longer season	Vessel and participant geography, competitor waterways, trip motivation, party value, repeat behaviour and barriers	Ramps, trailer parking, secure high-clearance storage, fuel, repair, recovery, accommodation and evening experiences
Regional water and touring network	Murray River, Ouyen Community Lake, Lake Cullulleraine and the Murray-Darling junction provide distinct recreation, camping, touring and storytelling assets	Which markets value each place, seasonal and route behaviour, venue capability, visitor flow, length of stay and displacement	Linked itineraries, competition and training roles, camping and accommodation, safe access, interpretation, transport and cross-border coordination

Opportunity	Possible inherent or proven advantage	Market questions still to answer	Complete offer considerations
Arts and culture	Mildura Arts Centre, Rio Vista, Elliott Collection, public art, festivals, Trail of Lights and FOSO	Primary arts-market size, comparison with Bendigo, collection accessibility, conversion, seasonality and economic value	Programming, exhibitions, interpretation, packages, transport, dining, two-night itineraries and measurement
Ballooning	2004 FAI World Championship, current Fiesta and Night Glow, open landscape and aviation history	Pilot, crew and spectator markets, flight reliability, event rights, competitors, travel and expenditure	Training, equipment, crew logistics, recurring competition, public spectacle and event progression
Education travel	Identifiable institutional prospects, repeat potential and travel outside holidays	Curriculum fit, school geography, approval cycle, pricing, travel tolerance and conversion	Suitable accommodation, supervision, safety and packaged art, river, environment, astronomy, agriculture and history experiences
Travelling sport and clubs	Hattah, tennis, cricket, harness racing and touring-group history	Participant, support and spectator numbers, off-peak fit, acquisition path and visitor value	Trailer and equipment access, parking, storage, specialist services, accommodation mix and secondary activities
Motorsport	Multi-generational champions, clubs, more than 100 annual events and facilities across karting, speedway, drag, off-road, motorcycle and river competition	Participant and spectator markets, competing destinations, calendar gaps, destination-position potential, event progression and economic value	Facilities, workshops, fuel, trailers, secure parking, washdown, accommodation, family activities and club partnerships
Grey nomads and road-trip travellers	Established RV flows, major routes, warm climate and existing caravan infrastructure	Month-by-month direction, routes, stop sequence, booking lead time, event return, expenditure and bypass behaviour	Seasonal offers, supplies, servicing, events, longer stays and targeted before-and-after communication

These examples are not a recommended final list. They show the analysis that should precede selection.

Appendix 3 From historical reporting to forward tourism management

The central distinction is both timing and accuracy. Most of Mildura's available tourism information estimates what happened after the opportunity to influence it has passed. Aggregated reservation information could show what is already booked to happen while Council and businesses still have time to respond.

Source	Time view and basis	Likely accuracy and limitation at Mildura level	Decision it can support
TRA visitor statistics	Historical; survey-based, modelled and sometimes averaged	Valuable for broad scale and direction, but less precise as geography and visitor segments narrow; delayed and not an operational count	Long-term trends, broad visitor characteristics and estimated historic nights and expenditure
Mobility data	Recent past or present; observed device movement subject to provider coverage	Useful for movement patterns and origins, but does not reveal booking intention, available rooms, complete expenditure or trip motivation	Changes in visitation patterns, movement and comparative event periods
CommBank iQ or transaction data	Historical or recent past; recorded transactions within the product's coverage	More direct than recalled expenditure, but may exclude cash, some online or other transactions and cannot by itself prove why spending changed	Where, when and on what recorded visitor expenditure occurred
Aggregated accommodation reservation data	Forward-looking; actual bookings held in participating reservation systems	Operationally accurate for participating properties, subject to cancellations and data quality; not the whole market unless participation is broad	Bookings on hand, booking pace, expected occupancy, remaining participating capacity and periods requiring demand

Historical data may help Mildura understand tourism. Forward-booking data would help Mildura manage it.

With sufficient participation and appropriate privacy controls, forward accommodation intelligence could allow Council and industry to increase marketing when future demand is weak, reduce or redirect promotion when commercial accommodation is approaching capacity, test whether campaigns and events are creating bookings, and help hospitality and service businesses plan staffing, stock and opening hours.

MWCCI does not propose abandoning official statistics, transaction analysis or mobility data. Each source should be used for the purpose it can safely serve. No source is perfect. The problem is that the current system relies heavily on delayed estimates and rear-view information while providing almost no shared view of the road ahead.

Appendix 4 From an anchor exhibition to a city-wide visitor proposition

Case study 1 Bendigo Elvis

Elvis: Direct from Graceland ran at Bendigo Art Gallery from 19 March to 17 July 2022. It was exclusive to Bendigo, created in partnership with Graceland and presented approximately 300 authentic objects connected with Elvis Presley.

The exhibition was the anchor, not the whole offer. The wider VIVA Bendigo program assembled approximately 100 Elvis-themed experiences across the city. Businesses, performers and visitor attractions participated through food, music, fashion, events, displays and packages. City of Greater Bendigo reporting records approximately 220,000 visitors and an estimated $67 million regional economic impact.

The strategic lesson is not that Mildura should copy Elvis. Bendigo secured a globally recognised cultural property, made the exhibition a reason to travel and organised the wider city to convert that journey into accommodation, dining, retail, participation and repeatable destination reputation.

Case study 2 Bendigo Paris

Paris: Impressions of Life 1880–1925 ran from 16 March to 14 July 2024 as an exhibition exclusive to Bendigo. It brought together more than 170 works and artisan objects, principally from the Musée Carnavalet in Paris.

The Bonjour Bendigo program again extended the proposition beyond the gallery. French food, wine, cocktails, films, performances, education, lighting, flags, retail offers and weekend itineraries allowed businesses and public places to participate. The exhibition created the travel trigger; the city-wide program created a fuller stay.

The important distinction is precision. Bendigo did not merely promote “arts and culture”. It used an exclusive exhibition and partnerships with globally recognised collections and rights holders, then built a coordinated destination experience around a defined theme and period.

A working Mildura Great Gatsby concept

Mildura's Art Deco and Moderne buildings, Rio Vista, the Elliott Collection, Sculpture Triennial history and public art, heritage rail, classic vehicles, ballooning, paddle-steamers, river travel, fashion, music, dining and after-dark installations may appear to be separate products. They may become substantially more valuable when assembled around one recognised travel trigger.

A working Great Gatsby concept illustrates the method. Council could investigate an exclusive exhibition, collection or appropriately licensed cultural property with sufficient recognition to create a reason to travel. Around that anchor, heritage-rail arrivals, classic-car touring, Art Deco interpretation, exhibitions, sculpture, ballooning, fashion, music, dining, river experiences, Trail of Lights, FOSO and temporary building projections could create a period in which the whole destination participates rather than a single fenced event.

The audience might include arts and design visitors, heritage-rail travellers, classic-car clubs, event spectators and older travellers with time and discretionary spending. Those are hypotheses to test, not categories to assume. The working title, intellectual-property position, curatorial concept and final proposition would require development.

Mildura is not yet at Bendigo's level of product maturity in this market. A credible pathway would require market testing, rights and collection partnerships, curatorial and delivery capability, business mobilisation, accommodation and transport planning, careful timing, smaller trials and consistent measurement. The purpose would be to build a platform that can be repeated and improved, not stage one disconnected event.

The exhibition or licensed property creates the reason to travel. The destination-wide program turns that journey into nights, expenditure, participation and a position Mildura can build over time.

Appendix 5 Winning a greater share of the fishing market

Fishing provides a worked example of the difference between listing an asset and competing for a market. Murray cod gives Mildura a recognised hero species. The market spans low-cost bank fishing and camping, grey nomads, families, fishing clubs, tournament participants, guides and travelling parties towing valuable boats and equipment. The task is to determine which parts of that market Mildura can win, from whom, at what time and for what economic return.

Case study 1 Northern Territory Million Dollar Fish

Tourism and Events Northern Territory built a destination campaign around barramundi, a hero species with an established connection to the Top End. The campaign used tagged fish, a $1 million headline prize, numerous smaller cash prizes, registration, independent claim verification, specialist tagging controls, commercial partners and repeated publicity when tagged fish were caught.

The campaign was designed to influence travel during the Top End's lower tourism season, not merely to reward local fishing. Tourism NT's first-season reporting described targeted online advertising, public relations, an ambassador, brand partnerships and positive reported effects among fishing tour operators, retailers, accommodation partners and local suppliers. Current terms identify Tourism and Events NT as promoter and Sportsbet as underwriter of the cash prizes, supported by fishing, aviation, accommodation and tourism partners.

The lesson is not “offer one large prize”. The campaign joined species, season, reason to travel, commercial partners, verification, smaller wins, content and visitor packaging into one acquisition proposition.

Case study 2 Victoria Golden Tag

The Victorian Fisheries Authority established Golden Tag to encourage recreational fishers to visit regional communities. More than 1,000 fish were originally tagged across Victorian waterways, with prizes attached to verified captures. The program has awarded more than $440,000 to more than 170 winners and includes Murray cod and golden perch in Sunraysia waters such as Lindsay River and Kings Billabong.

This demonstrates that tagged-fish tourism promotion is already an accepted Victorian tool and that Sunraysia has participated. It also raises a sharper local question: what did Mildura learn from that participation, and could a more distinctive destination proposition be built around Murray cod rather than remaining one location within a statewide program?

Case study 3 Yarrawonga Mulwala and the Cod Classic

Yarrawonga-Mulwala has built a recognisable Murray cod position around Lake Mulwala and the Cod Classic. Published event records show thousands of registered anglers in individual years, major boating prizes and a long history of using the opening of cod season to attract participants and accompanying visitors.

The event itself is not the whole market. Its value is the mechanism: a recurring event reinforces the destination's reputation as a place to pursue Murray cod, supports fishing-related businesses and creates reasons for anglers to return outside the event. Mildura should establish how much fishing visitation and reputation Yarrawonga-Mulwala and other competitors command, why anglers choose them and where Mildura could compete differently or better.

How a Mildura market share campaign might work

The following sequence illustrates the work required. It is not a completed MWCCI proposal.

1. Define the priority fishing cohorts by motivation, ability, geography, equipment, party, timing, accommodation and spending.

2. Measure the addressable market, Mildura's present share and the destinations currently winning those visitors.
3. Test Mildura's proposition, including fishery quality and reputation, bank and boat access, river conditions, supporting services and seasonal advantage.
4. Choose the period in which additional demand would create the greatest value without displacing existing visitors.
5. Design a compelling travel trigger. A tagged million-dollar Murray cod is one possible attention mechanism, supported by smaller prizes that create credible wins and continuing publicity.
6. Obtain specialist legal, fisheries, environmental, insurance and promotional advice. Prize-indemnity cover or commercial underwriting may transfer the headline prize risk, but the premium cannot be assumed: it depends on probability, duration, fishing effort, controls and verification.
7. Seek cash and in-kind partners from relevant boat, engine, tackle, electronics, finance, insurance, accommodation and media sectors. Illustrative names are not commitments; partners must be approached and value tested.
8. Build rigorous tagging, chain-of-custody, eligibility, registration, anti-tampering and independent verification arrangements.
9. Package the complete visit: accommodation, ramps, secure trailer and boat storage, guiding, fuel, tackle, food, family activities and evening experiences.
10. Market directly through clubs, tournaments, boat dealers, tackle retailers, specialist media, databases and tightly defined digital audiences.
11. Measure registrations, qualified enquiries, bookings, origin, party size, nights, expenditure, cost of acquisition, repeat visitation and periods of capacity filled.
12. Compare the incremental economic return with the full campaign cost, publish the result and improve or stop the activity according to evidence.

The million dollars is the headline, not necessarily the cost. The real work is designing the probability, underwriting, partnerships, verification and visitor offer so that a nationally compelling promotion produces a commercially sensible return.

The purpose of this appendix is not to argue that Mildura must immediately launch a million-dollar competition. It demonstrates how destinations compete: identify a market they can credibly win, understand its choices, create a reason to travel, share or transfer risk, recruit partners, complete the experience and measure the economic result.

Fishing is only one example, but it is revealing. If Council cannot show that this level of work has been undertaken for an obvious market connected to Mildura's defining natural asset, the proposed strategy is not yet a sufficient basis for five years of public tourism expenditure.

Appendix 6 Events as a measurable acquisition pipeline

Stage	Evidence and measure
Addressable opportunity	Relevant governing bodies, schools, clubs, promoters, rights holders or organisations
Priority target	Fit with visitor market, season, capacity and destination position
Approached	Proactive approaches distinguished from incoming requests
Qualified	Requirements, timing, probability, cost and potential value
Proposition or bid	Offer, partners, infrastructure, capability and public commitment
Negotiation	Decision timetable and outstanding barriers
Won or lost	Reason, acquisition cost and competitor outcome
Delivered	Visitor origin, party, nights, expenditure, capacity and experience
Evaluated	Forecast compared with result, net value and lessons
Repeated or expanded	Retention, progression and long-term positioning effect

Appendix 7 Suggested annual tourism scorecard

Area	Indicators
Visitor economy	Visitors, nights, real and nominal expenditure, locally retained value and market share
Priority markets	Addressable size, qualified demand, conversion, acquisition cost, yield and repeat visitation
Accommodation	Participating supply, available capacity, occupancy, forward demand and booking pace
Marketing	Spending, reach, qualified response, conversion, additional demand and cost per result
Events	Targets, pipeline, wins, losses, origin, nights, net value and retained learning
Visitor servicing	Cost by channel, reach, referrals, bookings, conversion and visitor value influenced
VIC retail	Sales, margins, inventory, losses, markdowns and fully allocated result
Product and investment	Opportunity size, utilisation, barriers, private capital, jobs and progress
Partnerships	Cost, defined contribution and measurable value to Mildura
Resource decisions	Activities continued, changed, stopped or reallocated and why

Appendix 8 Matters requiring Council verification and disclosure

- The exact annual tourism budget and the five-year total.
- The VIC's fully allocated annual cost, staffing, functional costs and percentage of the relevant tourism budget.
- The source, definition and period for the estimate that the VIC directly serves approximately 14 per cent of visitors.
- The respondent count and denominator for every page 35 survey chart.
- The methodology, inputs, weightings and comparator set for the Urban Enterprise Destination Performance Index.
- Current Visit Victoria and MRT growth forecasts and targets.
- Project values, timing and capacity for the full accommodation and attraction investment pipeline.
- The Elliott Collection's current accessibility, visitation role and marketing position.
- Current participation and visitor value associated with Hattah, harness racing, cricket, tennis, ballooning and powered recreational boating.
- The current and historic visitor profile, economic effect and annual learning from the Hattah Desert Race and Mildura 100.
- The addressable Murray cod and recreational-fishing markets, Mildura's current share, competitor destinations, fishery evidence and seasonal opportunity.
- The Mildura Harness Racing Club meeting calendar, Cup Carnival visitation, facility use and visitor expenditure.
- Month-by-month grey-nomad and road-trip movements, routes and before-and-after opportunities around major external events.
- River conditions, infrastructure feasibility and the addressable market for powered boating and tow sports.
- The present and potential tourism roles, operating constraints and visitor markets for Ouyen Community Lake and Lake Cullulleraine.
- Visitor movement, interpretation and packaging opportunities at the Murray-Darling junction and Wentworth riverfront.
- The visitor, business-participation and economic results attributed to Bendigo's Elvis and Paris exhibition programs.
- The passage and final form of the Victorian work-from-home legislation and its implications for travel behaviour.
- The coverage and exclusions of MRCC's CommBank iQ or related transaction product.

Appendix 9 Supporting documents and the discipline not carried forward

Source document	What MWCCI recognises	What the draft still fails to resolve
Visit Victoria Strategy 2030, pp. 8-20	Create, Convert and Connect demand; market-share scenarios; priority markets; accommodation capacity; Protect, Own, Grow, Watch and Leverage market maturity	A Mildura-specific choice of markets, competitive position, capacity response and market-share ambition
Events Strategy 2020-2025, pp. 18-22 and 29-34	Hallmark events, proactive acquisition, shoulder-season targeting, overnight expenditure, bids and economic-impact measures	What was delivered, results, lessons, outstanding actions and connection to current priority visitors
Visitor Servicing Strategy 2021-2025, pp. 10-27	Whole-of-journey servicing, digital booking, visitor touchpoints, packages and a more inspirational service model	Cost, reach, conversion, booking value, additional nights and economic value distributed to regional businesses
Mildura-Wentworth Local Area Plan, pp. 5, 15-18 and 23	Water experiences, accommodation renewal, education travel, bookable products, public pontoons, temporary moorings, water taxis and cross-border action	Priorities, locations, responsibility, investment case and integration into a distinctive Mildura proposition
Mildura Riverfront Masterplan, pp. 1, 8, 28 and 33	City-river-CBD connection, marina berths, short-term mooring, launching, fuelling and associated activity	Which actions remain relevant, what has been delivered, what has changed and the contemporary pathway to implementation
Draft Tourism Strategy, pp. 44-54	Training, campaigns, event attraction, accommodation, riverfront, route, branding and partnership actions	The analysis connecting those activities to defined visitors, timing, capacity, conversion, yield and return

These references are not included to suggest that earlier strategies contain every answer. They show that Council already has access to stronger strategic concepts than are applied in the draft now proposed for adoption.

Appendix 10 Principal references

- Draft Mildura Tourism Strategy 2026 to 2031 and supporting material.
- Experience Victoria 2033, Victorian Government.
- Visit Victoria Strategy 2030, Visit Victoria.
- *Local Government Act 2020* (Vic), s. 89, and Local Government Victoria guidance on the Act's strategic-planning principles.
- Mildura Rural City Council Events Strategy 2020 to 2025, adopted 27 November 2019.
- Mildura Rural City Council Visitor Servicing Strategy 2021 to 2025.
- Mildura Riverfront Masterplan, March 2005.
- Mildura-Wentworth Local Area Plan and Recommended Actions, February 2023.
- Tourism Research Australia methodology, regional estimates, local-government profiles and published cautions.
- Visit Victoria visitor forecasts and relevant regional destination-management plans.
- Murray Regional Tourism Destination Management Plan and market material.
- MRCC budget, annual report, Visitor Information Centre material and 2026 official visitor guide.
- Urban Enterprise Destination Performance Index material.
- Mildura Rural City Council, *Mildura Motorsports and Community Precinct Investment Prospectus*.
- Mildura Rural City Council minutes, 23 May 2024, Event Funding and Support Grants Program 2024-2025.
- North West Victorian Motorcycle Club and Hattah Desert Race event history.
- Mildura District Ski Club and Mildura 100 event material.
- Tourism and Events Northern Territory, *Million Dollar Fish* terms and campaign reporting.
- Victorian Fisheries Authority, *Golden Tag Competition* material and evaluation.
- Yarrawonga-Mulwala Cod Classic published event history and participation records.
- Australian prize-indemnity and promotional-risk information for final feasibility verification.
- Mildura Arts Centre information about the Elliott Collection.
- FAI records for the 2004 World Hot Air Balloon Championship.
- Public funding and operator information for identified tourism and accommodation investment.
- Mildura Rural City Council, *New model to drive economic and tourism development*, 9 October 2023; Council annual reports; Tourism Advisory Committee material; and the Draft Tourism Strategy consultation page.
- Parliament of Victoria, *Equal Opportunity Amendment (Work from Home) Bill 2026* and bill-status material.
- Bendigo Art Gallery, *Elvis: Direct from Graceland* and *Paris: Impressions of Life 1880–1925* exhibition material.
- City of Greater Bendigo annual reporting for the VIVA Bendigo program, exhibition visitation and attributed economic impact.
- Bendigo Region, Bonjour Bendigo city-wide program material.
- Mildura Rural City Council and community information about Ouyen Community Lake, including the Ouyen Lake Project and competition use.
- Mildura Rural City Council visitor and planning material for Lake Cullulleraine.
- Wentworth Shire Council history and Murray-Darling Junction viewing-platform material.
- Visit Victoria, *Working with Visit Victoria 2026*.
- Tourism North East, High Country Destination Management Plan overview.

Figures described as working estimates and claims identified for verification should be checked against authoritative records. Where Council holds more accurate information, MWCCI invites Council to correct the record and publish the evidence.