

Lighthouse Club Narre Warren BC

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Nine months ago, Narre Warren Bowls Club changed its board, its vision, and almost certainly the course of its future.

Based in Melbourne's booming south-east corridor, Narre Warren BC sits right next door to the giant and growing Westfield shopping mall Fountain Gate, and the imposing City of Casey Cultural Precinct, which is under construction.

The bowls club is as ambitious as its upwardly mobile neighbours.

Realising when they took over that something had to be done to address membership declining at a rate of 25 per cent, president Eric Sydenham and his newly appointed board wasted no time laying out an ambitious game-plan, then backing it up with hard work.

"Our charter is to become the premier small club in Victoria. I guess to do that we have to become the premier small club in Melbourne first," Mr Sydenham says.

"We want Narre Warren Bowls Club to be the first club people in our community think of when they want to have a function, join a bowling club, or attend a bowling club.

"We want to become a community hub and we're working towards that in various ways."

What is most amazing about Narre Warren Bowls Club's transformation is the speed of achievement.

Since the current Board took over in May 2016, it's been forward motion at a dizzying rate. They've earned deserved status as a Bowls Victoria Lighthouse Club for clubs seen as leading the way statewide with their initiatives.

The club now has local council, State and Federal Members on the same page – all seeing the value the well located, well run, welcoming club can provide to the community.

The membership slide has been reversed. Astonishingly, they have increased their number of Pennant-playing ladies by 50 per cent, which bucks all trends nationally.

Hosting functions has become a key focus, both now and going forward. Plans are now underway for major renovations of clubhouse, club precinct and greens, including two roofed greens and a semi-commercial kitchen. Importantly, so too are plans to fund them, thanks to building relationships with all levels of government.

On the green, the club is a reigning Pennant champion, and there's a weekly Corporate Challenge going well.

Disability bowls is a key focus – with member and recent Bowls Victoria Volunteer of the Year region winner Len O'Brien one of the State's leading vision-impaired bowlers. There're also plans for a junior academy, and active involvement in Bowls Victoria's burgeoning schools programs.

And there's not a pokie in sight. The club says it's proud to provide a facility for all sections of the community, independent of gambling revenue.

Retired senior bankers, engineers, small business owners and former government administrators are among the club's decision-makers. Smart, focused, experienced people with plenty of ambition and vision driving the club forward. It's a recipe for success.

It hasn't all been smooth sailing. A torrential downpour just prior to Christmas – 65mm of rain in an hour

- wrecked the club's synthetic green, which is out of action most likely until the start of next season. Two burglaries of the club premises not long after the new board took over were also a concern – far less so now CCTV has been installed.

But the positivity and ambition around the club remains undented.

“We've probably achieved in raw terms 30 to 40 per cent of what we wanted, but we're only in the early stages,” Mr Sydenham says.

“The profile of what we've been able to create for Narre Warren Bowls Club as a board is far beyond what I hoped for. We've still got a lot to do but we can be immensely proud of what we've achieved so far.

“What's been engendered in terms of pride in the club from our members ... has been one of the most important achievements we've had. And that's helping us to drive the things we want to do. I think people can see that what we're doing is the right way to go.”

Some key moments and achievements

City of Casey Mayor Sam Aziz, State MP **Luke Donnellan** and Federal MP **Anthony Byrne** were invited to the club for a morning tea, made honorary members of the club, and walked through the club's three- and five-year plans by the Board. All have been impressed enough with what Narre Warren Bowls Club has proposed to help with its funding efforts for various important projects

- ⦿ Increased number of Pennant-playing ladies by 50 per cent for 2016-17
- ⦿ Introduced a variety of membership types – most notably an \$89 introductory membership pack
- ⦿ A weekend of demonstrating the sport at next-door Fountain Gate shopping centre was pivotal. With some help from Bowls Victoria, and Regional Bowls Manager Barrie Lester, it led to 100 families signing up for more information to be sent to them about the club. Thirty families took part in a recent Come and Try Day. An estimated 50 to 60 new members was the result of the Fountain Gate experiment
- ⦿ Taking names and contact details at both their Fountain Gate demonstration, and functions held by the club to allow for follow-up contact
- ⦿ An approach to Narre Warren BC to become a Federal Government Work for the Dole host organisation means dole recipients have been working at the club to learn new skills and experience. It's been a huge success. The Work for the Dole Scheme team work in the club kitchen, in maintenance, and as cleaners
- ⦿ Sprucing up the current clubhouse. While big renovation plans are underway and will take time, new furniture and a coat of paint in the clubhouse, an existing outdoor pergola changing from carport to barbecue area, plus the removal of dated pink vertical blinds were cost-effective, short-term ways to sharpen up the facility for existing members, plus sell the club as a perfect function venue. “You can't keep on hitting members in the pocket for paying their fees and green fees. We chose to market the club ...a venue for people to have work functions, social functions, barefoot bowls, Christmas functions. We've had an exceptional six months as far as bookings went. The more people we can get in spending their money, the less we've got to spend to keep people happy and maintain the place.” – Eric Sydenham