



Draft Victorian Transmission Plan, May 2025

Submission to consultation process by Horsham Rural City Council

24 June 2025

Submission endorsed by Horsham Rural City Council on 23 June 2025

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1. Executive Overview

Horsham Rural City Council (**HRCC**) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Draft Victorian Transmission Plan, May 2025 (the **VTP**), prepared by Victorian Government agency VicGrid.

This submission was formally endorsed by HRCC at its meeting of 23 June 2025.

The VTP includes the identification of seven Renewable Energy Zones (REZs) across Victoria where new renewable energy projects, such as solar farms, wind turbines and battery storage will be grouped and developed (subject to market interest). It also includes seven priority transmission projects needed to support upgrades and modernisation of the grid to connect and transmit energy into the electricity network. These are key items upon which VicGrid is now seeking feedback.

Our perspective

As a Council at the heart of the Wimmera Southern Mallee REZ, HRCC is uniquely positioned to represent our communities likely to be impacted by the transition to renewable energy. HRCC acknowledge that the preparation of a long-term plan to guide transition toward renewable energy over the next 15 years and beyond is a logical step to support state and federal government policy. Our submission considers implementation of the Plan through the eyes of our community.

Regional Victorian communities taking the strain

North-western and western Victoria, via the concentration of the six of seven REZs, will carry most of the burden of hosting renewable energy projects and infrastructure on behalf of all Victorians. The extent and nature of the impacts this will have, positive and negative, are going to largely remain unclear until the energy market responds. The VTPs identification of REZs provides some clarity about where impacts will occur. This is important to landholders and others who may be impacted.

It is our communities and landscapes that will be directly affected. The possible triple bottom line effects are palpable and will inevitably include social (community cohesion, mental health and wellbeing), environmental (visual intrusion, impacts to biodiversity, water use) or economic (agricultural productivity, property values). Some of these impacts may be predictable, some will be unforeseen or unintended.

Uncertain outcomes and genuine local decision making for those most affected

HRCC understand the value of the VTP, however endorsing it would, effectively, require a confidence that a range of largely unknown impacts on our communities, environment and economy can or will be addressed positively. There remains too much uncertainty to do so currently.

Implementation of the VTP must not come at the expense of fair, transparent and equitable processes that prioritise genuine engagement and dissemination of information with affected local communities.

Across Victoria, Councils are continuing to see their role in decision making marginalised. State Government plans are increasingly accompanied by planning controls that limit engagement, fast-track processes and empower Ministers to make quick decisions that tend to favour well-resourced proponents ahead of impacted local communities.

The quantum of unknowns associated to the VTP and future outcomes in REZs demands that a more empathetic approach is needed that empowers local communities. The VTP must enable Councils to genuinely represent their communities and to enable them to properly assess project impacts. A priority must be placed on working proactively to avoid creating community discourse.

It is also imperative that a community benefit model delivers investment back into the region and ensures a significant amount of funds generated from energy transition are returned to impacted municipalities to assist economic growth.

HRCC acknowledge the input and feedback provided in June (Community Benefit Plan) and in late 2024 (VTP Guidelines) has been used by VicGrid to inform preparation of the VTP. This includes recognition throughout the VTP of the need to protect agriculture and productivity. This is the single biggest concern expressed by people in our region. It also acknowledges Council's other key concern which is to ensure that the location of any Renewable Energy Zones (REZs) and or renewable infrastructure, such as wind turbines, do not adversely impact the future growth of Horsham Airport.

Key Issues and Recommendations of the HRCC submission

In the context of these leading considerations outlined above, this submission highlights three key issues, each with a supporting recommendation, that emerge from our review of the VTP.

The full recommendations are contained in the main body of the submission in Section 3 along with the supporting discussion. As a snapshot, the Key Issue Recommendations made by HRCC are summarised below:

1. Key Issue #1 - Agricultural productivity: a more transparent process:

- The VTP and the State Government must adopt a consistent, statewide approach to identifying and protecting high-value agricultural land in Planning Scheme, independent of specific State projects.
- HRCC urges the Victorian Government to close the current land use planning gap and ensure agricultural productivity is not compromised by energy infrastructure.
- Map high-value agricultural land in and near Renewable Energy Zones (REZs) in the VTP.
- Require rigorous impact assessments for developments affecting agricultural land

2. Key Issue # 2 - Approvals, engagement, social cohesion & conflict resolution:

- Establish a clear, transparent planning and approval process for all renewable energy projects.
- Make Renewable Energy Zones (REZs) visible to land purchasers via Section 62 Certificates or a new statewide planning overlay.
- Ensure genuine, timely community engagement is central to project development.
- Require transparent social and financial impact modelling in all approvals.
- Embed conflict resolution processes and avoid undisclosed compensation agreements that may cause community division.
- Provide VicGrid-funded specialist staff to support community engagement and conflict mediation.
- Allocate funding and technical support to local councils for independent peer reviews and legal input, ensuring fair participation in complex assessments.

3. Key Issue # 3 - Economic development – a joined-up approach.

- Council supports the concept of REZ Community Energy funds to target areas such as supply chain networks (to support local economic growth and innovation). HRCC advocates that funding (across all Government areas) in rural communities needs to target common issues affecting multiple growth sectors as a 'whole-of- place approach to help address areas such as skills and training or housing challenges, for example, to promote long-term sustainable growth.

- This requires coordinated economic development strategies to leverage shared benefits rather than narrow industry specific interventions in regional Victoria.

2. Context: The VTP in summary

For the purposes of context to this submission, a short summary of the VTP is provided below.

The VTP is prepared under the requirements of the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005 (NEVA).

The release of the VTP establishes the release of seven (7) Renewable Energy Zones (REZs) across Victoria. It also identifies the seven (7) *'priority transmission programs'* and investments required in transmission required to 'strengthen and modernise' Victoria's grid.

The Wimmera Southern Mallee REZ includes land inside the HRCC boundaries (see **Appendix 1**). The Grampians Wimmera REZ is located just beyond our eastern boundary in the Northern Grampians and Yarriambiack municipalities. This is part of a concentration of six of the seven REZs in Victoria's north-west and western regions (see **Appendix 2**).

The key project affecting Horsham and the region is the 'North West Strengthening Program' (**Appendix 3**), which aims to significantly increase capacity through works that include replacement of single circuit transmission lines with new high-capacity double circuit lines (by 2035).

The VTP highlights:

- Energy scenario testing: This was undertaken to determine how much energy Victoria would require as a key input to how many project areas might be required (and size) to help supply these needs.
- REZs have been matched to best meet energy demand: how much energy required, potential generation capacity, suitability of regions and land within it to meet demand and infrastructure investment needs all informed REZ location and size (under 5-step approach to developing the VTP).
- Strategic land use assessment informed the plan (consideration of land constraints including agricultural productivity, environmental values & bushfire hazards).
- Feedback has helped inform areas suitable for energy development.
- Landowners right to say no: landowners will have the right to say no to projects in the future (renewable energy projects, not transmission priority projects).
- Compensation for landowners hosting projects and potentially impacted neighbours (although details about impacted neighbours are less clear)
- Detailed planning for priority transmission program projects: Further detailed planning (including engagement) will occur post the finalisation of the VTP for specific projects.
- Supported by State Government facilitated approval pathways: the VTP identifies the implementation of the Development Facilitation Program and speeding up the Environmental Effects Process to 'shorten development time' for future renewable projects.

Preparation of the VTP

Preparation of the VTP commenced in November 2023 and has included community renewable energy planning survey and mapping (November 2023 to February 2024), community workshops (May to June 2024), Draft Transmission Plan Guidelines & consultation (July 2024) and the release of public consultation reports in late 2024¹. HRCC been engaged during these phases by VicGrid.

¹ All background documents can be accessed here: <https://engage.vic.gov.au/project/victransmissionplan/page/document-library>

Council made submissions in respect of:

- The Draft Renewable Energy Zone Community Benefits Plan (June 2024); and
- The Draft Transmission Plan Guidelines (September 2024)

HRCC acknowledge the input and feedback in late 2024 that has been used to inform preparation of the VTP. This includes recognition throughout the VTP of the need to protect agriculture and productivity. This is the single biggest concern expressed by people in our region. It also acknowledges Council's other key concern which is to ensure that the location of any Renewable Energy Zones (**REZs**) and or renewable infrastructure, such as wind turbines, do not adversely impact the future growth of Horsham Airport.

Recognition of feedback from HRCC and our community is set out in the VTP itself, as well as in the *'Draft Victorian Transmission Plan Guidelines Final Engagement Report - What We Heard'*, December 2024 (the **2024 Engagement Report**) and the supporting factsheets that now accompany each REZ.

HRCC welcomes recognition of these key regional and local considerations in the development of the VTP to date and how it has responded to them.

3. HRCC Submission

HRCC's submission:

Acknowledges the principle of the VTP to provide long-term direction about the location and development of the REZs and the Transmission Projects provided the VTP:

- Prioritises and supports agricultural land use and productivity
- Safeguards Horsham Airport
- Avoids creating community discourse
- Establishes transparent, fair and equitable approvals processes
- Can deliver clear local economic benefits to host communities

3.1. Building on previous feedback

This submission builds on previous feedback provided in June 2024 and September 2024, which highlighted the following (summarised here):

- Need to safeguard the future of Horsham Airport from encroachment – in particular its flight paths and long-term expansion plans.
- Protect highly productive agricultural land use from overt intrusion of infrastructure
- Protect landowners and agricultural communities (and by extension their health and wellbeing).
- Consider sensitive use of pylons and reduce use of monopoles that have a higher adverse visual impact.
- The Plan should be prepared in an open and transparent manner.

It is noted that the final Community Benefits Plan has not yet been finalised; however, our previous submission (June 2024) should continue to be read in conjunction with this submission and in particular Key Issue # 3.

3.2. Key Issues

This section outlines three (3) key issues that HRCC has identified following a review of the VTP where further action is considered necessary. A number of related issues are explored under each and HRCC makes a number of recommendations under each Key Issue.

Key Issue # 1: Agriculture & Productivity – a more transparent process needed

HRCC continues to reinforce the major economic importance of agricultural productivity to the region. This is recognised and acknowledged by the VTP and the 2024 Engagement Report that reflects both Council and community feedback.

HRCC does not need to provide any further economic assessment of the value of agriculture in support of this submission, recognising that this is well recognised by State Government for its importance as one of the '*world's greatest grain growing regions*'².

² See the Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership: <https://www.rdv.vic.gov.au/regional-partnerships/wimmera-southern-mallee>

Mapping agricultural land quality – a consistent and transparent approach?

The VTP indicates that various assessments of agricultural land have been key inputs in its preparation, including consideration of soil quality, productivity etc.

What is not apparent to HRCC is where this data can be transparently and easily accessed and understood to determine how land capability was assessed and determined in the context of this project but also longer-term agricultural productivity.

The maps within the VTP, notably Figure 17 (Wimmera Southern Mallee REZ) on page 70, do not show valuable productive agricultural land, yet other uses, such as mining (mineral sands) or biodiversity values are readily mapped. Given the major significance of agriculture to Victoria's economy, this is considered a less than adequate outcome.

The *Draft Victorian Transmission Plan Guidelines, Appendix A – Strategic Land Use Assessment* (July 2024)³ contains the following complex explanation of agricultural land use assessment, noting that no mapping specific to agricultural land value was contained in the same document or has been made available:

Agriculture

In relation to agriculture, VicGrid worked with specialist agriculture consultancy RMCG to develop a bespoke model of agricultural inputs combining several statewide datasets to understand the relative performance or significance of agricultural land for incorporation into the land use assessment. The agricultural land model brought together available statewide datasets, including the Victorian Government's updated Victorian Land Use Information System (VLUIS) 2022 dataset, to create a performance potential measure for agricultural land. This measure considers farmgate output, biophysical land capability (e.g., soil quality and rainfall), access to irrigation, and farm infrastructure investment. The combined dataset identifies higher-value agricultural land across Victoria – termed agricultural performance potential, which may be less favourable for hosting renewable energy development¹

This is another example of agricultural land quality being addressed in a siloed approach using a 'bespoke' assessment unique to a single project. That productive agricultural land is still not shown on REZ mapping is concerning.

It is considered that there should be a single source of agricultural mapping that identifies agricultural land quality and value used to inform all land use planning processes in Victoria.

Land use processes such as Melbourne's growth corridors, peri urban planning, green wedges, extractive resource planning or regional growth projects have long pitted agricultural land and productivity against competing land uses, often with less than desirable outcomes. Likewise, projects that are 'flavour of the month' often fail to have regard to long-term holistic outcomes. This has included the need to

³ Follow this link: <https://engage.vic.gov.au/project/victransmissionplan/page/draft-victorian-transmission-plan-guidelines-2024>

retrospectively introduce reverse controls over Melbourne's green wedges, extractive resource areas⁴ or create buffer controls⁵ to protect existing public utility assets (such as waste recycling) from encroachment that had been allowed to occur, often to prioritise short term residential land supply requirements.

State Government plans and policies, including the recently released *Plan for Victoria*, refer to a need to consider agricultural land quality, before making decisions about alternative land uses.

Pillar 4 in Plan for Victoria, under the heading 'Enabling' states:

Enabling

...

Sustainable agriculture: We'll prioritise food security and the agricultural sector by protecting agricultural land.

Action 22 of Plan for Victoria, while somewhat vague, states the intent to:

Protect and carefully use regional resources

It is supported by the following outcome:

Planning decision makes and the community will have clarity on use of rural areas and the location of new transmission lines.

This type of action remains a carry-over from *Plan Melbourne*.

The *Land Capability Assessment of Melbourne's Green Wedges and Peri-Urban Areas* (Final Report, October 2018)⁶ was one attempt from Plan Melbourne to protect agricultural land. It highlights the long and largely disjointed approach to the consideration and protection of agricultural land in Victoria. The report highlights different approaches already used in Western Australia, New South Wales and Queensland to map high value agricultural land.

A more consistent State-wide approach is required in Victoria so that processes such as preparation of the VTP are premised on clear and readily available data. This will also help to support a range of land use planning outcomes and avoid each municipality or State project having to determine a methodology as to what constitutes significant agricultural land.

HRCC has not undertaken any technical assessments specific to this process to understand the practical implications and consequences of renewable energy projects on agricultural land productivity. It remains to be seen how compatible renewable energy projects, concentrated at scale in the REZs, will be with continued agricultural use of land. We will observe the feedback from industry experts into this process and retain reservations about the potential impacts, which have not been modelled by the VTP.

HRCC considers it essential that future approvals processes require proponents to demonstrate there would be no significant adverse impacts on productivity. We accept that future approvals processes

⁴ See for example Extractive Resources Strategy and land use planning response: <https://resources.vic.gov.au/projects/past-projects/extractive-resources-strategy/resource-and-land-use-planning>

⁵ See the following for a summary of land use planning response to buffers: <https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/guides-and-resources/guides/all-guides/buffers-and-land-use-compatibility>

⁶ See https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0036/699183/agriculture_victoria_research_final_technical_report.pdf

beyond the VTP will address this⁷, however, to set this up, amendments to Clause 52.13 (*Renewable energy facility (other than wind energy facility)*) of the Victorian Planning Provisions (VPPs) should incorporate more specific requirements for proposals to address agricultural land productivity (where a proposal is on Farming Zone) land. Key Issue # 2 also considers broader land use planning issues.

In its previous feedback, HRCC made comments in relation to transmission lines and pylons. Again, we note that these will be subject to more detailed and separate planning processes in the future and so we retain reservations about the potential impacts on farming and agricultural productivity along with visual impacts until such processes detail the extent and scale of any impacts as projects emerge.

Where upgrades to existing transmission lines are proposed, HRCC remains concerned that there could be potential adverse impacts to agricultural land, such as damage to crops, impacts of construction activity including access by non-agricultural vehicles, possible compaction of soils and loss of productivity. It isn't clear if compensation to affected landowners is available for upgrade works in comparison to new transmission projects, despite the potential for adverse impacts. This should be clarified and VicGrid should ensure that all affected landowners are appropriately compensated. Sensitive project and land management is also required during any project works to ensure minimal impact to day-to-day farming operations.

Where new transmission lines are required that may not follow an existing transmission easement, HRCC encourages the investigation of old stock routes (in which to locate new transmission lines) as a possible opportunity to help avoid or mitigate the loss of or impacts to existing agricultural land.

HRCC makes the following recommendations in respect of the above issue: (recommendations follow on next page):

⁷ This assumes that any changes to planning approval pathways don't further marginalise the ability of Councils and communities to scrutinise and test proposals.

Key Issue # 1: Agriculture & Productivity – a more transparent process needed

HRCC Recommendation # 1:

HRCC recommend that:

- a) The mapping and data used to inform the Strategic Land Use Assessment is made available to all.
- b) High value productive agricultural land should be mapped in relation to each REZ (within and in proximity to).
- c) Rigorous assessment requirements are embedded into any approval pathway process for a proposal that will have potential impacts on agricultural land productivity and viability to avoid significant adverse impacts and unintended consequences. This should include a specific requirement under the provisions of Clause 53.13 (*Renewable energy facility (other than wind energy facility)*) of the Victorian Planning Provisions. See also Recommendation # 2.
- d) The State Government urgently adopts a consistent, statewide approach to identifying and protecting high-value productive agricultural land. This should be done independently of any State project to avoid a perception of conflict or bias and should have the support of peak agricultural representative bodies. This would support action 22 of Plan for Victoria.

This would enable transparent decision-making processes to occur where information is made visible to all members of the community. This could take the form of simple overlays in any planning scheme if necessary to safeguard the highest quality productive land and provide clear directives on future outcomes.

- e) Compensation for adverse impacts to agricultural productivity associated with upgrade works to existing transmission lines must be made available to affected landowners/ businesses. All transmission upgrade projects must ensure sensitive land management plans are put in place to avoid or minimise disruption to day-to-day farming practices.
- f) Where new transmission lines may be required, old stock routes should be investigated wherever possible to locate them as a means of limiting impacts to agricultural land.

Key Issue # 2 – Approvals, engagement, social cohesion & conflict resolution

The VTP highlights that implementation is to be supported by the Development Facilitation Program and streamlined reviews of Environmental Effects Statements processes – in the interests of an *‘accelerated planning assessment pathway’* or *‘speeding up assessment review times’*.

Good decision making must be transparent and fully consider the impacts on local communities and prioritise social cohesion.

Identifying REZs and implementing renewable energy projects

It is unclear what further changes to Victorian Planning Provisions or policies will be required to implement both the priority transmission programs and renewable energy projects in the REZs once they are declared.

It appears that the term Renewable Energy Zone (REZ) has the capacity to confuse given it will not be applied as an actual ‘zone’ in any planning scheme. Zone is a term readily understood to mean the land use designation in Victoria, except here it will not. On this point, if there is no intention to use a zone or an overlay in planning schemes to identify an REZ, we would ask how visible these zones might be to future purchasers of land in or in proximity to them? Some form of overlay ought to be used as a minimum, including buffer overlays to alert potentially affected property owners. If no REZ related planning scheme tool is to be used, will legislation be created to require a Section 62 Certificate under the Sale of Land Act 1962 to identify them?

The VTP indicates that renewable energy proposals will be facilitated under the Development Facilitation Program (DFP), using Clause 53.22 (Significant Economic Development) as the tool to ensure that any proposal generating over 1 megawatt will be determined by the Minister for Planning (Ministerial Permit). A proponent needs to apply under this pathway directly to the DFP.

A headline planning scheme zone establishes planning permit requirements and notice and third-party review rights. Despite this, Clause 53.22 has the capacity, under sub-clause 53.22-2 to waive any application requirement in a planning scheme. In addition to this it also removes the right of objectors to any proposal to a right of review (e.g. VCAT). At best, this creates uncertainty around the ability to pursue a fair and transparent process.

To the lay person it is considered less than obvious that land may be subject to a REZ if the current status quo approach (to approval) continues to apply. In a scenario with no planning scheme overlay and the ability for a proponent to use the provisions of 53.22 to ‘fast track’ a proposal via Ministerial powers, it highlights gaps or disconnects within planning scheme provisions that are unlikely to be known to those without detailed knowledge of planning schemes. This should be addressed in the interests of legibility and fairness.

A new overlay, including buffer areas must be considered for REZs. It would create clear visibility of these areas. Any overlay can incorporate the requirements of Clause 52.32 (*Wind energy facility*), Clause 53.13 and Clause 53.22 into a single new renewable energy provision to make it easier to navigate the planning scheme through one provision.

Right to say no versus compulsory acquisition

The VTP indicates that landowners will have the right to say no to renewable energy proposals, but it is not expressly clear that this consideration does not apply to transmission projects (i.e. the connections and upgrades to the linear grid network). The latter, once preferred routes are determined, will be

delivered through a combination of negotiated outcomes and possible compulsory acquisition of land (likely easement rights over land). Evidently the 'right to say no' will not apply. The Plan needs to make it expressly clear that there are two very different approaches that will apply and communicate this openly.

Good decisions ahead of faster decisions

HRCC observe that there is a continued trend of decision-making being centralised in Victoria and an increasing emphasis placed on speed ahead of the most desirable outcomes for affected communities. 'State significant' projects are often undertaken with limited engagement processes with local communities left affected by State Government decisions and expected to manage outcomes on the ground, such as noise, dust, traffic or other amenity considerations. Projects such as recent housing reforms have reduced or removed Council decision making powers. Elsewhere, larger renewable energy projects, the Suburban Rail Loop, major road and rail projects or even post-Covid economic projects are all provided with Ministerial approval pathways and specific legislation to fast track them at the expense of marginalising community input.

It is our communities and landscapes that will be directly affected. The possible triple bottom line effects are palpable and will inevitably include social (community cohesion, mental health and wellbeing), environmental (visual intrusion, impacts to biodiversity, water use) or economic (agricultural productivity, property values). Some of these impacts may be predictable, some will be unforeseen or unintended.

HRCC understands the value of the VTP however, implementation must not come at the expense of fair, transparent and equitable processes that prioritise genuine engagement and place the impacts on our local communities at the forefront of decision making. HRCC is also concerned at the level of technical skills, inputs and resourcing that might be necessary to engage fully and equitably in any future processes pre and post approvals.

Social cohesion

The introduction of financial payments for host landowners and potentially '*significantly impacted neighbours*' is, at first glance a positive 'incentive' to promote landowner participation.

Council urges real caution here because of the social issues it raises, including potential for conflict and disconnection within communities and a range of unintended outcomes if a short-term outlook simply prioritises jump-starting renewable energy projects.

A number of questions emerge, such as where there are divergent views or a lack of clarity around 'significantly affected', (that is: at what distance does someone have to be considered affected?), who will be left to resolve such disputes and manage them on an ongoing basis? The potential economic impacts to land values or farm viability within or in proximity to an REZ haven't been modelled, including the role that financial payments might play in incentivising land use decision making or distorting outcomes (short and long-term). The impacts on the social and economic fabric of rural communities must be a core consideration of any impact assessment process.

Further, there needs to be greater clarity about when compensation/ payments are made, what payments might be and how this is disclosed. Compensation should not be used by proponents to create conflict within communities.

With a real risk that communities will become divided, local Councils and health agencies will be left to pick up the pieces if uninformed decision making prevails with a short-term outlook

Maintaining social cohesion and the health and wellbeing of our communities must be a major priority under the VTP. Ensuring this aspect of future planning is adequately funded and resourced is vital.

Key Issue # 2 – Approvals, engagement, social cohesion & conflict resolution

HRCC Recommendation # 2:

HRCC recommend that a clear and transparent planning and approval process for each and every project is clearly developed and communicated and must prioritise social cohesion through the following:

- a) Consider how to make Renewable Energy Zones visible to potential land purchasers via Section 62 Certificates issued under the Sale of Land Act 1962 and/ or
- b) Create a new single renewable energy precinct overlay for all planning schemes to make the REZs highly visible and the application and approval requirements, exemptions and approval pathways more visible and transparent.
- c) Genuine engagement with local communities must be a cornerstone of the development facilitation program and allow sufficient time for this to occur.
- d) Social and financial impact modelling must be a cornerstone of all future approvals processes and must be transparent.
- e) Any process must embed conflict resolution processes. The use of compensation payments, through undisclosed agreements, to cause conflict between landowners must be avoided. VicGrid funding and support must include dedicated specialist engagement staff trained to conduct and mediate community conflict or neighbour disputes. This may be important within local communities where there is the potential for possible community fracturing that could occur as a result of features such as financial incentives to host projects, impacted neighbour payments, disinformation or processes that are not perceived to be transparent.
- f) Funding & technical expertise: Funding should be made available for local Councils to undertake appropriate independent peer review work of any proposal on behalf of its community, including legal costs, to ensure a level playing field in terms of technical expertise and the time and resources involved in working through often technical areas. This would be consistent with other State projects, such as North East Link (NEL), where Councils received funding for additional staff resources and/ or consultant input.

Many of these proposals will affect smaller regional Councils with limited resources, technical skills, knowledge and budgets. It is important that the design of future assessment and approvals pathways is appropriately resourced.

Key Issue #3 – Economic Development – a joined-up approach

HRCC acknowledges the introduction of the REZ Community Energy Funds to help support, amongst other initiatives, energy supply chains or create jobs in the energy sector, as this is greatly needed. HRCC previously made a submission to the REZ Community Benefits Plan in June 2024, and this should continue to be read in conjunction with Key Issue #3.

Diversification of Horsham and the broader region's economy is a priority objective for the Council particularly where this realises genuine benefits to affected communities.

HRCC also highlight that the Victorian Government has dissolved the Regional Growth Plans into Plan for Victoria. Despite this, Horsham and many other rural and regional Councils believe that it is now more important than ever that Victoria's regions are given their own strategies that support and harness a whole-of-place approach to economic growth that will create more diverse, vibrant and prosperous futures. The model chosen for Community Benefit outcomes needs to drive structural change through integrated strategies. This must target common issues affecting economic growth sectors including local skills, training and education gaps, supply chains and infrastructure, local housing supply issues (including affordable housing, housing diversity and key worker accommodation), promote the retention and attraction of working age people into rural communities and deliver supporting infrastructure to create places that can support long-term growth.

It is not enough that the benefits proposed through the REZ Community Energy Funds only fund a set of number of community projects. While this is important, such an approach will not lead to structural change to support economic transition.

Initiatives only focused on one sector, while welcomed, will not join the dots effectively across complex local rural economies that require joined-up strategies specific to their unique geographies, opportunities and constraints.

Key Issue #3 – Economic Development – a joined-up approach

HRCC Recommendation # 3:

HRCC welcome initiatives to promote local economic development under the VTP and will be keen to see this program developed in more detail as an early priority to promote thinking, innovation, upskilling, training and strategy development that can best harness the opportunities.

HRCC also recommend that economic growth should be undertaken as a whole-of-government (Federal/ State/ Local) approach specific to each region and its unique opportunities and challenges. This should avoid a siloed approach focused on one sector, instead adopting a cross-sectoral approach that addresses whole-of-place challenges. This will support integrated and efficient sustainable long-term growth and unlock more jobs and economic prosperity. It will also better target challenges that commonly apply to multiple economic growth sectors, such as key worker housing or skills, key infrastructure or training and education that are key to unlocking regional economies. It will also ensure that limited Government spending is targeted where it is most needed.

4. Conclusions

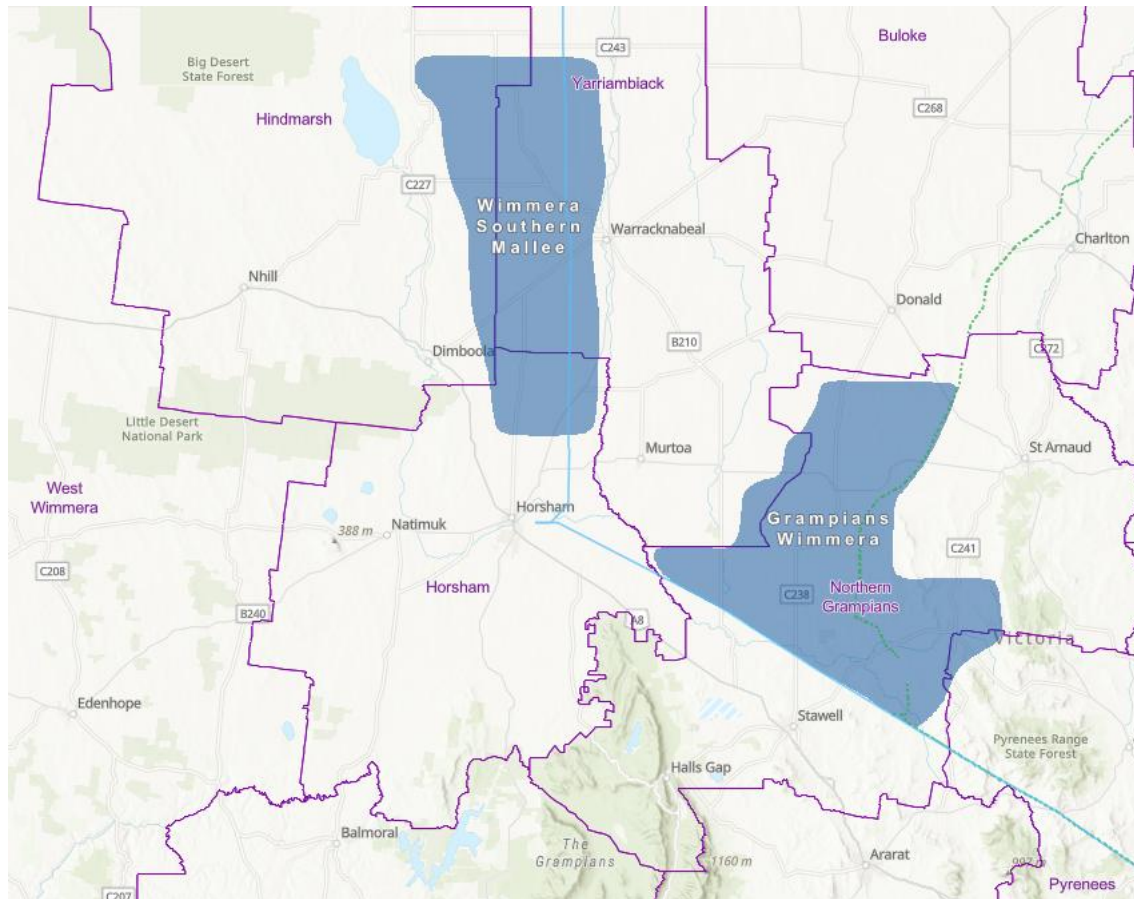
The broader Wimmera Southern Mallee region is entering into a phase of economic transition, from heavy reliance on the agricultural sector, to a more diversified economy inclusive of renewable energy projects, electricity transmission projects and critical minerals mining.

Vic Grid and the State Government have an opportunity and an obligation, through genuine engagement and an equitable community benefits scheme to ensure no community or individual is left behind.

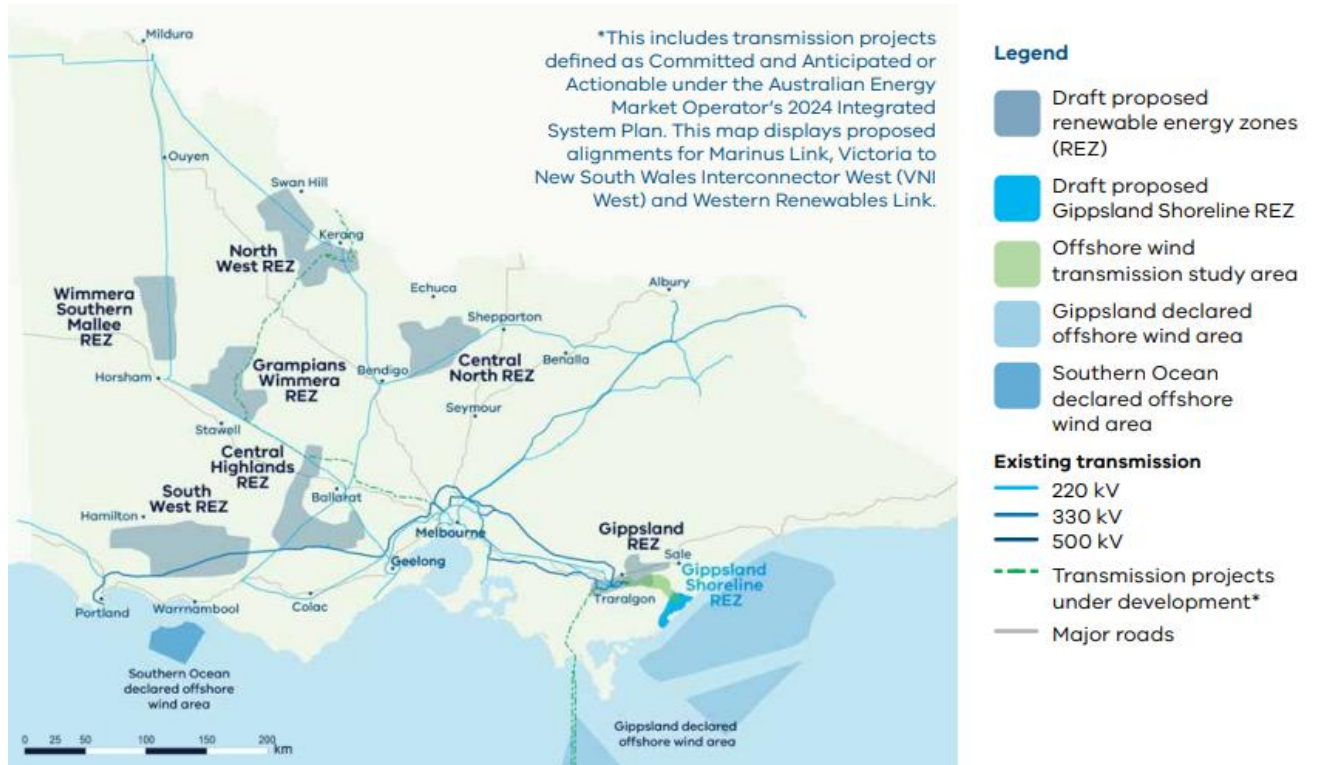
Our submission addresses a number of important issues being faced by our community who will bear the full impacts of new renewable energy zones.

HRCC appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this important planning process. We look forward to ongoing engagement with VicGrid to ensure that the final VTP delivers a just, inclusive, and sustainable energy transition for all Victorians—particularly those facing the greatest and yet unknown impacts.

Appendix 1 – Renewable Energy Zones and Council Boundaries



Appendix 2 – Proposed Renewable Energy Zones (REZs) in Victoria



Appendix 3 – Priority Transmission Programs in the VTP

Figure 3: Map of the 7 VTP priority transmission programs

