



# SARSFIELD COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION

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## **Sarsfield Community shocked by grant guideline interpretation**

A heavily bushfire impacted community had its application for recovery funding under the Black Summer Bushfire Recovery grants program denied without even being assessed.

Simon Hof, the President of the Sarsfield Community Association (SCA) described how devastated the people of Sarsfield are with the decision. 'We would have understood if the assessors had read the application and declined our request for funding. But sadly, they threw out our application without looking at it, because the ABN of our small volunteer hall committee classified it as a 'State Government Entity'.

'In rural areas, local halls and recreation reserves are either under council management or under the management of the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP),' Simon explained.

'From a community point of view, there's almost no difference, and most rural people wouldn't know if their local football oval or hall was council or DELWP managed. They just appreciate that these assets are maintained by a small group of hardworking volunteers made up of local community members donating their time and energies.' The Black Summer bushfires devastated the Sarsfield community, which prior to the fires had 270 homes. Of these, 200 properties were damaged by the fires, and 80 homes were completely destroyed.

John Kinniburgh and Carol Kennedy were among the unlucky families who lost their home in the bushfires. 'I'm gutted,' John said. 'After the fire, we had politicians from every level, including Scott Morrison himself, come to see our burned homes and promise support. And then they threw out our application without reading one word, all because we have the 'wrong type' of local hall.' The Sarsfield Community Association was formed after the fires and has been working hard alongside the hall committee to plan a positive future for Sarsfield. 'I joined the SCA to make a difference,' John said.

'I wanted to support our highly traumatised community, where a huge number of us are still living in temporary accommodation. I can tell you, when I'm flipping sausages at a community barbecue, I certainly don't feel like I'm part of some government organisation. We're all just doing our best to move forward, and people are heartbroken that our application wasn't even assessed.'

Simon stated that the Sarsfield community has not received a single major state or federal grant since the fires tore through the area and was applying for funding to build a new hall.

'Our hall was cobbled together 60 years ago from a second-hand caravan park kiosk and a school shelter shed. We've kept it going, but the foundations are now crumbling and the beams in the ceiling are sagging. The toilets are across the gravel carpark and have no disabled facilities, which makes it extremely difficult for our elderly fire-impacted residents, particularly at night. 'We don't even have a pub in Sarsfield, or a school or any other type of public building, so the local hall is the only place we can gather, and it's incredibly important to our rural community.

The community have now turned to the Hon. Darren Chester MP, the Federal Member for Gippsland to raise the issue with Hon. Bridget McKenzie, Minister for Emergency Management and National Recovery and Resilience to address this issue immediately.

Simon said that the funding application was the culmination of a huge amount of community effort. 'We worked so hard to consult with the Sarsfield community and come up with a strong community led plan for the future, and then we make sure that our funding application ticked every box. Countless hours and effort went into our submission. 'To be deemed ineligible because the ABN of our hall committee showed that our recreation reserve is one of the many DELWP-managed community facilities instead of council-managed is hard for us to understand. And despite the procedure listed in the grant guidelines, we weren't notified early that our application wouldn't even proceed to the assessment stage, meaning that a highly traumatised community has held on to hope for many months.

'We hope that the government will listen to us, and will also consult with our supportive local politicians, and at the very least read our application and assess it properly. We would welcome a visit from the Prime Minister or any other federal politician who would be interested to see how our community is faring only two years on from the bushfires. I can tell you that we're still devastated, and this process has just traumatised the community even more.'