

Better than nothing? The future of private rooming houses in the City of Yarra

Report by Sally Jope to Yarra Social Issues Network.

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Summary

The Brotherhood of St Laurence, on behalf of the Yarra Social Issues Network, developed a research proposal and received funding from the City of Yarra's Community Grants Program to produce a profile of the municipality's private rooming houses and their residents. This information will be used as a benchmark with which to measure changes in the supply of affordable, single housing, the needs of rooming house residents and their access to support services.

Purpose of Project

The main purpose of this project was to describe private rooming house accommodation within the City of Yarra to assist local agencies and government departments in their planning processes. The project aimed to provide information on:

- the number of private rooming houses and their location;
- the views of proprietors on the role of rooming houses and their past and future in the municipality.
- a broad profile of residents as perceived by the proprietors and local agencies, and
- the needs and aspirations of residents themselves.

The project involved consultation with service providers, group discussions with rooming house residents and interviews with rooming house proprietors. These were undertaken in November and December 1999.

Results of the census of rooms in the City of Yarra

The project identified a total of 873 rooms within the municipality:

- 347 rooms in private rooming houses
- approximately 60 rooms in unregistered houses
- at least 88 rooms in hotels, and
- 438 rooms in publicly owned, community housing.

At the end of 1999, these figures indicated a loss of approximately 44 rooms in the 12 months prior to the census, and a loss of approximately half of the private rooming house rooms that were available in 1992.

The more detailed investigation of the census process identified an additional loss of low-cost rooms within the municipality. This loss was from rooming houses that were taking advantage of increased demand for single, rental housing and for short-term tourist accommodation. A significant number of proprietors had or planned to improve facilities, increase rents and attract a resident with a higher income.

Existing record keeping procedures do not enable the easy tracking of changes in the numbers of rooms in rooming houses, let alone changes to low-cost rooms. Contact with individual proprietors was required to identify changes from low-cost rooming houses to self-contained units, back-packers, hotels and other more expensive single room accommodation.

Major issues from interviews

Rooming houses in the City of Yarra were mostly concentrated in Fitzroy and Richmond while the majority of free food, material aid and day centre support services were located in Fitzroy.

Concerns regarding the houses raised by service providers included the sub-standard conditions of some rooming houses and the impact of these conditions on the outcomes of services, as well as the access of rooming house residents to support services.

The residents' aspirations for more independent accommodation were noted along with their lack of housing alternatives, other than public and community housing.

The proprietors interviewed for the study, generally felt that real estate pressures and the unmet support needs of residents acted as disincentives to the provision of low cost rooms in their investment properties.

Key Findings

The key findings of this project were that:

- the supply of low-cost rooms in the City of Yarra had decreased, since 1992 and over the 12 months prior to the census;
- the decrease in the number of low-cost rooms was a result of increases in real estate values in the area and the low rate of return some proprietors feel they received from their investment;
- many proprietors hold a perception that the support needs of some residents who were being referred to rooming houses by health and welfare agencies, were not being adequately met;
- some proprietors had refused to provide housing to people with special needs because of this perception;
- the demand for rooms and single accommodation had increased;
- the profile of rooming house residents had changed from the middle aged, male worker who consumed alcohol to one that included: an increase in younger residents with psychiatric disabilities and / or illicit drug use, an increase in women, an increase in wealth amongst some residents as well as a small but significant ageing population of residents aged 60 years and over.
- the decline in supply of low-cost rooms is expected to continue unless there is a change in the housing market or some form of intervention;
- the lack of housing alternatives available to low-income rooming house residents served to force residents to remain in sub-standard accommodation and also indicated a homeless future for rooming house residents if the supply continued to decrease;
- the limited knowledge about support services that both rooming house proprietors and residents demonstrated, indicated a barrier to these services, and
- information about the supply of and demand for affordable, single rooms in the municipality was difficult to access.

Recommendations

If rooming house residents have access to appropriate services and their special needs are met, their accommodation should be less problematic. In contrast, if their needs are not met, it seems that their future accommodation in low-cost, private rooming houses will be at risk. They may not be able to live independently and without appropriate, affordable options, they will become homeless.

The following recommendations, in response to the key findings, call for measures:

- that will see an increase in single affordable housing options,
- that will serve to conserve the existing supply of low cost rooms,
- that will ensure support services are adequate to meet the needs of rooming house residents,
- that will serve to ensure people with special needs will have equal access to affordable housing,
- that will see mechanisms developed and implemented to measure the demand for and supply of affordable housing within the City of Yarra
- that will ensure a mix of housing.

The first recommendation is in response to the past loss of rooms.

Recommendation 1 That the City of Yarra, supported by Yarra Social Issues Network lobbies the Office of Housing for an increased supply of affordable, housing for single, low income earners to fill the gap left by the loss of privately owned low-cost rooms.

The following recommendations are in response to the projected future loss of rooms.

A number of rooming house proprietors identified difficulties they faced in providing low cost housing and strategies that may address these difficulties.

Recommendation 2: That the City of Yarra, in an effort to maintain the level of affordable private rental housing within the municipality, responds to the issues raised by private rooming house proprietors (in this report), in consultation with the proprietors and representatives of the Yarra Social Issues Network.

The accommodation of a significant number of rooming house residents who require assistance to live independently may be at risk if proprietors do not feel the provision of support services is adequate.

Recommendation 3 That the City of Yarra supported by Yarra Social Issues Network develops strategies to make sure its diverse community has access to private low-cost rooms. These strategies:

*will identify adequate levels of assistance required for rooming house residents, which take into account their support and housing needs; and
will ensure both residents and proprietors of low-cost rooming houses are informed about the support services that are available; and
will require the co-ordination of a variety of services including, but not only, those funded by the HACCC program.*

The project also found barriers to track changes in the supply of single, affordable rooms. These barriers included the lack of accessible records and the lack of a common definition in government legislation. The only mechanism to identify changes in demand for single rooms and singles housing, is through the records kept by Yarra Community Housing and the Office of Housing. Improved access to this information would assist in the planning of responses to the needs of low-income residents.

Recommendation 4: That the Victorian Department of Human Services (Health) and the Department of Justice (Tenancy) adopt a definition of rooming houses based on a standard number of residents.

Recommendation 5: That the City of Yarra adopts record keeping procedures that enables the tracking of changes in the supply of and demand for low-cost rooms.

Recommendation 6: That the City of Yarra, in consultation with existing service provider networks, adopts mechanisms that identify and measure the needs of low-income rooming house residents and the provision of services in response to these needs.

In addition, internal protocol should be developed to operationalise the City of Yarra's public commitment to monitor changes in rooming house registrations and to co-ordinate Council's internal management on rooming houses.

Recommendation 7 That protocol is developed to ensure the managers of Community Services and of Statutory Planning and the co-ordinator of Community Amenity and Health liase on rooming house issues and are informed of any planned changes to existing rooming houses.

Recommendation 8 That these officers, supported by Yarra Social Issues Network, participate in the development and implementation of strategies to maintain low-cost accommodation in the municipality.