

MORE than 5000 people wandered through Fortuna Villa on Saturday — and the public's first glimpse of the former defence site brought rave reviews.

"It was an enormous and such a positive response from everyone we spoke too," Villa Fortuna Action Group president Merle Hall said.

"That was the response that we got from everyone who came out on Saturday.

"People told us that we were definitely on the right track and that we had to keep our work going," she said.

Bendigo Historical Society president Jim Evans said he was thrilled to see so many excited people going through Fortuna's gates.

"It was interesting to hear comments from Bendigonians who had been there way back, and were now back and going on tours.

"I just think it's a golden opportunity for Bendigo to have this in public hands, and I just hope that the council can work with state and federal governments to bring that about," Mr Evans said.

Fortuna Villa, the mansion built for mining magnate George Lansell, has been occupied or owned by the Defence Department since 1942.

It was included on the commonwealth heritage list in 2004.

Mrs Hall said she hoped to present newly elected Bendigo City councillors with a business plan for the site soon.

"Hopefully the councillors will have a formal visit to the site soon, because I know some of them haven't actually seen it," she said.

Mr Evans said he hoped



WAITING: Hundreds queue to get a glimpse of Fortuna.

the day was a prelude to greater public interest.

"There were people there from all over ... and if it opened again for the public, I think you would even get international visitors.

"It's just so important to reinforce the view that this is a golden opportunity for Bendigo people," he said.

Mr Evans said it was important for the community to step forward for Fortuna Villa, arguing the site couldn't become public property if the public didn't fight for it.

"It won't achieve anything

if the community doesn't get behind any push to retain it as something in Bendigo hands," he said.

Federal MP for Bendigo Steve Gibbons said the strong public interest in Fortuna Villa on Saturday reinforced his view that the site must remain in public ownership.

"Fortuna Villa is not only one of the most important heritage buildings in Bendigo, it is also of national historical significance," he said.