

The future of Fortuna Villa is the subject of much interest and lively debate in the local community, with Mayor Kevin Gibbins, MP Steve Gibbons, and others contributing to the discussion. In the 25th article in her *FORTUNA GLIMPSES* series, Lansell family historian Beverley Carter looks at what might lie ahead for Fortuna, rather than what has gone before.

SEVERAL readers of Fortuna Glimpses have enquired as to my views about Fortuna's future.

"You have written extensively on the subject of Fortuna's past", said the writer of a recent email, "what are your thoughts on Fortuna's future?"

A fair question, and one which we all, as citizens and ratepayers of Bendigo, should take the time to consider.

This week, therefore, I have decided to look forward rather than back, sharing some of my views on this important topic.

Most people in Bendigo will be aware that the Defence Department has vacated Fortuna Villa.

For the first time in more than 60 years, the house is empty, save for its dedicated security detail.

In accordance with guidelines for the disposal of Commonwealth property, state and/or local government will have "first refusal".

With ownership transferred to either the City of Greater Bendigo or the State of Victoria, public ownership of, and access to, Fortuna would be assured.

There would be a new jewel in the crown of our collective assets — and a new opportunity to develop our community, enhance our national and international profile, and grow our local economy.

Tourism is an expanding industry, and the sector of the tourism market which is expanding fastest worldwide is cultural tourism.

The cultural tourist travels more frequently, stays longer, and spends more money than the average tourist.

In order to maximise our share of this lucrative market, we must be able to offer world-class attractions and events.

We know that Bendigo can do this — the recent blockbuster *Golden Age of*



*Couture* exhibition at the Bendigo Art Gallery has set a magnificent benchmark.

I agree entirely with comments made by Mr Stan Liacos on ABC radio recently: it is absolutely vital that Bendigo continue to attract international events.

The acquisition of Fortuna Villa would open up significant possibilities in this regard.

In 2008 I joined Villa Fortuna Action Group because their vision for Fortuna's future largely coincides with my own.

A community organisation committed to continued public ownership of Fortuna, this group proposes that the Fortuna site be developed as a centre for a wide range of cultural, commercial and community activities.

Imagine, for example, a string quartet in the music room, jazz in the garden, cocktails in the conservatory, heritage garden tours and lectures, film festivals, wine and food expos, museums and galleries, travelling exhibitions, vintage car displays, children's programs, specialist retail outlets, community meeting rooms for clubs and societies, conferences and corporate functions, photo shoots, weddings, product launches, festivals and fairs, and fine dining, all in a unique and picturesque location, within a few kilometres of the centre of town!

In historic Fortuna Villa and its spacious grounds, Bendigo has a treasure that few regional cities can boast.

There is nothing quite like Fortuna Villa anywhere in Australia.

Surely we would not be so short-sighted as to say "Thanks but no thanks" to such an extraordinary opportunity?

There is no doubt that

such ventures can be successful.

Historic buildings throughout the world have long been adapted to new purpose, and can pay for themselves many times over.

In Victoria, the Abbotsford Convent project provides one possible development model, offering a variety of ongoing attractions and activities, as well as special, "one-off" events.

We can also learn from the recent revitalisation of Werribee Mansion, near Melbourne.

Overseas examples include Hylands House in Chelmsford, Essex, UK, which attracts thousands of visitors annually, providing a significant boost to the local economy, and lifting the profile of often-overlooked Essex as a serious tourist destination.

The naysayers are quick — as naysayers invariably are — to point to the costs involved in such a project.

Only a fool would deny that there would be significant costs, especially in the short-term.

And only the biggest fool of all would fail to properly consider the long-term benefits — financial and otherwise — which are made possible by such an investment.

I don't subscribe to the "Times are tough, we can't afford it" argument.

This kind of project has the potential to help pull us out of tough times — and to take some of the sting out of the next downturn through broadening our income base.

Such projects offer opportunities, not only in terms of job creation (an increasing concern in the current economic climate), but for local businesses to be directly involved, and for the development of active, ongoing partnerships at all levels.

A "Fortuna project" should not be seen as a competitor for resources, but as an integral part of the developing business and cultural environment of Ben-