

DANDENONG

Solar spin-off rises in rust belt

Renewable technology transforms auto plant as carmakers close all around it

Jack Paynter

A DANDENONG manufacturing business has survived the collapse of the car-making industry by transforming itself to meet growing demand for solar power.

Heuch provided engineering systems for car plants across Australia, including Toyota, Holden and Ford, but saw the writing on the wall.

The closure of car manufacturing plants was expected to affect 30 companies in the Greater Dandenong area and more than 50 per cent of firms in the sector were predicting redundancies.

But Heuch has upskilled about 25 per cent of its workforce and taken on two apprentices since launching its solar spin-off company Black Stump Technologies.

DID YOU KNOW

■ 21 per cent of Victoria's auto supply chain businesses were located in Greater Dandenong

■ The closure of car plants is expected to affect 30 local companies

■ Find out if your small business is eligible for a grant at www.business.gov.au/smallbusiness

Greater Dandenong Council

"We've put a lot of guys through extra training – electricians are now solar qualified," business development

manager Martin Oakley said. Black Stump develops solar-powered refrigeration and energy technologies for disaster zones and mining sites, to deliver clean water,

food hygiene, sanitation, medical storage and energy.

With Australia's last automotive manufacturer Holden closing its South Australian plant last Friday, following Toyota's Altona closure earlier this year and Ford Geelong last year, Heuch's transition was timely, Mr Oakley said.

He said funding from the Accelerating Commercialisation program helped market its product.

"If we didn't get the grant, we would have had to sell the designs overseas," he said.

Heuch can now manufacture 200 units a year.

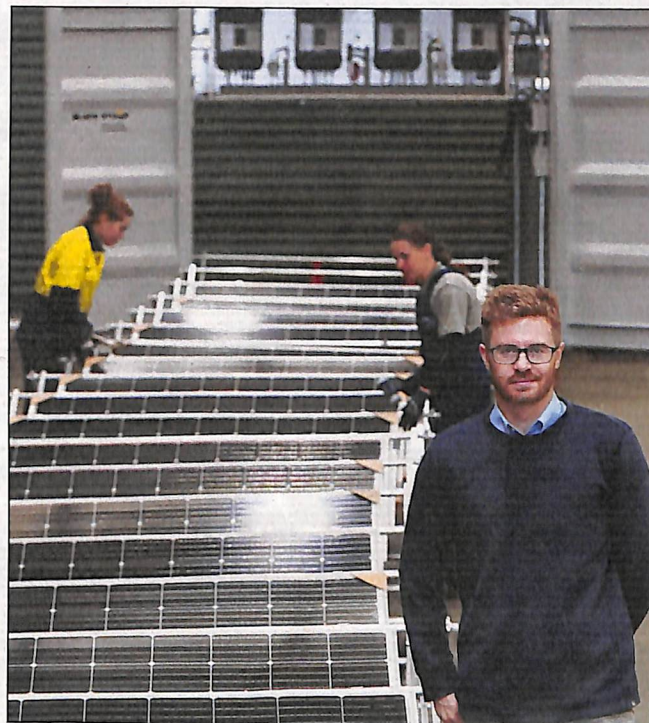
Acting group manager Greater Dandenong business Kevin Van Boxtel said the council and the State Government were working to help supply chain companies.

Chisholm Institute's skills and jobs centre provides training, upskilling and support to redundant auto supply and manufacturing workers.

Acting manager Andrea O'Bryan said it delivers career transition training including skills for resume writing, interviewing, networking and assistance for the first 90 days of a new job.

"Currently we have significant numbers of auto supply workers who have registered for assistance," she said.

"I would (also) estimate that at least half of our job-seekers are from manufacturing, however, there are still 144 types of products being manufactured every day in Australia and Dandenong has some world-class manufacturers."



Heuch's Martin Oakley with solar panels on the production line.

Picture: DAVID CROSLING