

David v Goliath in Midfield expansion plan



Janis and Dean Bennett, with Princess Penelope, in the yard of their Merrivale home. The couple are among those fighting to stop two major industrial developments by the Midfield Group on land now zoned Public Use.

Words: Carol Altmann

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[/dropcap]hen **Janis** and **Dean Bennett** bought their little rough diamond of a house in Merrivale almost 10 years ago, they knew it wasn't far from the Midfield meatworks, but they could live with that.

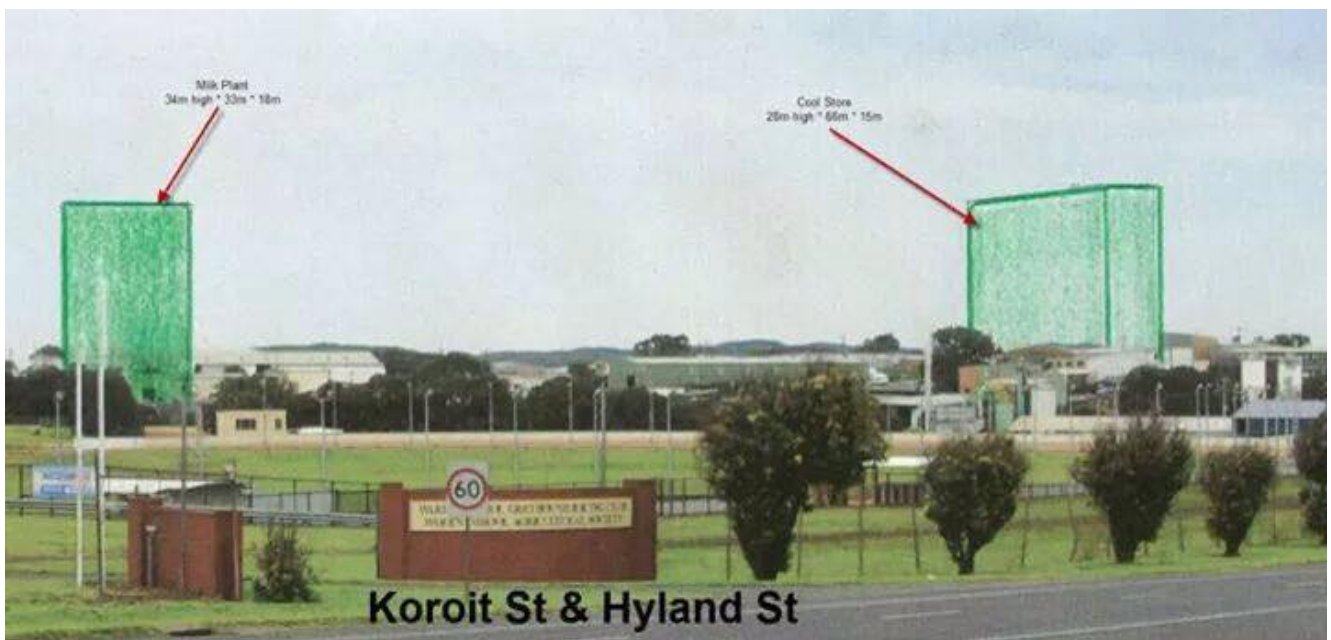
Like most young couples, they needed a home that would fit their budget and the little suburb on the west side of Warrnambool had a lot going for it: a primary school, a

football and cricket club, close to a river and beach, and within walking distance to town.

The Bennetts have since had a child and, through hard work, slowly transformed their “rough diamond” into a cosy home, with a thriving vegie patch, herb garden and chicken coop. Merrivale has also changed from being a very working-class suburb to a socio-economic mix of people wanting to live in an area with character and a strong sense of community.

But now the people of Merrivale are being asked to accept two enormous changes to their suburb: a 29m tall cold storage facility (basically, a giant fridge) and a 35m tall milk powder factory, both of which would operate 24-hours-a-day, seven days a week, on Scott St.

In what is shaping up as a classic David v Goliath battle, people like the Bennetts are battling to have the expansion stopped and will put their case to an independent panel hearing that starts in Warrnambool on Tuesday, Feb 3. ***(See end of story for details and timetable).***



This image by the Merrivale Community Association and the We Love Merrivale group shows how they believe the cold store (right) and milk processing plant (left) will look from the Warrnambool Showgrounds. Image: Supplied.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #8F9F59;"]W[/dropcap]hen the projects were first announced by the Midfield Group, they were [expected to create up to 200 jobs](#). It has since been revealed, however, that only up to 22 full-time jobs will be created after construction. Property prices [are also expected to be affected](#).

"We are not against a milk factory being built, but it is just in the wrong place: it needs to be out of town," Janis said.

The planning laws, as they stand, agree with her.

Both projects require land to be rezoned from Public Use to Industrial, including land that was once owned by the people (as Crown land) and used by the Warrnambool City Council depot, until it [was sold off to Midfield last year](#).

The Warrnambool Planning Scheme also asks that a cold store be no less than 150m from the nearest dwelling. The nearest house is less than 100m away.

The scheme also recommends that a milk processing factory be at least 300m from a home. The nearest house will be 130m.

The reason for these protections, of course, are that large-scale factories and freezers bring with them noise, lights, extra trucks, extra traffic and a whole raft of potential hazards that don't sit well with residential areas.

"We quite happily live near a pre-existing industrial zone, but we also knew that there were laws in place to prevent certain things happening and to make sure that things weren't forced through," Dean said.

"The council is now being asked to change those laws and there is an expectation that it will go ahead because of the money behind it."



Signs like this one have been popping up in windows and on fences around Merrivale as the community rallies to stop the developments. Image: Bluestone Magazine.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #8F9F59;"] T
[/dropcap]he Bennetts are among those particularly concerned about the potential health risks of the expansion and the fact that both projects will be within 1km of a primary school.

As one Gippsland milk powder factory owner said [after his factory exploded in 2012](#), explosions are [“an occupational hazard”](#) of such plants.

“I know we are talking worst case scenarios, but they can happen and (Midfield) has to plan for such things happening: this is what they want to put on our doorstep,” Janis said.

The **Merrivale Community Association** will be among those represented at the independent panel hearing, together with at least another 17 submitters against or in favour of the project.

Spokesman **Keith McAlley** – who will represent the MCA – has been wading through around 8kg of documents that outline the expert witnesses to be called by Midfield and the council.

There will be lawyers and QCs and a string of experts, and then there will be Keith, and other speakers from the community who wish to have their say.

“It is daunting, but I am at that point in my life where I ask ‘what can I do to help myself?’ and ‘what can I do to help my community?,” Keith said.

Keith hopes that wider Warrnambool will get behind the MCA campaign, because he believes the impact of the development will be felt across the city through more large trucks on the road, damage to roads and a dramatic change to the visual landscape of west Warrnambool.

“As ratepayers, you will be picking up the repair bill for any damage to the road, for example,” he said.

Once the independent panel has heard all submissions, it will make recommendations to the council.

It is then up to the council to decide if it will accept or reject the recommendations: giving the Midfield Group either a green or red light.

[learn_more caption="Click here for the panel hearing timetable"]

Hearings start at 10am and finish around 4.30pm, South-west TAFE, Level 3.

Tuesday, Feb 3: (All day)

Representatives for Warrnambool City Council.

Wednesday Feb 4:

AM: Environmental Protection Authority; Representatives for 92

Liebig St Pty Ltd.

PM: Site inspection at Scott St. (2.30pm-4.30pm)

Thursday, Feb 5: Representatives for Midfield Meat International.

Friday, Feb 6: Representatives for Midfield Meat International.

Tuesday, Feb 10: Representatives for Midfield Meat International.

Wednesday, Feb 11:

AM: Merrivale Community Association.

PM: Various submitters from the community.

Thursday, Feb 12: Various submitters from the community.

Friday, Feb 13:

AM: Midfield Meat International closing comments and right of reply.

PM: Warrnambool City Council closing comments and right of reply.

[/learn_more]

[box]You can access the full set of relevant W'bool City Council [planning amendment documents here](#). The Change.org online petition against the the development [can be signed here](#).[/box]

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