

NEWS FOCUS

bendigoadvertiser.com.au/news/local-news | mark.kearney@fairfaxmedia.com.au



MARK KEARNEY

@mkearney



SLEEK: A watercolour rendering of what the proposed Aspire cultural precinct would look like if another \$5 million is secured. Picture: CONTRIBUTED

An aspiration for funding

A collection of prized religious artifacts, a hub for startup businesses and a space for outdoor concerts could be bound for Bendigo if election candidates can find the cash.

BY MARK KEARNEY

THE group behind a proposed faith precinct in Bendigo has called on both Australia's major political parties to pledge funds to the project during this year's federal election campaign.

The Aspire Cultural and Charitable Foundation has already secured \$10 million funding for its Faith on the Goldfields facility from the state government, the

Sandhurst diocese and private donors.

But another \$5 million is still needed to build the "interpretative centre" and its accompanying function hall, business hub and public spaces into the hillside in front of the city's Sacred Heart Cathedral.

Foundation executive director Margaret O'Rourke said funding the interfaith project made sense in an election campaign focused

on economic sustainability.

"With political parties talking about jobs and growth, there isn't another project in Bendigo of this size that's on the horizon," she said.

Ms O'Rourke said the educational attraction would make sure Bendigo did not miss out on the growing faith tourism sector, a market the city was primed to cash in on since plans for the Great Stupa, Karen Buddhist monastery and Bendigo mosque

were developed.

Bendigo was already frequented by Catholic pilgrims, many of whom came to pray before a statue of Australian icon Mary MacKillop, installed outside Sacred Heart in 2014.

The saintly figure visited the central Victorian city during the 19th century gold rush.

About 80,000 tourists already visit the cathedral each year, but Ms O'Rourke said her foundation forecast that figure to grow by 41,000 just five years after the construction of Faith on the Goldfields.

Many of those new visi-

tors will be students, with one-quarter of Victorian schoolchildren educated in Catholic schools.

Aspire's own economic analysis of the project predicts more than 100 jobs will be created in the construction and operation of Faith on the Goldfields.

The business case for the precinct is also strengthened by the inclusion of a business innovation centre that will provide work spaces for social enterprise startups and entrepreneurs who might not otherwise get to "flesh out" their ventures.

A function centre, food vendors and an outdoor

space for markets and concerts will also be built into the the High Street site.

The *Bendigo Advertiser* contacted incumbent member Lisa Chesters and Liberal Party opponent Megan Purcell to ask if they planned to pledge funds to Aspire this campaign.

While both said they supported the project, neither would say if funding for the precinct would be forthcoming before the July 2 federal election.

Ms Chesters said she had received about \$300 million in requests for government funding this election campaign.

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City's proud Jewish story

BY MARK KEARNEY

SHOWCASING Bendigo's religious history will pave the way for a more harmonious future, a patron of the Aspire precinct has said.

Retired Supreme Court justice Howard Nathan, a supporter of the Faith on the Goldfields centre, said the proposed construction was a unique healing opportunity for Bendigo.

"It looks backwards at the things we can celebrate, and forwards at the things we

might improve," he said.

"The project carries with it a message that people of different faiths, but of good will, can build a tolerant, vibrant and even exciting society."

Mr Nathan said his city had "a lot to overcome" after last year's anti-mosque protests.

But these faith-based divides were nothing new for Bendigo, he said, explaining Catholic and Protestant tensions were rife during World War I, and anti-German sentiment peaked two dec-

ades later.

"There is much to celebrate, but we're aware of some of our obligations to improve," he said.

FAITHFUL HISTORY

The Faith on the Goldfields display would also pay homage to Bendigo's Jewish community, of which Mr Nathan is a member.

The first Jewish Bendigonians were English, drawn to the goldfields by the promise of fortune.

They were soon joined by

counterparts from Austria, worshipping at a synagogue standing where Lyttleton Terrace and Hopetoun Street now meet.

The only surviving image of the Bendigo temple, built in 1872, is stored in the Sandhurst Catholic diocese library and could feature in the Aspire collection.

The Byzantine-style building cost £2,000 to complete, with its five turrets each topped by a star of David.

The building no longer stands, dismantled after

World War II when many of Bendigo's young Jewish men were killed in combat.

Bendigo's Jewish history was otherwise a "wholly satisfactory and happy story," Mr Nathan said, and has thrived again since a new congregation began in 2006.

Some remnants of the first synagogue also survive today, including one of the stars of David.

The building's pews are also used in the Bendigo Masonic Centre.

CELEBRATING FAITH

The Faith on the Goldfields effort to celebrate religious expression was especially important to Australian Jews, Mr Nathan said, describing it as a fundamental freedom that trumps all others.

"If you permit discrimination on religious grounds, that can become the parent of every other form of discrimination, on gender, on colour of skin, on social customs," he said.

"It's something that has to be challenged at all times."

Showcase needed for religious treasures



LOST: Bendigo's synagogue, erected in the 1870s, fell into disrepair after World War II. Picture: CONTRIBUTED



HOME: The Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst has a stockpile of religious artifacts ready for the Aspire precinct. Picture: NONI HYETT



GRAND: Margaret O'Rourke, surrounded by artifacts, takes a seat in the century-old Chinese chair given to the Aspire Foundation for display at Faith on the Goldfields. Picture: NONI HYETT

BEHIND the grand facade of the Sandhurst Catholic diocese headquarters, in a room best-described as a broom closet, a treasure trove of religious artifacts is stored.

The collection, as well as the religious body's library of texts and photographs, could find a new home in the Aspire Foundation's proposed High Street centre.

Diocese archivist Dr Donna Bailey, who is also a member of Aspire's research committee, said the store of historical items told a tale of settlement and faith on Bendigo's goldfields.

She described plans for a religious precinct in Bendigo in the wake of racially and religiously motivated protests as "timely."

"With all of this unrest happening, the vision has certainly come at the right time," she said.

About 26 nationalities were represented in Bendigo during the 1800s but many of their places of worship have been torn down, their contents lost or cloistered in private collections.

“With all of this unrest happening, the vision has certainly come at the right time.”

Donna Bailey, archivist

But Aspire and the Sandhurst diocese have been able to salvage some items, like 1950s plans for the second construction phase of the Sacred Heart Cathedral or a stained glass window from a presbyterian church.

But other artifacts tell stories from further adrift, like a grandiose Chinese chair entrusted to Aspire from the Bendigo Historical society, or a Buddhist engraving found on the the Kalgoorlie goldfields.

"There's all these stories that are out there, and we want to tell the stories associated with the artifact," Ms Bailey said.

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