

YIMBY Compost: A Wellbeing Economy in a Bucket

Mount Alexander Wellbeing Economy Case Study Series | Castlemaine Institute | 2026



Introduction

This case study is the first in a series produced by the Castlemaine Institute that brings to life the wellbeing economy initiatives introduced in our *Wellbeing Economy Communications and Resourcing Guide* (2026) – developed from a community learning circle that brought together 17 local leaders to build the conceptual and relational foundations for a local economic transition in Mount Alexander Shire.

Each case study asks the same question: what does it look like when a local initiative embodies the principles of a wellbeing economy – and what would it take to resource it to its full potential? Throughout the series we reference *Mount Alexander Shire Council's Economic Development Strategy* – an award-winning, wellbeing-economy-focused strategy for our local government area – as the key policy driver for that transition, exploring how each initiative contributes to its goals and what concrete actions Council and its partners might take to support and strengthen it.

What is a wellbeing economy?

A wellbeing economy is an economy designed to serve the wellbeing of people, place and planet. As Mount Alexander Shire Council's own Economic Development Strategy puts it: *"the economy isn't seen as separate from our wellbeing, but as a tool to enhance it."*

For a fuller exploration of the concept and its frameworks, see the Castlemaine Institute's [Wellbeing Economy Communications and Resourcing Guide \(2026\)](#).

How this case study is structured

Each section of this case study maps to a domain explored in the *Wellbeing Economy Communications and Resourcing Guide*:

- **The initiative at a glance** – introduces YIMBY: what it is, how it works, and who runs it
- **Contributing to the Economic Development Strategy** – maps YIMBY's work against the specific goals, objectives, and strategic areas of Mount Alexander Shire Council's award-winning Economic Development Strategy, showing how community-led initiatives translate strategy into practice

- **Diverse economies and resources** – applies the community capitals framework and the diverse economies iceberg to reveal the full range of value YIMBY generates, much of which is invisible to conventional economic measurement
 - **Wellbeing government** – explores what YIMBY demonstrates about a different relationship between community and local government, and how Council's own policies point toward a collaborative path forward
 - **What makes it work** – names the foundations that make YIMBY's model distinctive and not easily replicated without deliberate attention
 - **Climate and disaster resilience** – explores YIMBY's neighbourhood network as critical social infrastructure in a Shire increasingly exposed to climate shocks
 - **What it needs** – identifies the specific resourcing gaps that, if addressed, would allow YIMBY to reach its full potential as a community wealth building asset
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The initiative at a glance

YIMBY (Yes In My Backyard) Compost is a community-scale, decentralised composting organisation operating across Mount Alexander Shire. Founded in 2021 with seed funding from Council, it has grown steadily over five years to reach 52 active community composters, 605 household contributors, 25 business contributors, and nearly 175,000 kilograms of food scraps collected. To date it has produced over 122,000 kilograms of high-quality compost and avoided an estimated 368,000 kilograms of greenhouse gas emissions.

YIMBY uses a continuous hot composting method, maintaining pile temperatures above 55 degrees Celsius to ensure rapid breakdown and the selection of beneficial microbes – producing a finished compost that teems with microbial life and exceeds Australian standards. Collections are emissions free - they happen on foot or by bicycle, block by block, with each composter running a neighbourhood-scale micro-processing hub from their own backyard and serving between 10 and 20 households.

YIMBY is the main project of The Hub Foundation, and is led by a small core team – Mikaela Beckley, Lucy Young and Joel Meadows – who gift the majority of their time. The initiative operates almost entirely in the informal economy: the compost is not for sale, the coordination is largely voluntary, and participation is built on relationship, trust, and shared purpose rather than financial transaction.

Contributing to the Mount Alexander Economic Development Strategy

YIMBY is a living demonstration of Mount Alexander Shire Council's Economic Development Strategy in action – and one of the most comprehensive examples of an initiative that works to deliver multiple goals of that strategy simultaneously.

Goal 1 – Prosperous local enterprises and organisations: YIMBY embodies Objective 1.2 on community wealth building – keeping value local, strengthening volunteering, and building community assets. The compost it produces is a high-value resource that cannot be bought commercially, which is held and distributed within the community rather than extracted by external suppliers. Its apprenticeship model also builds human capital that stays in the Shire.

Goal 2 – Future-ready people and industry: YIMBY builds resilience and adaptability at the neighbourhood level – exactly the kind of community capacity the strategy identifies as essential. Mikaela Beckley's own story – bringing nursing and microbiology skills into a new domain of community composting – is a vivid example of the kind of skill transfer and adaptability the strategy seeks to cultivate.

Goal 3 – Connected, inclusive and vibrant precincts: YIMBY's model is fundamentally relational. Door-knocking to find contributors, weekly bucket collections, shared compost-making – these are neighbourhood-scale acts of connection. As Lucy Young put it: *"It's a practical excuse for us to meet each other and find out more about each other."* The strategy's goal of thriving local precincts is built one street at a time by initiatives like this.

Goal 4 – Sustainable approaches and systems: YIMBY advances all three objectives of Goal 4 directly – learning and leading in sustainability, supporting innovation, and promoting reuse, repair, and circular economy thinking. It does so while exceeding Australian composting standards, using no trucks, no heavy machinery, and no mechanical processing. Its carbon footprint is a fraction of any commercial alternative.

Goal 5 – People participating equitably in the economy: YIMBY's gift economy model creates pathways for people to contribute and benefit regardless of financial capacity. Time, skill, and care are the currencies of participation – making it one of the most genuinely equitable economic models operating in the Shire.

Goal 6 – Healthy Country: YIMBY closes a critical loop in the local food system – returning nutrients from kitchen scraps to the depleted ex-mining soils of this region, building food-growing capacity,

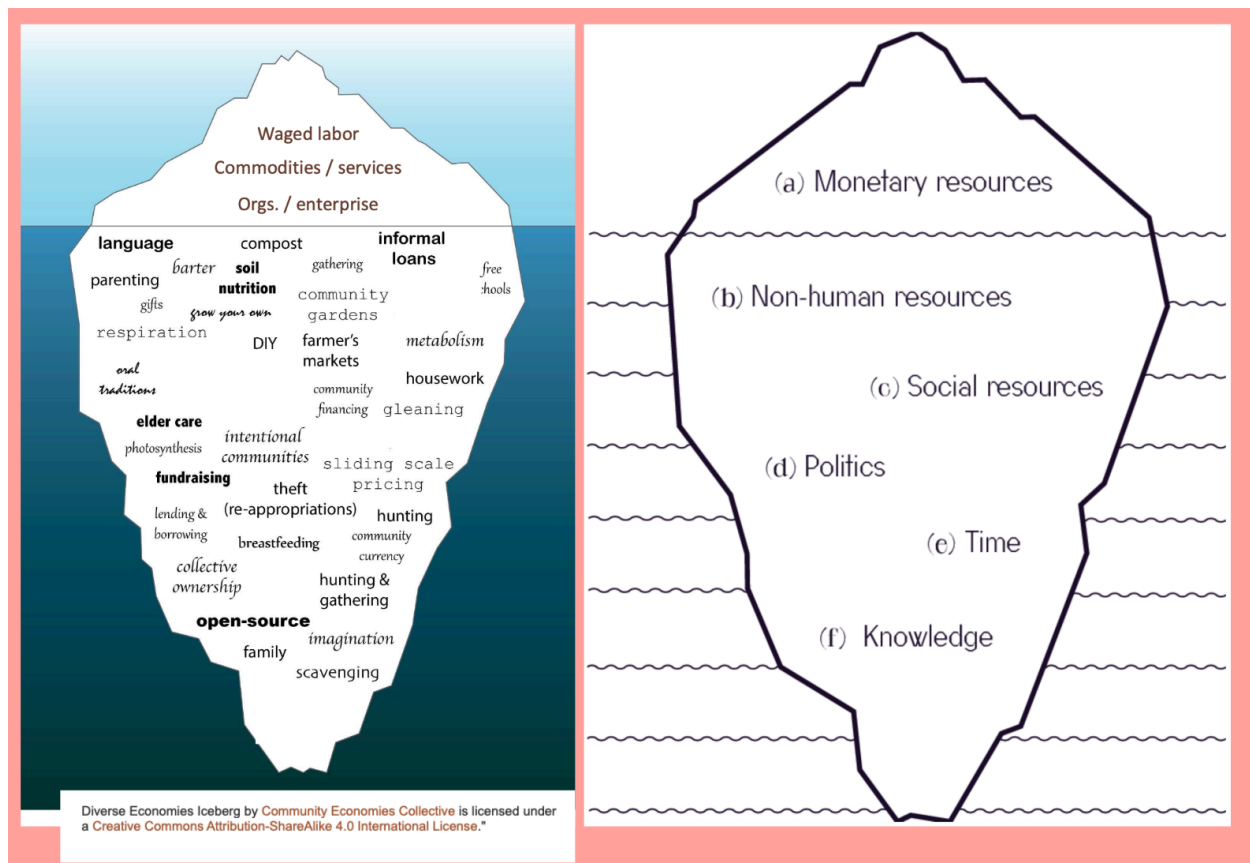
and strengthening local food security. Its compost goes directly into backyard food production, community gardens, and local Indigenous bush-food initiatives.

Guiding Principle 7 of the strategy states that Council will “work with local organisations and innovators who are advancing community health, wellbeing, or environmental stewardship.” YIMBY is the type of organisation that principle was written to protect and support.

Diverse economies and resources: what YIMBY generates

The Iceberg

Applying the diverse economies iceberg (J.K. Gibson-Graham, 2006, adapted by the Community Economies Research Network) – a framework that makes visible the full range of economic activity hidden beneath the surface of the formal market economy - YIMBY generates a lot of “below-the-line” value.



At the visible tip sits a small, measurable output: avoided costs from food scraps diverted from landfill, value of compost produced, avoided damage costs of emissions avoided, grant monies distributed. Below the waterline lies a far larger ecosystem of value: unpaid and gifted labour, neighbourhood care and mutual aid, knowledge freely shared, skills voluntarily taught, relationships deliberately cultivated, hyperlocal social cohesion that underpins disaster readiness and ecological regeneration quietly accumulating in the soils of backyard food gardens across the Shire. None of this appears in any economic measure, but all of it is real, significant, and irreplaceable.

Community Capital

The Community Capitals Framework (Flora and Flora, 2004) identifies seven forms of capital present in any community – natural, human, social, built, cultural, financial, and political – and explores how investment in each generates returns across all others.

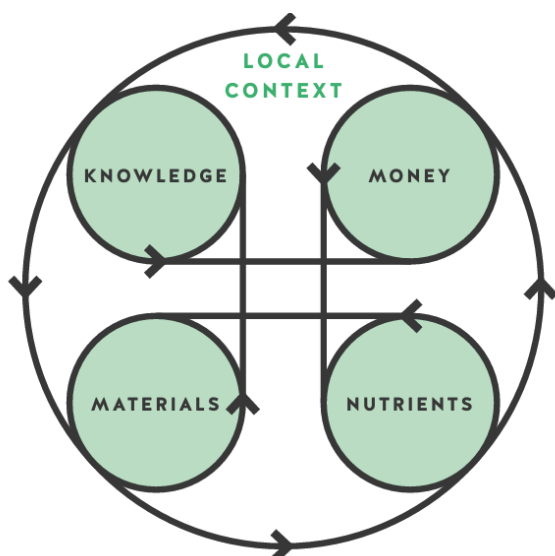
Applying the community capitals framework, YIMBY generates value across every capital simultaneously:

- **Natural capital:** 122,000+ kilograms of premium compost returned to depleted local soils; 368,000 kilograms of greenhouse gas emissions avoided; no diesel burned, no microplastics from heavy vehicle tyres, no road damage from truck movements
- **Human capital:** 52 trained composters with genuine expertise in a rare and valuable craft; 135 community members trained in workshops in 2025 alone; over 100 published articles building composting literacy across the Shire
- **Social capital:** neighbourhood relationships built street by street through door-knocking, weekly collections, and shared composting; social connection for isolated residents – young families, elderly neighbours – who might otherwise have little contact with those around them
- **Financial capital:**
 - Short term: household economies strengthened through access to premium compost unavailable commercially, as well as access to more locally grown food.
 - Long term/prevention: reduced pressure on healthcare systems through social connection and reduced isolation
 - Long term/prevention: strengthened local resilience networks to support disaster preparedness and response, avoiding material and other costs.
- **Cultural capital:** a composting culture taking root in the Shire; a weekly Compost Conversation column in the Midland Express building shared knowledge and identity; cultures of hyperlocal mutual support and resilience built through practical connection, value exchange and relationships.

- **Political capital:** growing community confidence and evidence base to advocate for locally appropriate waste management solutions

Circular Economy

The circular economy diagram (Reference: Plant Chicago (plantchicago.org), reproduced in the Castlemaine Institute's Wellbeing Economy Communications and Resourcing Guide (2026)) is vividly in YIMBY. Nutrients flow in (food scraps), materials flow out (compost), knowledge circulates (apprenticeships, workshops, media), and money barely enters the picture. The local multiplier effect is essentially complete – almost no value leaks to outside of the community to distant shareholders or other environments or interests.



A local circular economy is a collaborative economic practice sustained by the local circulation of resources, including energy, materials, nutrients, knowledge and money.

Wellbeing government: a different relationship between community and Council

YIMBY offers local government a rare and instructive opportunity – to do things differently.

The standard model for food organics collection is a centralised, contracted kerbside service: familiar, auditable, and easy to procure. But it extracts organic material from the community, deskills households, generates truck movements and emissions, and produces a lower-quality end product than what YIMBY makes in backyards across the Shire. Even the Shire's current preferred alternative – in-vessel composting at scale – while keeping material local, cannot match YIMBY's microbial richness, food-growing grade, or the social and ecological co-benefits its neighbourhood model generates.

YIMBY's model – decentralised, volunteer-led, zero-emission, and deeply relational – builds community capacity rather than replacing it, keeps value circulating locally, and advances all six goals of Council's own Economic Development Strategy. It embodies the 4Ps of a wellbeing government: purpose-led, people-powered, preventative, and pre-distributive. Supporting it to scale alongside any formal collection system would deliver better environmental outcomes, stronger community resilience, and lower long-term costs.

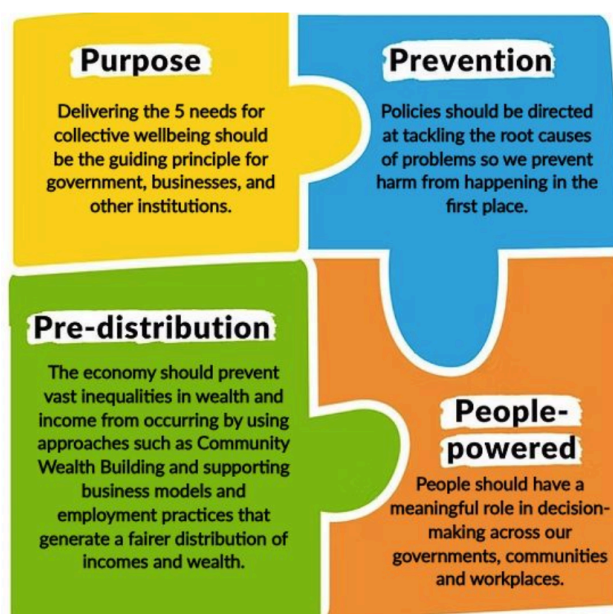


Figure 11: The Four Ps of Economic Systems Change

Source: Trebeck, K (2022) "The four P's of economic systems change" Dumbo Feather. [WEAll]

Doing things differently is genuinely challenging for local government – regulatory frameworks and procurement processes are designed around conventional service delivery. But both Council's Economic Development Strategy and its Community Engagement Policy already point toward a way forward. Guiding Principle 7 commits Council to working with local organisations advancing community health, wellbeing, and environmental stewardship. The Community Engagement Policy

calls for deliberative engagement – where the community weighs options and makes recommendations – for decisions of significant scale, cost, and community impact.

A co-designed approach, developed through genuine deliberation between Council, YIMBY, and community, offers the best of both systems. It has the potential to build the shared ownership that community-led service delivery depends on, ensuring regulatory requirements are met, and producing outcomes that neither Council nor YIMBY could achieve alone.

The question is not whether to choose between a community-led model and a formal collection service – it is how to design a system where both can thrive together, in a way that is genuinely fit for this place.

What makes it work

YIMBY's success rests on several interrelated foundations that are worth naming clearly, because they are neither accidental nor easily replicated without attention:

The gift economy model. The core team gifts their time not because they have no choice but because they have made a deliberate values-based decision about how they want to live and work.

As Michaela Beckley explains: *"We don't have to do this – but this is exactly what I want to do today. This is how I want to spend my time."*

This is not a choice that is equally available to everyone. In a community facing increasing cost-of-living pressures, the freedom to gift time depends on a degree of financial security that not all residents have. And yet Mount Alexander Shire has exceptionally high rates of volunteering – a deep cultural disposition toward contribution and mutual aid that represents one of the community's most significant economic assets. YIMBY demonstrates what it looks like when that disposition is directed toward genuinely high-value, technically skilled, ecologically significant work.

Tending the system. Underlying everything YIMBY does is a practice of regular, attentive checking in – with composters, contributors, and the network as a whole – to understand what people need and where the system needs care. Like a garden, it requires ongoing tending rather than periodic intervention: noticing when a composter is struggling, when a contributor has gone quiet, when a new connection is ready to grow. This relational attentiveness is invisible in any budget, and it is what holds the whole network together. It depends on people who know the network intimately, who care about it deeply, and who show up consistently over time.

Quality as a non-negotiable. YIMBY has grown deliberately slowly, maintaining exacting standards – laboratory testing, temperature monitoring, a 2–3 month apprenticeship for every composter. The compost it produces exceeds Australian standards. There is no commercial product that reaches its quality. This commitment to quality is also a commitment to trust – and trust is what makes the relational model work.

The apprenticeship model. Each new composter undergoes a mentored onboarding process before taking on neighbours' food scraps. This builds both quality control and genuine skill – composters who understand what they are doing and why, and who can teach others. The waiting list of 25 people wanting to become composters is evidence that the model generates its own momentum.

Deliberate slowness. YIMBY does not scale by sacrificing the relationships that make it work. Its vision – that one day every street has a composter, the way every street once had a baker – is a long-horizon aspiration, not a growth target. This commitment to working at the speed of trust contributes to its robustness and long-term sustainability.

Climate and disaster resilience: the hidden benefit

Perhaps the most underappreciated dimension of YIMBY's social capital is what it becomes in a crisis. Work commissioned by the Mount Alexander Shire Council in 2024–2025 on flood recovery and resilience found that the strength of neighbourhood-level social networks is one of the most significant determinants of community resilience in the face of natural disaster.

People who know their neighbours – who have a reason to knock on each other's doors, who have a shared practice and a shared resource – are better placed to warn, support, and care for each other when disaster strikes. YIMBY builds exactly this kind of network, street by street, bucket by bucket, long before any emergency occurs. In a Shire that has experienced two major floods in the past 20 years and devastating fires in Harcourt in January 2026, this is not a secondary benefit. It is a real social infrastructure. The social cohesion that YIMBY generates is climate resilience infrastructure – invisible in normal times, invaluable when it matters most.

Stakeholder interviews undertaken across the Shire revealed that in one of the three flood-affected areas this program engaged, the YIMBY composter network was the most significant source of connectedness and practical support in preparedness like sandbagging, response including evacuation and recovery support for flood-affected households.

As Joel Meadows observed in the wake of the Harcourt fires: *"Let's not wait until a natural disaster to meet our neighbours – because that is the exact moment we need to know who our neighbours are."*

What it needs: the resourcing gap

YIMBY is at a critical juncture. Five years in, it has demonstrated its model, built its network, and proven its quality. It now faces a regulatory environment that could override everything it has built – not out of malice, but as a byproduct of a blanket whole of state policy approach which has no visibility or mechanism built in to support place-led solutions that meet the policy objectives through existing and adapted local innovations.

What YIMBY needs is a seat at the table and a commitment to collaboration. This would include:

- **Data and research:** a locally grounded household waste survey to understand the true demand for food organics services in this Shire – data that currently does not exist and without which neither YIMBY nor Council can plan effectively
- **Deliberative engagement:** a genuine co-design process, supported through a deliberative engagement process such as a citizen’s jury, involving YIMBY, Council, community, and other stakeholders (such as Really Local - another Wellbeing Economy Case Study) to design a FOGO approach that is fit for this place
- **Core operational support:** modest resourcing for the coordination, administration, and “tending” to the systems and networks that YIMBY manage
- **Recognition as infrastructure:** Council and state government recognition that YIMBY is not a community group doing a nice thing – it is essential wellbeing economy infrastructure, operating to a standard that no commercial provider matches

As Joel Meadows reflects: *“High-quality compost is the best money can’t buy – because if you valued it with money and time, it would be way too expensive.”* The community wealth generated by YIMBY is real, measurable, and irreplaceable.

“YIMBY Compost is a living, breathing example of the Council’s wellbeing economy strategy. Value stays local, relationships are built and strengthened, leading to a more resilient Shire, and the end product feeds the soils that grow our food right here.” – Mikaela Beckley, YIMBY Coordinator

About CI

The Castlemaine Institute is a charitable, member-based research and learning hub located in central Victoria on Dja Dja Wurrung Country. We bring together researchers, practitioners, and community leaders to design and test regenerative approaches to economy, community and landscape –creating local models for systems change that can inspire others across Australia. Castlemaine Institute is a registered charity and an Approved Research Institute with Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR1) status.

We acknowledge that we live and work on the unceded lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung, and we honour the Djaara people as the ongoing custodians of this Country. We pay our deep respects to Elders past and present, and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who contribute to our community and learning. Castlemaine Institute commits 1% of total revenue to Pay The Rent in recognition that sovereignty was never ceded.

A note on how this report was produced

At CI, we are transparent about our use of AI. This report was developed with AI assistance, but it is built from a foundation of original drafts, reports, presentations, and other outputs generated by our team and the people we work with. The AI helped us synthesise and articulate in places, but the thinking and insight behind it are entirely our own, and our team has proofed, ratified and stands behind each word in this final draft.

We see this as part of working smarter and adapting to a changing world of work – one we know comes with genuine grey areas around authorship, accuracy and trust. We are also conscious that AI carries an environmental cost, and we try to use it deliberately and only where it adds real value. These are tensions we are actively navigating, and we think being honest about them matters.

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