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THE VISION VILLAGE SCHEME

THE VISION

The vision is of a network of socially healthy and ecologically sustainable rural villages, where previously 'disadvantaged' residents have been educated to assist in the building and running of their own village; they conditionally acquire equity in the land, common property and shared money-making project of their village, without having first been required to make any lump-sum financial contributions.

THE SCHEME

The Vision Village Scheme, as outlined in this submission, is a way to make the above vision a reality. Major sponsors of the scheme are expected to include federal and state bodies concerned with social security, housing, health, employment, education and training, and land and water conservation. Also expected as sponsors are local governments and non-government organisations.

PRACTICAL BENEFITS OF THE SCHEME

The scheme will present people with an opportunity to free themselves from dependence on social security, futile work or undesirable circumstances; and move into situations conducive to environmentally sound living as well as physical, emotional, mental and spiritual wellbeing.

The initial cost of this scheme may be high; however, it has the long term potential to dramatically reduce the mammoth health, housing and welfare bills of Australia.

THE MORAL IMPERATIVE FOR THE SCHEME

By nature's law, human beings are entitled, like all creatures on the planet, to claim part of the planet for their home.

By inherited law, and the way it supports the real estate system, many citizens in our society have been stripped of this entitlement.

The real estate system has unfairly allowed the most livable parts of the planet to be controlled by those who are financially rich. This holds many people to ransom. To find the money for horrendously high rental or land purchase prices they must earn a wage, but at this point in time there are not enough ethical and environmentally sound jobs to go around.

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If people decide to compromise their integrity and accept futile or damaging jobs, they are likely to become demoralised. If they are forced to leave the area in which they feel at home to take such jobs, they risk adding a sense of dislocation and disempowerment.

Many unemployed residents of the Byron shire are particularly loathe to leave this area because they feel a deep spiritual connection to it. Their choice is therefore limited to competing with each other for the few available jobs, or accepting survival money from Social Security.

The receipt of pensions and unemployment benefits does provide some recipients with the time to do voluntary work which benefits the community; but often, the dependence on such payments induces a sense of futility which exacerbates emotional problems and addictive tendencies. This leads to chronic unhealthiness, ongoing dependence, a waste of taxpayers' money and a loss of people power.

It's time for a change. We must support people's birthright to harmlessly claim a space on mother earth as their home.

Claiming and caring for a particular part of the earth satisfies the human instinctive need for territory, and serves as a sound foundation for the development of personal and community wellbeing.

It gives people an option to seeking any kind of job, irrespective of consequences, as their major goal.

The security of being on land where they can put down roots allows people to make sustainable living their major and direct goal, and to use the site for ethical and profitable work which blends into, and enhances, the greater social and environmental matrix.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE PLAN FOR ONE VILLAGE

Villagers -to-be will be selected from people who have low financial resources and who are willing to participate in the scheme.

They will be required to sign contracts containing forfeiture clauses for irresponsibility, or early withdrawal from the scheme, and will receive education to support conscious and environmentally sound living which includes an ethical money-making project for their village. They will also be assisted and supervised in the building of their own village structures and the development of their community, where practicable.

Although villagers will not be required to pay an initial deposit, they will nevertheless be able to conditionally acquire personal equity in their village. Such acquisition will be linked to the phasing out of government involvement, the villager's gradual repayment of development costs, and their increasing acceptance of self-management. The villagers will finally be able to have full equity in the village land and common property, as well as complete autonomy.

PUTTING THE VISION VILLAGE SCHEME INTO EFFECT

Supervising Body and Seed Village Staff

A supervising body of government officers and community representatives will be established, or an existing one engaged. Members of the supervising body will obtain funding, and advertise for staff who are practical visionaries skilled in planning, administration, healing, education and practical work.

The advertisements will describe the work being offered, which will be to assist in the establishment of a 'seed' village where staff will live, conduct courses for groups and then supervise those groups in setting up their own 'satellite' villages in nearby areas.

Job descriptions will be prepared. They will advise that the final selection process for staff will require participation in a Saturday seminar providing more information about the scheme, and that the successful applicants will be required to commit to:-

- * Participation, immediately after their contract begins, in two courses, 'Bodymind Clearing and Self Knowledge' and 'Group Communication and Decision Making'.
- * Willingness to use and support the sort of attitudes and techniques presented in the courses, such as communicating with truth and compassion; carefully considering any criticisms directed at them and making appropriate changes; and if required by the urgings of their own considered opinion, or the rest of the seed village staff or the supervising body, involving themselves fully in techniques for resolution when a conflict arises.
- * Helping to design and participate in community rituals and celebrations which acknowledge the preciousness of life, the spiritual essence of humankind and the cycles of nature, without emphasising a particular philosophy, religion or sect.
- * For environmental and health reasons, non-use of drugs, alcohol or tobacco; also adherence to a plant-based diet, with the occasional optional inclusion of non-fertile free-range eggs; and the consumption of smaller meals available more frequently rather than three meals per day.
- * Having a portion of their salaries retained as a contribution to their equity in the seed village, so they experience the system which will also apply to the satellite villagers.
- * Having an extra portion of their salaries for the first six weeks retained by the supervising body, as a possible forfeit to be surrendered if they leave the scheme before the end of their contract, or if they are dismissed for unsatisfactory performance of duties.

The seed village staff will then be selected and contracted. They

will participate in their initial courses, but for some months after that will only be required to work on Saturdays. They will use these Saturdays for basic planning and to help the supervising body to select village sites.

They will thoroughly investigate development potential and government restrictions on possible sites before selecting a site for their seed village and at least three other sites for satellite villages, which will be less than a half hour's drive from the seed village, and preferably closer.

They will purchase a bus with seat belts ready for the establishment of the seed village, and will plan for similar vehicles to be purchased for each village. The bus (or buses) for each village must be large enough to accommodate all the foundation group for each village, so they can travel together.

After their initial part-time work, the seed village staff will camp on the seed village site and work full time. They will be involved in the more detailed planning, and construction of this village, using assistance from participants in labour market programs, citizens required to do community service, groups of low-risk prisoners, and the defence forces with their equipment where practicable.

As much as possible, the permanent structures and layout of the seed village will be a prototype for the satellite villages. Layout will be based on the principles of geomancy and where possible also on the circle, even if this requires extra cost or effort. For instance, a circular meeting/kitchen/dining room could be a focal point for a village, with covered walkways, like the spokes of a wheel, fanning out from it to individual dwellings, which would have their own basic food preparation areas as well.

Innovative building methods such as foam-formwork, geodesic and straw-bale structures will be used where appropriate, with the planning incorporated with land management and wind/water/sun power planning from the earliest days.

Low cost, and possibly demountable, facilities and shelter for the student satellite-villagers-to-be will be a short walking distance from the seed village proper. Seed village staff dwellings should, however, have large enough study areas to allow for small groups of students to occasionally meet with teachers and administrators in their own quarters. This will allow the students to get the feel of how their own village might be, and the informal environment will also be of use in facilitating discussions or counselling sessions, as required.

Stage One - Satellite Village

The seed village staff will devise initial advertising, introductory seminars and selection processes for the first group of satellite villagers. The advertising will include statements concerning aims, objectives and methods to be used in the scheme, and the need for applicants to be willing to sign a contract with forfeiture

clauses, and clauses requiring certain hours of work; also participation in communication and decision-making using methods to be taught in the courses; involvement in community ritual; and adherence to the requirements concerning drugs, alcohol, tobacco, vegetarian food and health.

The first group of satellite villagers will be drawn from unemployed people with low financial resources. Where possible, requests from groups of friends wishing to be placed in the same village will be catered to.

To protect the fragility of the scheme in its early stages, the first group will not have obligations to support children, and its members will be strictly required to be non-users of drugs, etc., (In planning for future village networks, the courses may be adapted to include children, and serve the needs of other groups in society. For instance, a course could include a phase-out program for addicts.)

After selection, the first group of satellite villagers will be contracted and housed in the student quarters of the seed village.

Their foundation courses will include versions of those in which the seed village staff participated.

These will be 'Bodymind Clearing and Self Knowledge' and 'Group Communication and Decision Making'. These courses will be vital to the success of the scheme. A great deal of people's inability to be focused and motivated enough to work, is caused by subconscious negative beliefs formed in early life. These beliefs create self-sabotaging responses which stay in place until cleared. Such clearance will be facilitated in the first course with techniques drawn from Breathwork, N.L.P., Gestalt, Inner Child Work, and the like. Group members will be encouraged to make their own choice of positive and renewing thoughts and to accept them as replacements for the old, negative beliefs.

The second course will help to release communication from unnecessary limitations, and encourage the use of effective methods and compassionate attitudes.

Foundation studies will also include an Overview of the planning and skills development options for Practical Work. Individuals will then be assisted to choose an area of practical work for more specific training/sharing/application in the next phase of the course.

A suitable group money-making project will also be planned (as in the N.E.I.S. scheme) and basic equipment and reference material ordered. Projects could include production of organically grown food, arts and crafts, furniture or clothing manufacture, contract labour services for treatment of soil erosion, planting of trees on farms, dune care and the like.

Auxilliary schemes may also be anticipated. In the Byron shire, for instance, villagers might supplement their main money-making scheme by offering guided tours of their village, and seminars on environmentally friendly living; or they could encourage visitors to participate in organic horticulture under the W.O.O.F. scheme.

In this initial stage of the training, villagers-to-be will be asked to have minimal contact with people from outside the scheme. This first stage will close with a day of retreat followed by a ritual to support commitment, bonding and spiritual awareness. This will be followed by an open day and celebration, to which friends can be invited.

Stage Two - Satellite Village

This next stage will begin with the seed village staff working with the students to develop the skills needed for their chosen area of specialisation. These could include land management, permaculture, food preparation, building techniques, accountancy, mechanics, etc. It is likely that some students will already have expertise that will be of great value. The goal will be to empower students with skills and accurate knowledge, and particularly to equip them with reference materials and job instruction manuals that will become the property of their village. Manuals should include references to books, journals, libraries, government departments and specialist organisations so that villagers are empowered to continue research on their own. A standard library system and files with index sheets will be established at the outset.

Practical training may include visits to nearby towns for specialist instruction, and work at the seed village, but as soon as possible the group will travel daily in the bus to their own village site to assist in the installation of their own infrastructure and the construction of their own buildings.

This phase of the work will be anticipated well in advance, especially in regard to obtaining permits, and ensuring the supply of materials and equipment. Critical path planning and penalty clauses for delay in suppliers' contracts will be used to avoid demoralising and expensive delays.

A particularly careful watch will be kept on group dynamics during this 'limbo' time, with counselling, meetings, recreational trips to local townships and on-site celebrations interspersed with the practical work as needed to keep communication clear and morale high.

The group will take up residence in their village and be supervised in establishing its functions for approximately six weeks. Friends will then be invited to the village's official opening ceremony.

The villagers will be reminded that they will now receive gradually decreasing supervision and support from the seed village staff, and will need to take full responsibility for honouring the practical agreements they made in their contracts.

As well as the agreements noted earlier, some of these extra agreements will be:-

- * Villagers will work the equivalent of six hours per day, five days per week, with a reduction of three hours per week if they are needed for work on Sundays, which will be the village rest day. Individual choice of work times, and the use of siestas,

will be encouraged where practicable.

- * There will be three weeks optional holiday time each year, at a time to be determined in consultation with the village meeting.
- * Villagers will have privacy rights over their own dwellings and the immediately surrounding land which may be approximately 500 square metres but which will depend upon the planning for each individual village.
- * Villagers will be allowed to make extensions and/or improvements to their dwelling in their own time and at their own expense, provided they have permission of the village for major improvements or extensions, with 'major' defined by the village, and provided they keep records as described later, to avoid possible conflict about payouts if they leave the village.
- * Decisions affecting the village will be made by villagers at weekly meetings which all will be required to attend unless the group gives them permission to be absent. Consensus decision-making will be strived for, but if consensus cannot be reached after an issue has been considered on two separate occasions, or once for at least an hour in an emergency, an eighty percent majority vote will decide the issue.
- * Village meetings will be attended by one or more seed village staff or members of the supervising body. To begin with, they will have the right to require reconsideration of, or if necessary veto, decisions which in their opinion are not in the interests of the scheme. If this is unsatisfactory to the villagers they may appeal to the whole supervising body, but the decision of the supervising body will be final. This arrangement will stay in place until autonomy is reached, as described later.

For the first year of their participation in the scheme, villagers will receive part of the unemployment benefit (or whatever such payments might be called under this scheme) as pocket money. This amount will be approximately \$35 per week. The remainder will be channelled directly into village expenses.

After the first year, both of these forms of the benefit will be decreased incrementally until they are phased out totally at the end of the second year, to encourage participation of villagers in their money-making project.

The withheld portion of the benefits, and later the profit, less community expenses and pocket money, will be used to pay the establishment and development costs of the village back to the government. These payments, plus any capital outlays or money-making project expenses paid directly from profits, will be equity. Villagers who have honoured their contractual obligations will accrue equity in their village land, common property including all dwellings as constructed at the beginning, and the money-making project.

When all debts to the government have been met, autonomy time will have been reached and the village community will be free to determine its own future without further supervision.

ARRANGEMENTS FOR LEAVING THE SCHEME

The original contracts will clearly define the terms on which a villager may be required to quit the scheme, or leave it voluntarily. These terms will include the following:-

Until autonomy is attained, village meetings will be required to form a recommendation as to whether villagers who have not met their contractual obligations should stay or go, but the right to make the final decision will be retained by the supervising body. This is to avoid situations such as a seriously irresponsible villager receiving the meeting's vote for him or her to stay, because of misplaced allegiance arising from familiarity; covert threats from the villager; or simply a reticence from the villagers because no one wants to be the first to say that he/she should leave.

When such people are required to leave, they will be entitled to receive a refund of any accrued equity less a 'disruption fee' as determined by the supervising body after consultation with all concerned. If there is an admission of willful damage, or the like, supervisors will be entitled to deduct the cost of restitution from their equity as well. If no equity has been accrued because the villager has been in the scheme for less than six months (see later) or because there is insufficient equity remaining to cover costs, and/or because the situation requires legal intervention because of its seriousness, the seed body will engage appropriate legal processes to ensure that justice is done and in particular, that any personal assets or future earning capacity of the villager are claimed to cover the villager's debt to the scheme, and/or restitution due personally to members of the village.

Villagers who leave the scheme voluntarily in the first six months will be ineligible to receive unemployment benefits for a time, according to a scale noted in their contracts unless the supervising body decides that special circumstances apply. They will not be entitled to receive a refund of the withheld portions of their unemployment benefit.

Villagers who leave the scheme voluntarily after six months and before two years from the beginning will not affect their right to receive unemployment benefits by this action.

They may hold some equity in the village but they will only be entitled to receive a percentage of its value back from the group. To discourage disruption to the community caused by a villager leaving in the early stages of development, the percentage received will be a low 0.123 percent of any equity held if the villager leaves on the first day after the first six months. (It is, however, unlikely that the village as a whole would be holding any equity at such an early stage.)

This percentage will increase to 89.88 percent on the final day of a two year period after the first six months. The remainder will be retained by the village as a compensation for disruption, and will be spread to increase the equity of remaining villagers. (Calculation based on 90 percent divided by 730 days, the total number of days in a two year period.)

A predetermined portion will also be retained from the equity of villagers leaving the village after this two year period and until autonomy is reached.

If a villager leaves a village with its approval to change places with someone from another village, the village will have the right to decide to increase the refunded equity payments to as high as 100 percent, depending on the value of the exchange to the scheme, rather than on the personal inclinations of the villagers.

Villagers leaving the scheme at any time and for any reason will be entitled to request reimbursement from the community for the cost of improvements and repairs they have made to their dwelling in their own time and at their own expense. They may request such payment only if they present a totalled list of expense receipts and vouchers, and time logs for their labour. They must note the value per hour which the seed body had decided could be allocated for the period in which the work was carried out. All such support documents must have been accepted and stamped by a seed village staff member within a month of payment or of application of labour. The staff member will be entitled to reduce the number of hours claimed if, in his/her opinion, supported by the village meeting, the villager's work is slower than could be expected from a reasonably competent tradesperson doing the same work with modern equipment.

It is important to note that payments for reimbursement of equity or expenses for dwellings will be dependent on the village first receiving an equivalent payment from a replacement villager, and that the villager requesting reimbursement may be required to advertise for applicants at their own expense, and preselect them for final approval by the village. It is expected, however, that this requirement will not have to be invoked, because of the plan outlined in the next section.

Villagers Joining a Village from the Stand-by List

One of the seed village staff's duties will be to make an initial selection of people from the target group who have applied to them to join an existing village. In the early stages of a village, it is possible that such applicants will have enough funds available to buy up equity from a villager leaving the village. At later stages in the development of a village, when the value of the equity is above the ceiling level for assets which can be held by the target group, carefully selected applicants will receive supplementary private loans at low interest from the government to make up the difference. When a vacancy occurs in a village,

three suitable people from the stand-by list and/or the villagers' own advertising efforts will be interviewed at a village meeting and a selection made.

Training of such people will be assisted by videos made of the village's initial training courses which can be viewed by the incoming villager, and by requiring them to pass informal tests on the material in the videos, course notes and the job instruction manuals which all villagers will be required to compile for the use of people who need to take over their duties.

Options at Completion of Village Network Duties for Staff

As each satellite village in a group is established, the seed village staff will take in and train a fresh group of villagers-to-be and help to establish another village, until all village sites for the area are settled. Seed village staff will encourage interaction and sharing between villages as appropriate. For example, one village could offer the use of their specialist library, one could run a general store, one could offer wholistic health treatments, etc.

When the staff have supervised their final satellite village in the area to a time three months past the time when the group took up residence in their own village, the staff will cease to receive full time salaries and will be paid for decreasing part-time supervision and report writing only.

They will have the options of staying in their village and gaining equity in it by setting up their own money-making project, or leaving with 95 percent of the value of their accrued equity to date, or moving on, with 100 percent of their equity, to help establish a network of villages in another area.

Any gaps in the ongoing supervision of the original network will be managed by local specialists whose services are directed by the supervising body. Their work will be facilitated by journals and reports produced by the original staff.

Adapting the Scheme

From the beginning of the first village, the supervising body will have investigated the possible adaptation of the scheme to serve the needs of homeless children; pensioners; indigenous communities; low income earners; single parents who wish to live near enough to their child/children's other parent(s) to facilitate co-parenting; addicts; physically and intellectually disabled; and people who need half-way houses.

In any adaptations it will be important to maintain the essential factors that will underpin the success of the scheme. These are:-

- * Inspiring ethics
- * No-nonsense forfeiture clauses
- * The appeal of deposit-free equity acquisition
- * Psychological and social 'assisted passage'. In the version of the scheme outlined in this document, this begins with

the training in personal development, group dynamics and management styles. This training will allow villagers to clear troublesome negative patterns and awaken to their individual potentials. It will also allow them to become aware of the reasons for the authoritarian take-it-or-leave-it offer to enter the scheme; the benevolent despotism of the management style which may be present in the early weeks; and the checks and balances which are nevertheless necessary to support 'freedom' in a community.

These awarenesses, combined with the gradual phasing-in of the villagers' own decision-making, will encourage a smooth transition into responsible self-government and provide a safeguard against many of the problems which have arisen in the evolution of other communities.

This is draft number ONE of this document, issued 16th Jan 1996.

Criticisms, suggestions for improvement and offers of support will be gratefully received.

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Please phone first if you would like to visit me at this address to discuss your ideas about the scheme.
