

Media Release - State Government Reneges on Funding Agreement for Wynyard Community Hub, Watershed, a Big hART Project

Big hART Disheartened as State Government Reneges on 3-year Funding for Community Project 'Watershed' After Only 12 Months

Renowned Tasmanian arts and social change organisation, Big hART were stunned last week to receive communication from The Attorney-General and Minister for the Arts, Elise Archer, announcing that funding for the highly successful Wynyard community project, Watershed, was to cease after only 12 months of the project—not the three years previously negotiated with Minister Jaensch.

Three-year-funding of the Watershed project was promised by Minister Jaensch after lengthy discussions regarding the negative impacts caused by short term project funding in vulnerable communities.

In an area of the state that has higher than average youth unemployment, concerning levels of recidivism, and a direct need for disability support, the impetus to defund a project such as Watershed which has proven so successful in addressing these community needs seems unfathomable.

The young facility occupies a section of a council building on the banks of the Inglis River. In the first six months since launching at the end of June 2022, Watershed program has hosted:

- 360 workshops, talks, performances and events
- Welcomed 2600 people and participants into the space, many run by young people
- Delivered STEM and digital literacy workshops
- Worked with over 50 individual creatives, scientists, academics, agriculturalists and chefs from around the state.

Independent Member for Murchison, Hon. Ruth Forrest MLC, spoke passionately during her adjournment speech in the Legislative Council on Thursday, 16th September.

...over the last few years, it has been a privilege to watch the emergence of a remarkable piece of new community infrastructure in my community on the north-west coast. The Watershed, on the banks of the Inglis River, has thrived, delivering a range of much sought-after programs. It has been a privilege to attend many events and engage with many of my constituents at sold-out evenings, all run by young people employed in training programs delivered by well-known community organisation Big hART. I commend the minister, Mr Jaensch, for his foresight in funding this and other Big hART projects such as Project O over recent years.

With this in mind and with the many valuable outcomes delivered by Big hART, many of which I have spoken about in this place, it is mystifying and disappointing to hear the state Liberal Government has decided to cut Big hART's funding, promised by Mr Jaensch, for the successful Watershed programs. This commitment was provided in writing and stated it would cover three years. After lengthy discussions and verbal communications to that effect, the communication that I was provided with, sadly, notes that only the first year of funding has been approved. The three-year funding has been reneged on and only one year's funding will be provided.

Sadly, more than 2600 residents and participants from Wynyard and towns along the coast will now be both disappointed and bewildered at the loss of the much needed, highly sought-after and sold-out programs that are provided at this facility. What makes it worse is that Big hART's Watershed programs are inclusive and reach out to the whole community. They aim to break negative cycles amongst young people experiencing disadvantage, as well as people living with a disability.

The reason given for the discontinuance was not that Watershed had failed in any evaluative process, but that it was due to the 'challenging fiscal environment.' Government and departmental inefficiency led to any responses to Big hART's requests for information being dragged out for months; by the time the defunding notice was received Big hART there was three weeks before the contract was to end. This is not only disappointing to the young people receiving employment and training through Watershed and audiences that patronise Watershed programs, it is devastating for the staff of the Watershed to suddenly face being retrenched with little prior warning, after believing their positions were funded for at least another two years.

Big hART CEO Dr Scott Rankin said, 'to watch our staff and local young people achieving so much and delivering such strong programs, it is appalling to watch departmental bungling, poor government process, buck passing and broken promises leave this remarkable community venture in disarray. On top of that, to have the government suggest otherwise, is both blame shifting and cost shifting and makes it doubly wounding. The only course now is for the Premier to step in, and, for a relatively small amount of money, secure this project for a part of the State which both needs and wants it.'

The Watershed website is: <https://thewatershed.bighart.org/>

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Adjournment Speech by Hon. Ruth Forrest MLC: <https://ruthforrest.com.au/inthedia/9-video/1131-adjournment-speech-big-hart-funding-cut>

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Printmaking workshop at Watershed, Wynyard 2023