

Designing a Free 24 Hour Stay Precinct

Practical principles for planning short stay visitor precincts that lift the local economy.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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A well designed 24 hour precinct is a piece of economic infrastructure.

Across Australia, regional councils are increasingly recognising the value of the visitor economy. Many have invested in visitor centres, main street beautification, events and destination marketing. Yet one of the simplest and most cost effective opportunities often receives the least strategic attention: the free 24 hour RV stay precinct.

Done well, a 24 hour stay precinct is not simply somewhere for travellers to spend the night. It is an economic development asset that encourages visitors to stop, explore, spend locally and often extend their stay.

Done poorly, it becomes little more than a parking area that delivers limited economic value while generating concerns from residents and local accommodation providers.

The difference lies in planning.

This paper explores the planning principles, governance arrangements and visitor amenities that transform a basic overnight stop into a catalyst for local economic growth.

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The Rise of the Self Drive Visitor

Australia's caravan and motorhome sector has grown into one of the country's most significant domestic tourism markets.

Travellers are increasingly seeking:

- Authentic regional experiences rather than mass market destinations.
- Flexibility in how long they stay and where they stop next.
- Walkable towns where they can leave the vehicle and explore on foot.
- Value for money, not the cheapest option.
- Communities that make them feel genuinely welcome.

Unlike traditional holidaymakers, they often decide where to stop on the day. A welcoming, well designed overnight precinct can be the deciding factor between stopping in your town or driving to the next one.

For regional councils, this flexibility represents a major opportunity.

Think Beyond Parking

One of the most common planning mistakes is viewing a 24 hour stay precinct as a parking project.

It is not.

It is a visitor experience project.

Visitors do not remember the dimensions of a parking bay.

They remember:

- The bakery where the owner recommended the scenic drive.
- The pub with live music and a warm welcome.
- The cellar door where they lost track of the afternoon.
- The walking path along the river.
- The volunteer at the visitor information centre.
- The town that made them want to stay another day.

The role of the precinct is to connect visitors with these experiences.

Planning Around the Visitor Journey

Successful precincts are designed around how visitors actually behave.

A typical visitor journey looks like this:

Arrival

Easy access from the highway with clear directional signage.

Parking

Large, level spaces suitable for caravans and motorhomes without difficult manoeuvring.

Orientation

Maps, visitor information, walking routes and recommendations for local businesses.

Exploration

Visitors walk into town, have lunch, browse shops, visit attractions and meet local business owners.

Overnight Stay

Travellers relax, enjoy the town and often decide to remain longer.

Every stage presents opportunities for local economic activity.

Location Is Everything

A beautifully designed precinct on the edge of an industrial estate will rarely deliver the same economic outcomes as a modest facility located within walking distance of the town centre.

The ideal location should allow visitors to reach:

- Cafés, bakeries and restaurants.
- Supermarkets and everyday retail.
- The visitor information centre.
- Parks, riverfronts and public open space.
- Cellar doors, breweries or local produce outlets.

Without moving their vehicle.

Walkability is one of the strongest predictors of visitor spending.

Essential Amenities

Many councils assume expensive infrastructure is required.

The reality is different.

Travellers consistently value well maintained essentials.

Priority amenities include:

- Level, generously sized parking bays.
- Potable water refill points.
- An accessible RV dump point.
- Clean public toilets available 24 hours.
- Rubbish and recycling bins that are emptied regularly.
- Lighting that supports safety without disturbing residents.
- Clear signage explaining permitted use and length of stay.

Quality maintenance is far more important than luxury facilities.

Designing for Large Vehicles

Caravans and motorhomes have different needs from passenger vehicles.

Planning should consider:

- Turning circles suited to rigs up to twelve metres long.
- Drive through or pull through bays wherever possible.
- Level surfaces that avoid the need to unhitch or level up.
- Overhead clearance free of low branches and awnings.
- Wide, sealed access roads that avoid tight corners.

Small design decisions significantly improve visitor confidence.

Governance Matters

Good planning must be supported by good governance.

A successful precinct should operate under clear policies covering:

- Maximum length of stay, typically 24 to 72 hours.
- Eligibility for self contained vehicles.
- Fees, if any, and how they are administered.
- Bookings, arrivals and departures.
- Behaviour, noise and site conduct.
- Enforcement responsibilities and complaint handling.

These policies should be simple, consistent and visitor friendly.

Addressing Community Concerns

Free overnight stays sometimes generate concerns from residents or local businesses.

Common issues include:

- Perceived competition with commercial caravan parks.
- Amenity impacts such as noise, litter or lighting.
- Confusion about who is entitled to stay.
- Assumptions that free stays reduce local spending.

Experience across Australia suggests these concerns are best addressed through:

- Early engagement with caravan park operators and neighbouring residents.
- Clear rules and visible enforcement.
- Positioning the precinct as complementary to commercial accommodation.
- Sharing data on visitor spending in the town centre.
- Ongoing community reporting on outcomes.

Most self contained RV travellers are highly respectful of local communities and appreciate well managed facilities.

Working With Local Businesses

The purpose of a 24 hour stay precinct is to stimulate local spending.

Councils should actively involve businesses by:

- Co-designing signage and welcome material with the business community.
- Distributing a walking map that features local traders.
- Inviting businesses to run tastings, tours or specials for visitors.
- Encouraging retailers to open outside standard hours where practical.
- Sharing visitor feedback so businesses can respond to changing needs.

A visitor who parks once and spends the afternoon exploring the town generates value across multiple businesses.

Learning from Regional Australia

Langhorne Creek, South Australia

Frank Potts Reserve demonstrates how modest infrastructure combined with exceptional local experiences can create a highly regarded RV destination. Visitors can easily walk to wineries, hospitality venues and the general store, encouraging overnight stays and increased local spending.

William Creek, South Australia

Despite a tiny resident population, William Creek has become an iconic stop because practical infrastructure supports unforgettable experiences such as scenic flights over Lake Eyre and travel along the Oodnadatta Track.

Daly Waters, Northern Territory

The combination of authentic hospitality, memorable experiences and visitor friendly infrastructure has transformed a remote settlement into one of Australia's best known RV destinations.

Warrnambool, Victoria

Warrnambool demonstrates how larger regional centres can integrate visitor infrastructure with walkable retail precincts, coastal attractions and year round tourism experiences.

Measuring Success

Councils should move beyond simply counting overnight stays.

Better performance indicators include:

- Average length of stay in the town.
- Visitor spend per party per day in local businesses.
- Repeat visitation and referrals from previous guests.
- Online reviews and destination sentiment.
- Business turnover trends in the surrounding streets.
- Return on investment against the precinct capital and operating cost.

These measures provide a clearer picture of economic impact.

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Five Planning Principles

1. Plan for economic outcomes, not parking capacity. Every planning decision should encourage visitors to engage with local businesses.
2. Prioritise walkability. Visitors who can comfortably walk into town spend more.
3. Keep infrastructure simple but maintain it exceptionally well. Cleanliness and reliability create positive first impressions.
4. Integrate the precinct into the visitor experience. Maps, local stories, public art and visitor information strengthen destination appeal.
5. Design with flexibility. Infrastructure should accommodate future growth in caravan sizes, changing travel patterns and emerging visitor expectations.

Looking Ahead

Australia's caravan and RV market will continue to expand as flexible travel, remote work and longer life expectancy reshape domestic tourism.

Communities that invest thoughtfully today will position themselves to benefit from increased visitor spending for decades.

The opportunity is not simply to provide another place to park.

It is to create destinations where visitors choose to stop, stay, spend and return.

Conclusion

A free 24 hour stay precinct should never be viewed as a cost.

It is an investment in the visitor economy.

When planned strategically, it supports local businesses, encourages longer stays, improves road safety, strengthens destination appeal and contributes to more resilient regional economies.

The most successful regional communities understand that the precinct itself is not the destination.

It is the gateway.

Its purpose is to connect travellers with the people, businesses, landscapes and experiences that make a town worth remembering.

Communities that embrace this broader perspective will be far better positioned to capture the growing economic opportunity presented by Australia's expanding RV tourism market.

WHERE THIS LEADS NEXT

Turning insight into action.

Every regional community has the potential to strengthen its visitor economy. The difference lies in leadership, planning and a willingness to think beyond individual assets and towards the whole visitor experience.

If you would like to discuss how these principles apply to your council, tourism organisation or region, Argo Advisory & Consulting works with regional leaders across Australia to translate insight into practical, measurable outcomes.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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About the Author

Founder and Principal Consultant, Argo Advisory & Consulting. David advises regional councils, tourism organisations and economic development agencies on visitor economy strategy, RV tourism and regional growth. Drawing on deep marketing expertise, Australian authenticity and extensive travel throughout regional Australia, he helps communities develop practical, evidence based strategies that increase visitation, strengthen local businesses and create more resilient regional economies.