House units to fill void for retiring farmers, residents

DAVID JOHNSTON

SWIFTS Creek Bush Nursing Centre has embarked on the biggest challenge of its 105-year existence with a plan to create independent living accommodation to allow farmers and other residents to live locally for longer.

Estimated to cost $3.5 million, the project kicked off last year when a property on the edge of town was bought with the goal of building 10 two-bedroom units within the next three to five years.

The centre's board of management hopes to have planning approval by the end of this year before attention turns to securing grant funding and philanthropic backing.

The nearby Omeo hospital has an aged-care facility, but centre manager Sue Carroll said no independent living options for elderly residents who wanted to stay local existed in the wider district that includes Benambra and Ensay.

"So many of the elderly have told us they can't keep managing their big homes and their farms so they sell up and leave," she said.

"They aren't ready for a nursing home, but there is nothing in between.

"We want to help those who can still care for themselves, but can't care for their big properties."

The property bought at auction last year was originally the site of a butter factory that opened early last century and operated until the end of World War II.

A house was later built on the site and was the long-time home of two of the town's best-known residents, Edna Gale and Pat Oram, who both lived into their 90s.

Ms Oram, a registered nurse, did relief shifts at the bush nurse centre and Ms Gale was instrumental in the creation of the town's swimming pool.

The accommodation project is also being supported behind the scenes by people who have strong family connections to Swifts Creek.



Swifts Creek Bush Nursing Centre committee president Eddy Mauger with manager Sue Carroll, and inset, Sue with administration officer Deborah Crellin. Pictures: Yuri Kouzmin

Committee president Eddy Mauger said it wanted to repay "these highly valued" community members rather than them being forced to move to a larger, unfamiliar town in their twilight years.

"They are what I would call our iconic characters who've built our footy clubs, our pubs and are the reason this area has got such a fantastic reputation as excellent cattle breeders and excellent sheep breeders," he said.