Richmond has probably seen more busts than booms in its 148-year history.

But now the tiny north Queensland outback town wants to turn the tide and rebuild a population by inspiring others to join the simple country life its 827 residents cherish.

Workers drifted away with the decline in the shearing industry in the early 1990s and, in recent years, mining towns lured more with higher wages.

The town has launched Richmond Uncovered, a grassroots community campaign initiated by Commerce Richmond Inc, in an attempt to reduce potential population decline and highlight the benefits of the remote town and its people. The Queensland Government’s Building Rural Communities Fund has provided about $14,000 with additional funding from campaign sponsors including the Richmond Shire Council.

“Population decline is reasonably well established here and it has been since the end of the sheep boom,” says Richmond Uncovered project co-ordinator Sara Hales, who runs Hales livestock services with her husband.

At the height of the “sheep boom” teams of up to 12 shearers could work for 10 months of the year and as a result many set up home in the town with their families.

“It was the equivalent of having the mining industry in our area because in those days you had big seasons … they (shearers) were very big money earners and of course they spent lots of money in the town,” says Richmond butcher Barry Carrington, who worked with his wife in the shearing sheds before it became unsustainable.

The shearer left as cattle became the main industry but stagnant beef prices and the recent live export ban have created problems.

“The economy changes, the grazing evolved, technology changes, it’s the same story across rural Australia – our problems are not unique,” Hales says.

John Wharton, a grazier who has served as Richmond Shire mayor since 1997, says the industry continues to struggle: “The cattle industry came along and there was a crash in the ‘70s and today it hasn’t improved at all.”

“The major effect to our industries is the dollar. Our dollar should be back down there and these smaller communities would be booming. “So it’s a real battle but we’re resilient, we’re fighters out in this country.”

In a sign of the issues confronting graziers, Wharton recently lost a personal battle to stop the sale of his Runnymede station, which had been in the family for nearly 100 years. Lender Bankwest called in receivers KordaMentha late last year to recover a debt reported to be about $12 million. The legal battle continues.

Located on the Flinders Highway about halfway between Mount Isa in the west and Townsville on the east coast, Richmond was always going to feel an impact from Queensland’s resources boom.

Though the attraction of sky-high wages led many to relocate, others prefer to commute and with accommodation increasingly at a premium in booming regional centres, there is optimism more resources workers and their families may be encouraged to live in Richmond.

“We’ve probably got at least half a dozen people now that work in the mines. The nearest one is a couple of hundred kilometres away and most of them do seven on, seven off (work rosters) so it’s very possible,” Carrington says.

Moving from city to the bush may have few incentives for some, but lifestyle is one of the campaign’s main selling points as evidenced by its slogan – “Richmond, BIG on the little things”.

“What we love about living here is the sense of community and the connection you have with everyone. Things like people saying ‘hello’ and they know who you are and they look out for your kids, it’s the real place to raise a family,” says Hales, who arrived from Toowoomba 11 years ago and has two sons, aged 8 and 3, and a daughter, 5.

“The kids are growing up, they’re connecting to their community, learning to converse with people from different age groups and backgrounds.

“It’s the little things. We can’t say we have Dreamworld around the corner but we can say we have this community and it’s really, really special.”

Carrington says “freedom” and “never
being lonely” are the best things about living in Richmond.

“The freedom that I know my son can walk to school in the morning and home in the afternoon and he’s safe. I go to bed at night and sleep like a baby because I know no one’s going to break into my house and that’s a wonderful thing,” he says.

Pressed on the worst aspects of living in Richmond the mayor concedes the summers are scorcher.

“It gets to 43, 44 (degrees), that’s quite common,” Wharton says.

But he adds that Lake Fred Tritton, built by the council in 2003 and “the only water that you see on the road from Townsville to Mount Isa apart from the Burdekin River”, provides a popular spot for swimming, fishing and water sports.

The council has separately, for several years, been on a drive to recruit more residents and recently attracted attention after offering $1 blocks of land to anyone willing to move to the town. In 2008, a similar offer saw seven blocks put up—and three now have houses on them.

Wharton says it will be six months before the new round of blocks are ready and the $1 allows eligible applicants, who have met criteria including a commitment to build a house within four years, to enter a ballot for the land.

“We’ve had over 800 emails and telephone calls. It’s just unbelievable,” he says.

Of course, anyone moving to Richmond needs to earn a living and locals say there is no shortage of opportunity.

“You can rent a shop for $200 a week that’s probably five times the size of one you’d pay $2000 a week for in the city,” Carrington says.

“If you pick and choose what sort of business you do, you don’t have competition either. We don’t have a tyre barn in town so someone could come in set up a proper tyre barn and they’d get every bit of business.

“A lady opened up a hairdressers (recently) and there’s 20 people trying to get in.”

There are vacancies for tradespeople poached by the resources sector and the agricultural industry that employs 40 per cent of the town is “always looking for staff”, Wharton says.

And longer term, more ambitious projects are being eyed which could change the landscape of Richmond’s economy.

As well as the prospect of mining resources nearer the town, (“after they get the easy stuff out they’ll come and find the harder stuff,” says Wharton), the development of irrigated agriculture along the Flinders River has been mooted.

Hales says the town’s goals aren’t unrealistic, with just two or three new families enough to make a difference to the town and its economy.

Hales and the rest of the country community are determined to move forward, even if they aren’t quite sure what awaits them.

“I think we have to embrace the way the national economy is changing and find our new role within it and stop looking backwards and wishing for the golden days; look forwards and find our new opportunity,” she says.

“There’s a lot of that going on in Richmond at the moment so the future’s pretty good. We’re going to find it if we’re not just sitting here, we’re out there fighting for it.”

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SARA HALES
RICHMOND UNCOVERED PROJECT CO-ORDINATOR