

# Friends of Suai/Covalima Annual Report 2024/25



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# About the Friends of Suai/Covalima Community Reference Committee

The Friends of Suai Community Reference Committee delivers on the City of Port Phillip's commitment to its longstanding friendship with the Covalima district in Timor-Leste. The Committee promotes the Friends of Suai program within the Port Phillip community and supports ongoing relationships between the Port Phillip and Covalima communities.

The Committee comprises local community members with diverse backgrounds and interests, together with a Council representative and key City of Port Phillip staff.

In September 2020, the City of Port Phillip reaffirmed its friendship with Covalima district through a third formally recognised ten-year Friendship Agreement (2020–2030). This agreement commits both communities to building productive and sustainable relationships, guided by principles of best practice in international development.

Friends of Suai works in partnership with the Covalima Community Centre (CCC) in Suai to achieve the aims and objectives of the Friendship Agreement. The partnership focuses on programs that promote education, leadership, and community development in Covalima.

In December 2021, Council decided to implement a transition plan to cease Council funding for the friendship program by 2025/26. In response to this change in resourcing, the Friends of Suai 2020–25 Strategic Plan was reviewed and replaced by a Strategic Framework. This framework outlines the goals and strategies that will guide future planning and activities, with the overarching objective of supporting the CCC and strengthening its programs towards long-term sustainability.

# Friends of Suai Strategic Framework 2025

**Outcome 1: The Covalima Community Centre (CCC) and its programs are strengthened towards sustainability.**

## **Strategies**

- Support CCC priority programs in education, public health, climate adaptation, livelihoods, social enterprise and advocacy
- Assist and provide mentoring support for CCC capacity strengthening priorities in areas of human resources, management and governance
- Actively work to assist the CCC to gain funding, support and resources.

**Outcome 2: City of Port Phillip (CoPP) and Covalima municipality and their communities are actively engaged in cultural exchange, mutual learning and development activities**

## **Strategies**

- Increase engagement with community organisations, businesses and CoPP residents with the support of Councillors
- Friends of Suai/Covalima hold community events and cultural exchanges (in person or virtual) to celebrate the friendship with the Covalima municipality.

**Outcome 3: Friends of Suai/Covalima is accountable, effective and efficient**

## **Strategies**

- Facilitate communications with CoPP Council, staff, residents and key stakeholders
- Develop new donors and fundraising initiatives
- Implement the Community Reference Committee Terms of Reference.

# Message from the Chair

It is a pleasure to present the Annual Report of the City of Port Phillip Friends of Suai/Covalima (FoS) for 2024/25.

We were pleased to welcome Cr Serge Thomann back to the Committee as the Council representative. Cr Thomann is extremely committed to the Friendship and has already added great value to our work.

On the other hand we were very sorry to lose our Coordinator for the past seven years Carlene Harlock, who finished her employment at the City of Port Phillip in December, due to the position being phased out. Carlene made an outstanding contribution in the role, providing invaluable mentoring and support to the team in Suai, as well as planning and implementing all the work achieved under our strategy with great skill. She is enormously missed.

As outlined in the introduction to this Annual Report, we have now adopted a Strategic Framework to guide our work, rather than the previous more comprehensive Strategic Plan, taking account of reduced resources at our disposal. A similar direction is being followed, albeit with fewer strategies able to be achieved.

We acknowledge the life and work of our friend and mentor Patsy Thatcher who died on 19 November 2024. Patsy was a founding member on the Friends of Suai Committee in 2000 and remained active for over a decade. You can read a tribute to Patsy later in the report.

2025 is a significant year as it is 25 years since Timor-Leste became an independent nation, it is the 25th anniversary of the formation of the Friendship between the City of Port Phillip and Suai, and 50 years since the Indonesian takeover of the country. In May we jointly celebrated with the two other Friendship groups formed at the same time as ours, at an event held at the Coburg Town Hall. Looking forward, we have many activities planned from 1 July 2025, with several events to take place including a Friendship conference in Dili.

At the Covalima Community Centre their projects are developing and the organisation is increasing a focus on human rights and inclusiveness with disability and LGBTIQ+ rights being recognised.

Thanks to the City of Port Phillip for agreeing to continue to provide a core funding grant to the CCC and a heartfelt thank you to all our generous supporters and donors who make the work possible.

Megs Alston

Chair Friends of Suai/Covalima

# The Covalima Community Centre (CCC)

Friends of Suai (FoS) work in partnership with the Covalima Community Centre (CCC) in Suai to meet the aims and objectives of the Friendship Agreement and to ensure the friendship pursues best practice in international development. The CCC has benefited greatly from the friendship and has a high capacity for development.

The CCC is a vibrant, well-managed and inclusive community centre, and an important hub in Covalima providing training, support and connection for people throughout the district. There is a strong focus on inclusion and gender equality in all programs.

The CCC Commission (the management committee), staff and volunteers also provide leadership in community development activities throughout Covalima district of Timor-Leste.

The CCC is a registered NGO and training organisation and has partnerships with local and international NGOs to implement a range of programs. The CCC manages initiatives funded through community donations and fundraising by FoS, and also has internal income generating activities including community training programs and hiring of facilities.

## CCC activities and operations

The 35 staff at the CCC implement a range of community development programs and initiatives that have a significant impact on improving the lives, wellbeing and opportunities for people throughout this very poor district of Timor-Leste. Their work is guided by their vision to 'build a community in which everyone has the opportunity to develop their capacities so that they can contribute to the social and economic development of the Municipality of Covalima, Timor-Leste'.

The City of Port Phillip funding for the FoS program has been the main contributor to the core running costs of the CCC, including key staff salaries, administration and operational costs. Since 2021, this funding has incrementally decreased and was due to cease in 2024/25, however Council affirmed in May in its 2025/26 Budget to continue to provide an annual grant of \$15,000 for the next five years, for the duration of the current Friendship Agreement. FoS are working to raise additional funds and assist the CCC to find alternative income sources.

## Financial management and audit

The CCC finance team has clear and transparent systems and policies for record-keeping and monitoring program income and expenditure. Each year the Centre is audited externally by CC Business Solutions in Dili.

This year the annual audit was funded by FoS and the City of Port Phillip. The 2023/24 audit took place in July 2024. The CCC received a clean audit report and recommendations have been implemented.

## Community training

Many young people in Covalima enrol in English and computer training courses at the CCC. Students report that the training allows them to improve their school grades (at primary and secondary school level), increase their chances to access further study opportunities and gain skills for employment. This year there were 120 registrations for English language training and 35 registrations for computer training.

## Suai Secondary School

Friends of Suai and the CCC has had a long history of supporting the Suai Secondary School, which is the only public senior secondary school in Suai and has more than 2,000 students. The water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) project was a major undertaking by FoS and the CCC in recent years and has provided running water and toilets for the large school community. Having these facilities has improved student attendance and outcomes. The facilities are well maintained and regularly monitored by CCC staff. Having a consistent water supply has also meant that gardens have been planted around the school grounds.

## School library

Friends of Suai has provided funds, resources and skilled volunteers to establish and maintain a library at the school. This includes funding the salaries of two librarians who interact with students and manage the library collection which includes more than 4,200 fiction, non-fiction and reference books in four languages. The librarians report that students enjoy using the library space and teachers regularly borrow the science equipment, also donated by FoS, for class activities.

From 30 June 2025, FoS will no longer have the capacity to fund the librarian salaries. The school Principal was advised and there is a plan for the school to take responsibility for the management of the library. The current librarians will be retrained to gain skills for future employment opportunities at the CCC.

## Scholarships and employment

Providing educational opportunities for disadvantaged students is a strong focus of the Friendship and scholarships are funded through FoS fundraising activities and community donations.

*Photo: Two students are studying Hospitality at the local Canossian Vocational Training Centre in Suai; a course with great employment outcomes.*



Since 2012, FoS has funded 183 scholarships to provide opportunities for young people in Covalima who would not otherwise be able to undertake post-secondary training.

FoS provides scholarships for students to further their education at senior secondary schools, vocational training colleges and universities in Timor Leste, with courses from 12 months through to four years in duration.

In 2024/25, FoS has supported nine new students undertaking courses in hospitality, primary school teaching, motor mechanical training and electrical studies.

## Graduations

One young man graduated from SENAI training centre in Becora, Dili in September 2024 after completing training to become a motorbike mechanic.

Another student received a scholarship to study general construction at the Don Bosco Training Centre in Dili, specialising in electrical. He completed an extended practical placement in Suai at the end of his training and graduated in April 2025.

In March 2025, a graduation ceremony was held for students at ICFP Teachers College in Baucau, who have successfully completed their third or fourth year of primary school teaching. Two students completed their fourth year and are now embarking on their careers teaching the next generation. Two students have completed their third year and are now underway with their final year of study and will graduate in March 2026.



*Photo: Fourth year graduates, Meliana and Emanuel at the graduation ceremony in March.*

## Employment for teachers

For many years FoS has funded scholarships for students to attend ICFP Teachers College in Baucau, to become qualified primary school teachers. There have been fantastic outcomes for the graduates, with most now employed and working in schools throughout Timor-Leste.

In 2024, as part of the Timor-Leste National Government teacher career regime, many of the graduates are now being appointed as permanent teachers at public schools throughout the country.



*Photo: Elizia, a fourth year student at Baucau Teachers College, on placement at Ladi primary school in Covalima.*

## IT Social Enterprise

The InfoTimor Social Enterprise (ITSE) at the CCC provides training opportunities for students and local organisations to learn to use Word, Excel & PowerPoint and to access the internet.

The ITSE also generates income by selling laptops, desktop computers and accessories (provided by the City of Port Phillip and community donations) to community members and organisations. Staff have been trained to maintain and repair these computers.

There is great demand for second hand computer equipment and sourcing computers to send to Suai is a priority for FoS. This year, the ITSE focused on marketing to boost income-generating activities and increased community engagement to better meet local needs.

## Reforestation – Rai Matak

With One Seed (now 'Rai Matak' – Green Land) is a certified carbon forestry program in Timor-Leste, partnering with subsistence farmers to plant and maintain trees, providing them with annual income and supporting environmental restoration.

The program has distributed over 100,000 trees to more than 248 small landholders in Covalima since 2019. This year, there has been expansion into two new sub-districts in Covalima and extensive community engagement.

Digital technology (TreeO2) is used to track tree planting and survival, ensuring accurate payments to farmers, while ongoing training, community engagement and the inclusion of fruit trees help increase both environmental and economic benefits for local communities.

Annual payments are made to farmers for planting and maintaining trees, providing vital income and financial stability for rural communities. In December 2024, USD 23,749 was distributed to farmers in Tilomar sub-district, calculated based on the number of surviving trees tracked using TreeO2 digital technology.



*Photo: The Rai Matak team at the CCC work with farmers to grow and plant thousands of trees.*

## Empowering women

A key focus area for the CCC is to contribute to the empowerment of women; this includes support for economic activities and the encouragement of women's leadership and participation in political and civil life.

The CCC is now nationally renowned for their work to support women's leadership, gender equality and raise awareness about gender-based violence. Their work is having a profound impact on the everyday lives of women and children, including people with disabilities, as they build the confidence and capacity to advocate for their rights.

The International Women’s Development Agency (IWDA) has worked in partnership with the CCC since 2009 to implement the Rural Women’s Development Program. IWDA is an important partner of the CCC, regularly contributing to operational costs and providing professional development opportunities for staff.



*Photo: The CCC Rural Women's Development team organised a successful event in Labarai village on 25 November 2024 to commemorate 16 days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence. The event included speakers and theatre group performances to share information about gender-based violence, human trafficking and inclusion.*

## CCC staff development activity

Organisational strengthening is a key focus area for both FoS and the CCC Strategic Plans, and is also a priority for other CCC partners. Program partners provide many development training opportunities as they recognise that training strengthens the CCC capacity and sustainability.

FoS offers mentoring and support to the CCC Director, and it was identified that staff would benefit from training to develop intermediate level skills using Excel spreadsheets.

FoS provided funds for eight staff at the CCC to undertake a five-day training program in February 2025. Program leaders reported that they are now confident to use Excel to create financial reports. CCC trainers also reported that they are now confident to provide intermediate level Excel training which is relevant to the workplace, including for municipal government.

# Port Phillip community events

## Suai Massacre commemoration

This year marked the 25th anniversary of the Suai Church Massacre, which occurred on 6 September 1999. FoS held a commemoration event to honour those who lost their lives and to express solidarity with our friends in Timor-Leste.

Guest speakers at the event included Dr Lia Kent, Research Fellow at the Australian National University and author of *The Unruly Dead: Spirits, Memory and State Formation in Timor-Leste*, and Balthasar Kehi, academic and respected Timorese community leader.

More than 40 people gathered in remembrance at the St Kilda South Port Uniting Church. The event provided an opportunity to reflect on the courage and resilience of the Timorese people, the sacrifices made in their struggle for independence, and their continued efforts to rebuild and strengthen their nation.

## Celebrating 25 years of Friendships

2025 is the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Friendships which were formed to support Timorese communities after the devastation when the Indonesians left in 1999. The movement grew to about 40 friendships, each with a distinct focus of activity and way of working.

The first friendships formed were Friends of Suai, Friends of Aileu and Friends of Baucau, each with Friendship Agreements signed by Xanana Gusmão when he was in Melbourne on 4 May 2000. A special event was held to celebrate this occasion at Coburg Town Hall on 6 May 2025. The celebration was attended by Mayor Cr Louise Crawford and members of the FoS CRC. FoS Chair, Megs Alston, participated in a panel discussion.

A Friendship Conference for the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary will be held in Dili in July 2025. It is being organised jointly by the Ministry of State Administration in Dili and the Australia Timor-Leste Friendship Network in Australia. FoS will have a small participation of self-funded members together with a delegation from the CCC from Suai.

## Fundraising activities

### Film night fundraiser

A film night fundraiser was held at the Classic Cinema on 1 August 2024. 37 people attend the screening of 'The President's Wife', raising over \$500 for FoS programs in Covalima.

## Successful trivia night

On 20 March 2025, FoS held its major annual fundraising event, a trivia night at the Middle Park Bowls Club, which successfully raised more than \$11,000 to support community development initiatives in Covalima, Timor-Leste.

The event featured ten competing teams, with more than 95 attendees. The success of the evening was made possible through the generous contributions of local businesses and individuals who provided items for the silent auction and raffle. Strong support was also provided by the City of Port Phillip councillors, staff volunteers, and Mayor Cr Louise Crawford, who performed the role of Quiz Master.



*Photo: Ten tables competing at the annual trivia night in March 2025.*

## Donations and fundraising

Friends of Suai is a registered fundraiser with Consumer Affairs Victoria and provides annual reports on fundraising activities.

In addition to fundraising events, FoS received \$44,761 in donations from individuals, community organisations and companies in Port Phillip and the wider community. FoS is grateful for all donations and would like to acknowledge long-term donors and those who make regular contributions.

In-kind donations from the community included items from local businesses and individuals for the silent auction and raffle at the annual trivia night. FoS also received donations of sewing machines, stationery, books, laptops and computer accessories from community members and Council. These items have been shipped to Suai.

## **In-kind support from Council**

### **Staff volunteering**

Council staff were offered the opportunity to support the friendship by assisting at the annual trivia night in March 2025. Four staff volunteered their time and did a fantastic job to help the event run smoothly and ensure people enjoyed the evening.

Council officers also provided support with the collection, storage and transport of items donated by Council and community members to send to Suai.

### **Computer accessories shipped to Suai**

The City of Port Phillip also provides in-kind support for the friendship by donating computers that would otherwise be disposed of when upgrading equipment. The equipment is shipped to the IT Social Enterprise at the CCC in Suai where it is used to deliver community training programs or sold to the community at affordable rates. This year Council provided computer accessories to be shipped, with plans for further donations later in 2025.

## **Remembering Patsy Thatcher**

Our friend and mentor Patsy Thatcher passed away on 19 November 2024. Patsy was a founding member on the Friends of Suai Committee in 2000 and remained active for over a decade. She was generous with her deep knowledge of Timor-Leste and anthropology, and opened her home to many Timorese visitors.

Patsy was deeply committed during the Timorese journey to self-determination and her contribution was recognised by the National Government of Timor-Leste. You can read the full tribute here:

[Statement on the passing of Patsy Thatcher « Government of Timor-Leste](#)

Vale Patsy.

# Financial report

## Friends of Suai/Covalima Income and Expenditure 1 July 2024 to 30 June 2025

<b>INCOME</b>	
City of Port Phillip program funding	\$ 15,536
Donations and grants	\$ 32,700
Trivia night fundraiser	\$ 11,123
Film night fundraiser	\$ 938
Bank interest	\$ 1,053
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>\$ 61,350</b>
<b>EXPENSES</b>	
Covalima Community Centre (CCC) core funding	\$ 22,640
CCC project support	\$ 10,217
CCC annual external audit	\$ 3,297
CCC local government training	\$ 4,203
Scholarships	\$ 25,451
Library project	\$ 4,100
Shipment of computer equipment	\$ 1,150
Fundraising costs	\$ 432
Administration and meeting costs	\$ 1,032
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$ 72,522</b>

## Friends of Suai/Covalima Donations account - July 2024 to 30 June 2025

<b>Opening balance 1/7/2024</b>	<b>\$ 31,692</b>
Plus income	\$ 45,814
Less expenditure	\$ 56,986
<b>Closing balance 30/6/2025</b>	<b>\$ 20,520</b>