

A draught at the post office?

- **Kate Lahey**
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IT COULD soon be one of the few places in Australia where you can get a pot with your post.

But not everyone in the Victorian town of Blackwood is happy about it.

Blackwood, in mineral springs country about an hour north-west of Melbourne, has a permanent population of just over 300.

Until now, residents have dropped into the Blackwood General Store to collect their letters, bump into a friend and share the latest news.

But the store's owners have decided to dump the mail for financial reasons, because Australia Post refused their request for more money.

The store and the pub are the only businesses in Blackwood open throughout the week, and Australia Post is negotiating with the Blackwood Hotel to run the post office from next month.

Publican Peter Olivieri declined to comment while negotiations continue.

Australia Post spokeswoman Nadine Lyford said the mail area would be separate from the bar, easily accessible through a side entrance.

At a recent public meeting on the matter, some Blackwood residents expressed concerns about having to dodge drinkers to post a letter.

Judith de Groot, a former owner of the general store, said she also worried about children collecting mail from the venue and being tempted by the pub's cigarette machine.

"I don't want the post office moved to the pub," she said. "A lot of people really don't like doing business in the hotel. I personally wouldn't like to do business in the hotel.

"I don't mind going to a hotel for a drink, or a meal, not that I do it very often, but I certainly don't believe that the hotel is the place for mail."

Others, like John Ryan, simply want Australia Post to start a home delivery service.

A resident of 55 years, Barbara Sweet wants the post office to remain in town. "I'm quite happy about it going to the hotel," she said.

Ms Sweet, 71, said she was not interested in a home delivery service, as she liked the social aspect of collecting her mail.

Melton MP Don Nardella said the post office was an important part of the town's social capital and he wanted to keep it open, even in the pub.

"If the postbox hasn't been cleared for a week, they know Mr or Mrs Smith may not be terribly well, so it provides that link," he said. The store has dropped several services in recent years, and the pub is likely to reintroduce greeting cards and magazines.

"We used to get our petrol over there," Ms Sweet said. "We used to get fish and chips, which was marvellous.

"We used to be able to go and buy a sympathy card if we wanted one, but there's none of those any more.



Lynne Wright and Peter Olivieri outside their Blackwood Hotel. Now Australia Post wants to set up a post office there, because the general store decided to dump the business. PICTURE: PAUL ROVERE Photo: *Paul Rovere PTR*

"I guess the newspapers will be the next to go, and with a bit of luck they might take that on at the hotel as well."