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The More I See, the Less I Know for Sure

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All for One and One for All

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AROUND THE NATION

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COVER PHOTO: Aerial view of Hobart which is set to have its inner city area revitalised
Photography by Tourism Tasmania and Nick Osborne
As spring heralds a time of renewal and rejuvenation, councils too face a time of significant change and growth following the recent water and sewerage reforms and the impending Local Government Elections. In this edition of LGAT News, we explore the process of change and how councils can successfully adapt to new leadership, policies, or conditions, and effectively convey those changes to stakeholders.

The LGAT too has been undergoing some changes of late. We welcome Mayor Barry Easther OAM who was elected as our new President in late July following Mike Gaffney’s resignation. Head to page 11 for details of the appointment and to page 6 for some insight into what motivates him in Five Minutes with Mayor Barry Easther. There has also been a reshuffle of responsibilities among the Association’s policy staff following Liz Gillam’s departure in July and the recent appointment of Kate Hiscock as Senior Policy Officer. For the benefit of our members, an outline of the key areas of responsibility for all policy staff has been outlined on page 38.

If you are a council manager and sense that staff morale is slipping, or that tensions are mounting in the workplace, Professor Niki Ellis’ article on page 44 provides valuable insight into the long-term impact of stress in the workplace as well as some useful strategies for overcoming it. Some readers may recall Prof Ellis’ television show, Stressbuster, which was aired nationally on ABC TV last year.

According to Roland Naufal, Director of 4C Consulting and a keynote speaker at the 2009 Local Government Conference, an Australian woman currently aged 50 has a better than even chance of living until the age of 90. If this is the case I certainly hope that, by the time I reach my senior years, the appropriate support structures and services are in place to enable me to comfortably reside at home for as long as possible. It would appear that I am not alone in my sentiments, as a growing number of people are reluctant to move into residential care. On page 30, Roland discusses the latest ageing trends and the development process identified by the World Health Organisation to foster an age friendly community that supports older people to develop their own solutions to the issues they face.
The More I See, the Less I Know for Sure

BARRY EASTHER OAM, PRESIDENT
Local Government Association of Tasmania

Having been a member of the General Management Committee of the Local Government Association for a few years now and serving for a period as Vice President, I thought I had a pretty good handle on what was going on in Local Government circles and what was coming up next. But let me say this. It wasn’t until I stepped into the role of President that I became fully aware of what the cut and thrust of policy and politics really meant.

Meetings with Ministers, briefings of Legislative Councillors, developing strategies and prosecuting positions on behalf of Local Government are a daily occurrence. Overlay that with the various communication channels that need to be constantly fed to keep member councils and stakeholders informed of what is going on and you begin to gain a real understanding of how much is involved in representing the interests of council members.

And then there are the phone calls and the media requests. Many people have an opinion on what needs to be happening now and what should happen next and they are constantly vigilant in respect of emailing or phoning through their up-to-the-minute views on matters. The press is anxious to get your take on the day’s events - sometimes when it doesn’t even concern you.

Once you manage to get your head above the water on the state issues, you are reminded of your obligations to contribute to the national agenda through the Australian Local Government Association and the Steering Committee for the Council of Australian Local Government.

Believe me, I am not complaining but enjoying my involvement as President, however it’s opening my eyes to the challenges Local Government faces in not only seeking to make its own future, but to respond to the futures that everybody else wants to make for Local Government. The treadmill doesn’t appear to stop. As soon as you think you are getting on top of things, the next wave starts building up.

What has become very clear to me is that Local Government is now so much an integral part of so many of the activities and agendas that others are seeking to pursue. Water and sewerage reform had a very direct impact on councils and while we have all but completed that process, there are several infrastructure issues on the horizon that will catch the attention of councils soon enough. The National Broadband Network rollout, the extension and establishment of new irrigation schemes, and the seeking of a new operator for rail are all issues that will impact on council activities, even though we are not directly involved.

Group those with issues such as compulsory voting, ongoing planning reform, cultural heritage, animal control, the establishment of an ethics commission, and Local Government sustainability, and you can soon see that the pressure doesn’t let up. And these are just the things we are aware of now.

There is no doubt that the last two years have been huge but with all these factors coupled with constitutional reform at the national level, we have a lot of work ahead of us. Councils need to be alert to not only the matters occurring at the local level but the implications of the state and national agendas, and how Local Government needs to position itself in these debates.

My eyes have been opened and I will be working with member councils to make sure that we are all informed and contributing to these important issues.

I would take this opportunity to wish all candidates at the upcoming elections every success and would like to thank those members who are choosing not to stand for the contribution that they have made to Local Government during their time in office.  
Local Government in Tasmania got off to a slow start from the time of settlement, with police districts under the control of magistrates being the first governance structures at the local level. Not until 1835 did we get our first council, Hobart, followed by Launceston in 1857. By 1906 Local Government had become a thriving endeavour, with 149 local bodies in existence providing local services.

That same year, the first Local Government Act was passed, consolidating council boundaries. It brought together councils, town committees and road committees, and provided a proper legislative context in which Local Government could function. Under this first Act all local authorities, other than Hobart and Launceston, were abolished and replaced by 47 municipalities.

With new councils formed, improved governance structures in place and a clearer understanding of the local responsibilities that each had, it became clear that common problems existed across council areas and the effort required to address each on an individual basis was arduous, time-consuming and resource intensive. In 1911, the forerunner to what is now the Local Government Association of Tasmania was formed as a means by which to seek shared solutions to common local problems and to utilise the strength of local representation to work for the betterment of local communities.

With the 100-year anniversary of the Association just around the corner, it is timely to reflect on how that concept of solidarity and working together is translating all these years later.

The two-year water and sewerage reform process tested the solidarity of Local Government in this state on more than one occasion. In what has been a difficult process to manage, and to ensure that adequate levels of information and understanding was available to all council members at the same time, the reform of water and sewerage has perhaps been the greatest testimony for councils working as one to achieve a preferred outcome. Its initial announcement brought with it anger, confusion and a passion that had not been seen in Local Government since the initial amalgamation debate. While divisions existed on whether the reform was good or bad, there was unanimous support for achieving an outcome that did not detract from the ownership and ongoing governance of Local Government in the ultimate solution. The achievement of regional bodies that remained within Local Government ownership and the retention of dividends and guarantee fees was a major coup for the sector and went against the trend in the rest of the country where water infrastructure, in particular, has been wrestled away from councils.

Due diligence, the regulatory regime and the gruelling timetable placed immense pressures on all involved and, just as implementation was in sight, the spectre of the now infamous Community Service Obligations (CSO) raised its ugly head. The final hurdle was in sight but was suddenly moved beyond the finish line and raised in height, with little likelihood of it being able to be scaled. Like marathon runners who “hit the wall”, dizziness and disorientation set in. Local Government drew a deep breath, pulled itself together and determined that not only would it complete the reform but the last hurdle would be jumped, and jumped on its terms.

When we approached Legislative Council members, they were less that convinced that Local Government should be the provider of welfare concessions. The firmness of councils in maintaining a solid position on this matter, following a counter offer from the State Government, resulted in taking a decision to not only continue to meet the cost of the pensioner rate remission but to fund the full cost of water and sewerage concessions on an ongoing basis. More a testament to the steely resolve of councils than an occasion where the hailing of victory was called for, the decision taken by the State Government was difficult and one which must be considered magnanimous.

With water and sewerage reform all but behind us now and, as we look to the centenary of the formation of the Association, I am sure that there will be other war stories from the past that will be reflected upon and even a few more battles before then that we will have to wage. Importantly, the Association continues today to pursue the goals that were originally set for it by its founding fathers in 1911 and I think that if they were around today, they would nod their heads in the way that proud parents do.
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