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Strength by Association

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COVER PHOTO: Junk Theory, one of the many highlights of Ten Days on the Island
The lead-up to midyear is a particularly busy time for the LGAT team who work exceptionally hard to coordinate the annual Local Government Conference, incorporating the CMP Dinner and Local Government Awards. So it is most rewarding when delegates value the experience and express their appreciation for the effort that is put into staging the event, and this year was no exception. Of course, coordinating an event of this size also involves the contributions of many others - our planning partners IPWEA and LGMA, venue managers, speakers, sponsors, trade exhibitors, entertainers, AV operators, printers, designers, our photographer and MC. LGAT would like to thank everyone involved for their professionalism in helping us to deliver such a successful event, particularly given the challenges faced as a result of the unavoidable, last-minute venue change for the dinner due to the swine flu outbreak. We would also like to thank the delegates who attended. Some highlights of the 3-day event are featured on page 19, followed by details of the winners of the 2009 Local Government Awards for Excellence.

For those councils that have been successful in receiving an award, Becher Townshend provides some useful tips on Maximising Your Post-Awards Success on page 39. Community members appreciate knowing when their council is performing particularly well, so don’t miss the opportunity to take your awards success that extra mile and let them know.

On page 30 you will find a summary of the 2009 Census Results, which provides a useful snapshot of the elected members who represent Tasmania’s 29 councils. Being the third census of it’s kind, we are now starting to get a clearer picture of the trends in Local Government leadership. Full details will soon be available on our website.

You will also find details of many other recent happenings in Local Government. We say farewell to outgoing LGAT President, Mayor Mike Gaffney, and welcome the newest member of the LGAT team, Ben Mooney, who has been appointed as Household Hazardous Waste Program Coordinator. We celebrate the latest Federal Government funding announcement to invest in the nation’s community infrastructure, and the success of this year’s Ten Days on the Island event, developed with the support of Tasmania’s 29 councils. For some light, bedtime reading, head to page 8 for Five Minutes with Mayor Alvwyn Boyd.
In my first contribution as Acting President I thought it appropriate to reflect on the matters raised by outgoing President, Mike Gaffney, in his report to the recent Annual General Meeting.

Mike spent some time highlighting the activities of the Local Government Association over recent times. The Association has been criticised for the work it has done in relation to the reform of water and sewerage. Members will recall that the reform was first alluded to by the then Premier in his State of the State address. Structures were established within State Government to progress the reform to the exclusion of Local Government and, despite strong representations, that exclusion remained intact for some time.

At the Association’s 2007 November General Meeting, the membership was canvassed on the reform agenda and expressed its strong opposition to the reform and its disgust at being kept out of the debate on the matter. The meeting acknowledged that, in light of the fact that the reform appeared inevitable, every effort should be made to retain Local Government ownership and control of the water and sewerage assets and responsibility for delivery of the service. The Association was requested to lobby and negotiate a water and sewerage outcome that would see continued ownership by Local Government, regional structures, retention of dividends and tax equivalents by councils, as well as protection of its employees.

A dialogue commenced with State Government on alternative models for reform and, following several months of negotiation, the Association delivered a model that met the key elements of the General Meeting resolution. There were some sticking points in that the governance structure did not accord with the preferred position of Local Government, a fourth corporation was proposed to fulfil common service requirements of the three regional corporations and the corporations would be subject to Parliamentary scrutiny. These latter matters were non-preferred positions for Local Government but ultimate trade-offs to achieve retained ownership, rather than State ownership. The Association also lobbied strongly to secure funding to assist councils with any transition to reform, with the State Government making $5 million available.

The recent planning reforms have again placed the Local Government Association in the spotlight. On becoming aware of the pending reforms, the Association moved quickly to ensure that not only would councils be provided with documentation but would also be offered the opportunity to attend forums to further query and debate the propositions being put forward. The Association did not generate the reforms, nor did it encourage the State Government to bring them forward with the haste with which they arrived. At the earliest opportunity, the Association met with the Minister responsible to discuss the timelines that had been set down. This meeting resulted in a reprieve by extending the period for consultation and having the legislative proposals split into separate Bills to enable even greater scrutiny of the more contentious elements of the reform. This did not equate to the Association supporting the reforms!

Efforts have been made to garner the views of councils through forums and via submissions to ensure that the Association can prosecute the strongest case possible on behalf of members. The Association has also secured policy positions from both major parties within the Tasmanian Parliament opposing forced amalgamations. It continues to publicly defend councils, the communities they represent and local decision-making. The Association has addressed various business and public forums, highlighting the efforts and endeavours of councils to improve their sustainability and the actions being taken to share resources and work cooperatively.

At the national level, the Association was a key advocate for the push for funding of community infrastructure included in the last ALGA budget submission. This was subsequently picked up by the Rudd Government as part of its stimulus package and netted $8 million for Tasmanian community facilities across the state. Participation at the national level has also seen the extension of Roads to Recovery funding and representation on the Council of Australian Local Government, as well as recent announcements extending the community infrastructure package and funding for asset management and financial planning initiatives.

The Association has also established the Code of Conduct Standards Panel which has overseen the conduct of a large number of hearings to resolve differences and issues between and with elected members. This process has allowed for an effective means by which to...

Continued Page 4
have matters of difference independently and expertly addressed while allowing councils to continue to operate in a functional and appropriate manner.

The Association has continued to provide weekend forums for professional development of elected members to accommodate the wishes of those elected members that have permanent jobs. Topics covered are broad but focus on the key issues and topics that councils have identified as being areas of most concern or interest, ranging from governance to finance, infrastructure through to community engagement, and dealing with difficult people. Attendees welcome the networking opportunity and the ability to learn from others as to how common matters are dealt with in different places. The Association also conducts regular forums for general managers and mayors to discuss topical issues and matters of priority interest, and to ensure that there are opportunities for sharing of information and highlights of best practice.

Negotiations are presently underway with the University of Tasmania to provide a practical short course on land use planning for elected members that could be delivered over a two weekend period. The course would provide newly elected members, in particular, with the background, skills and knowledge they require to confidently participate as a member of a planning authority.

A specialist resource has been developed to encourage people to choose Local Government employment as a preference and to address some of the issues relating to skills deficiencies and workforce planning.

The debate on financial sustainability was led by the Association which commissioned consultants to review the financial health of Local Government in Tasmania, to assess where the problems were and what needed to be fixed. The resulting report made several recommendations regarding finances, governance and asset management which the Association is presently progressing with councils to ensure that they have a long-term and financially sustainable future. Funding has subsequently been secured from the State Government to pursue the implementation of appropriate frameworks.

Waste management, climate change, emergency management, animal management and infrastructure planning are among the myriad of other matters the Association has prosecuted on behalf of councils this year.

In closing, I wish Mike Gaffney all the best in his new career and thank him for the professionalism and enthusiasm with which he performed the President’s role over the past three years.
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Funding Announcement Heralds Significant Boon to Infrastructure Backlog

ALLAN GARCIA, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
Local Government Association of Tasmania

Late last month, the Australian Council of Local Government (ACLG) announced that additional Federal Government funding of $220 million was to be provided to Local Government for nation-building investment in community infrastructure such as community centres, sports grounds and environmental infrastructure.

The announcement also provided for the improvement of long-term financial sustainability and resilience through the provision of a $25 million Local Government Reform Fund. The fund will seek to assist councils to: implement new asset management and planning consistent with a national framework; fund the collection and analysis of robust data about councils’ infrastructure assets; and support collaboration between councils on a regional basis for service delivery and planning.

This virtually mirrors the program argued for by the Local Government Association to the State Government two years ago which secured funding to undertake resource sharing projects, commence some work on the asset management and financial planning frameworks and funded the development of a planning short course for elected members.

While these funds are not guaranteed in perpetuity, it is important that they be grasped while available and the best possible strategic outcomes are achieved from their use. The community infrastructure fund should provide a significant boon to the infrastructure backlog for which we have continued to argue required external priming.

The foresight also in kick-starting our asset management and financial planning efforts means that, at the time that funds become available, we should be able to launch into the next phase of implementation utilising available funds from the Local Government Reform Fund.

These are good funding initiatives and speak volumes for the efforts that the State Associations have put into developing a targeted agenda that the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) can prosecute at the national level. This demonstrates the value of membership of these organisations and the benefits that can be achieved from having a strong and united voice.

It needs to be understood that these initiatives are not simply dreamt up and announced at the ACLG for the benefit of rapturous applause from attending mayors - although that is part of the cunning plan. These initiatives have been generated by the ALGA in concert with State Associations based on the needs identified by member councils. Indeed, a read of the ALGA Budget Submission reveals the significance the Australian Government places on the proposals that have been worked up from grass roots Local Government and delivered through the sector’s peak body. Our own financial sustainability work highlighted many shortcomings and these matters have been advocated by the Association at the national level as the things that would benefit Tasmanian councils. So the system is working.

While Constitutional Recognition is still a battle to fight and win, these small wins along the way are certainly welcome and allow councils to address at least some of the problems confronting them and their communities.

Although it is not clear exactly how much of this funding will be gracing Tasmania’s shores, I wish you well with your spending and look forward to utilising and experiencing the infrastructure around the state that will benefit from this injection.
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