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**Cover Photo:** In a first for Tasmania, children at the Longford Village Green playground put the Tasmanian-made, Lo-Pact rubber mulch to the test

March 2009  LGAT News
Recently I had the pleasure of joining the participants of the 2009 Pollie Pedal at a special dinner held during the annual charity bike ride for Diabetes Tasmania, involving politicians from the three tiers of government. Local Government was proudly represented by Mayors Graham Bury (Kingborough), Mark Shelton (Meander Valley) and Bertrand Cadart (Glamorgan Spring Bay), and Ald Helen Burnet of the Hobart City Council. The team members gave up their weekend to cycle through the Derwent, Huon and Coal River Valleys for a worthy cause and, that day, they rode an exhausting 120km.

As I dined with Mayor Dr Graham Bury, featured on page 6, I discovered a lighter side to this seemingly serious character. During the evening a number of awards were announced - Heaviest Bike, Best Fall, LouDEST Snorer, Most Transparent Nicks etc. But the most memorable of all went to Graham who, in good jest, received the Retort Report Award. Graham had let off some steam as he ascended a steep incline at Cygnet and, unbeknownst to him, another cyclist was trailing behind. As the cyclist drew abreast, he commented “We need every bit of propulsion we have got!” Graham’s quick retort was “Oh, I thought I had Cygnet all to myself.” But, laughs aside, Graham is living proof that a healthy, active lifestyle will provide many benefits in our latter years, a choice that obviously serves him well as Mayor.

As mid-year rapidly approaches, so too does the annual Local Government Conference, to be held in Hobart, from 10-12 June. This year’s event promises an inspirational line-up of speakers who will enlighten delegates on a range of pressing issues facing the sector. Head to page 18 for details. The Conference Program and Registration Form will be available soon. For newcomers to the sector, this edition also includes a special lift-out of our Local Government leaders. The pages can be easily removed for future reference at Local Government meetings and events.

LGAT News regularly highlights the significant achievements of our 29 member councils. If your Council would like the opportunity to gain further recognition for its achievements, don’t miss the opportunity to submit a nomination for the 2009 Local Government Awards for Excellence. Entry forms and further information can be found on the LGAT website at www.lgat.tas.gov.au. Nominations close on 27 April and winners will be announced at the Civic Mutual Plus Conference Dinner on 11 June.

Enjoy the read!

STEPHANIE WATSON
Editor
In November 2008, the mayors of all 562 Local Government areas were invited to Canberra by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to discuss a number of issues relating to councils across the nation. It was an historic occasion for Local Government and Federal Government relations, and even more so when the Prime Minister announced a $300 million infrastructure package to be divided proportionately between all councils.

This announcement was very well received and all councils were asked to submit project descriptors by 30 January. The response from councils was exceptional and over 3,600 projects were submitted that satisfied the guidelines and conditions. Many confirmations of identified projects have already been received by councils.

Minister Anthony Albanese was impressed with Local Government’s quick response and, even more so, when 344 submissions were received for the special project fund of $50 million. Indeed the combined total of the submissions was in excess of $1.2 billion. Thus, the announcement of an extra $500 million, when added to the original November amount, meant that within a three-month period, an extra $800 million will be benefiting local communities across Australia. As a result of the revised stimulus package debate in the Senate, applications will now be called for projects covered by the additional $500 million. This overcomes the concerns of many councils that did not get the opportunity to place an initial bid.

In early February, I was invited by Minister Albanese to Canberra to the inaugural meeting of the Australian Council of Local Government (ACLG) steering committee. The meeting was well supported and further reinforced the Australian Government’s commitment to the infrastructure rebuilds for local communities. The meeting covered several issues including an ACLG Charter and operating arrangements, the outcomes of the 2008 inaugural meeting; namely, constitutional recognition, the Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program, and the Local Government Centre of Excellence. There was also a presentation by Dorte Ekelund, General Manager of Major Cities Unit, Infrastructure Australia.

The role of ACLG is to:

- Provide a forum for the Australian Government and Local Government, including the Australian Local Government Association, to consider policies and initiatives of mutual interest;
- Provide advice to the Australian Government on matters relevant to Local Government and local communities;
- Contribute to dialogue on issues of national significance that affect Local Government and local communities;
- Promote collaboration between the Australian Government and Local Government as well between local governments themselves, to address emerging economic, social and environmental challenges;
- Encourage innovation and best practice in Local Government challenges; and
- Improve the provision of information and data to support the long-term development of Local Government.

The ACLG will report to the Australian Government Minister with portfolio responsibility for Local Government and will next meet in June, in conjunction with the ALGA National Assembly.

The forging of a new relationship of Local Government and the Federal Government is an important step and one that should provide positive outcomes for all communities. It is imperative that all three spheres of government in Australia should strive to work together to ensure our communities are resilient and able to cope with all that confronts them. The world financial crisis was viewed by some as being the catalyst for a new way forward and, whilst there are differing opinions regarding a solution, to sit back and wait does not seem to be part of the Australian psyche.
The Merger Waltz

ALLAN GARCIA, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
Local Government Association of Tasmania

If you were to ask a married couple that had been together for 50 or more years what was the secret of their success, they would likely respond by saying that initially, having things in common helped, a good period of courtship, ongoing communication, an ability to work things out when things were going a bit rough, and enjoying the goods times when you could. Issues such as who initiated the relationship and how it came about are generally not remembered, or are often inconsequential. The important thing is the success of the merger and the effort involved in keeping it alive.

Businesses mergers are a little different and much more is involved at the front end of the process to ensure that the right foundations are laid for a successful long-term relationship. A good merger process has all parties being heard, understood and included. Negotiations tend not to be protracted and are organised and fruitful. Implementation is clear to all involved and the new entity moves forward with confidence and optimism.

Of course, all this doesn’t just happen and there are several people working away in the background turning the cogs that are turning the wheels. The first thing to be considered is strategy. Why is the merger being contemplated? This needs to be expressed in simple terms in a single sentence that anybody can understand. If it can’t, then perhaps the merger should not be contemplated. There are several good business reasons to merge companies including complementary product lines, innovative technical skills, new markets and customers, and leveraging existing infrastructure.

Another major consideration is understanding the party on the other side of the table. Why are they interested in being part of you? What is their motive? If they are such a good acquisition, why are they getting out of the business? As the other party, you also need to consider why you are wanting to enter into such a relationship. What’s in it for you and your customers? What will happen if you don’t proceed?

It is important that the entities fit together. Essentially this goes to people but it can translate into financial performance. Can respective managements speak and work together? Will employees talk the merger down? Will the reputation of either of the entities alienate customers? It is always useful to look at the worst case scenario here and assess whether losing a few people and a few customers is worth the effort.

Clearly, integration is the key to success of a combined entity. Planning for integration should start early. Tension mounts from unknowns so it is important to announce the integration plan as soon as possible. Do it once, do it fast and do it properly.

Finally, the ends must justify the means. Is it really worth the effort? With good forethought, careful planning, sound analysis and hard work by the senior management team, mergers can result in the achievement of otherwise unattainable strategic goals. But if the effort is not going to be put in, or obstacles are constantly going to be imposed, then proceed with caution.

So how does this relate to the Local Government environment? There is much discussion presently about the possibility of council mergers in Tasmania but it would seem that we may need some assistance on the “rules of engagement” and the process by which we might think about going about the courtship.

As with relationships, these processes generally start with an innocent conversation, or a meeting of minds, or a common endeavour. It could involve mayors, general managers, or councillors but there can be difficulties in moving to the next step. Who should be involved in the broader discussions? What processes need to be implemented to ensure key players can participate in conversations at the appropriate time? How much analysis should be undertaken before stakeholders are brought into the mix?

There are a myriad of issues to consider in the process but it is the early stages, the feeling out process, where there is the greatest potential for problems to occur. When does the full council need to be involved? What level of information needs to be provided? When do conversations with the community begin? What are you going to tell them, or even ask them? How do you keep the media at bay? What about the other council - can you trust them? It is important that emotions are reigned in and objectivity and facts rule the process.

Unfortunately there is no secret recipe, no magic formula, or map leading to the merger treasure. Goodwill, trust, an open mind, transparency and respect are some of the key elements involved in moving a process forward. Broad discussions, general agreements, strategic positions are useful to contemplate before progressing too far. People need to be fundamentally aware of the “why” and of the potential benefits. Knowledge and information are paramount in these conversations.

In response to the increasing activity and debate in this area, the Association will initiate a conversation with member councils in the near future on the possible tools, checklists, frameworks and resources that may be helpful in contemplating a merger process. This is not aimed at driving a particular agenda but at ensuring that those councils seeking to enter into a long-term relationship, are provided with the tools and the wisdom to consider, and potentially consecrate, that relationship. There will be challenges along the way but, remember, there is a crack, a crack in everything - that’s how the light gets in.
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