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Tasmania’s Local Government Leaders

COVER PHOTO: A juggler entertains an enthralled audience at the Hobart City Council’s 2009/10 Taste Festival, hailed as the most successful in the event’s 21-year history
Photography by Sean Fennessy
The challenge has been set for Local Government in 2010, declared the Year of Women in Local Government, to increase the number of women working in council management positions and to narrow the gap between the number of men and women serving as elected members. Members of the Tasmanian Branch of the Australian Local Government Women’s Association recently launched a specially-made cocktail, named Women’s Influence, to kick off celebrations in Tasmania, and have been busily coordinating a string of initiatives to highlight the gender imbalance which currently exists. Find out more on page 12.

Throughout 2010, LGAT News will further explore Local Government’s feminine side in a series of interviews with Tasmania’s female mayors. In this edition, we spend Five Minutes with Mayor Jan Barwick of Tasman Council. It is with pride that Mayor Barwick now heads up an all female management team comprising of Roseanne Heyward as Deputy Mayor and Wendy Hunter as the new General Manager. Discover how Mayor Barwick’s journey into Local Government leadership began on page 6.

Is your Council struggling to engage men in local health and wellbeing programs? Jonathan Bedloe, of the Population Health Unit of the Department of Health and Human Services, challenges the common perception that men are typically disinterested in their own health. In his article, commencing on page 40, Jonathan considers other reasons why men may not be as proactive as they could be in addressing their personal health issues and looks at what can be done to help overcome the barriers.

In this edition, you will also find a special lift-out of our Local Government leaders. The pages can be easily removed for future reference at Local Government meetings and events. We hope you find it useful.

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LGAT News is circulated to every council throughout Tasmania. Circulation also includes senior government staff, state parliamentarians, interstate and national local government representative bodies and private companies operating in Tasmania.

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As I move around the state, I have been surprised at how frequently the topic of conversation comes around to the issue of compulsory voting in Local Government elections.

Currently, the Local Government Association of Tasmania’s policy is that compulsory voting is not supported. You may recall that when Premier Bartlett addressed the 2008 Local Government Conference, it came as quite a surprise to delegates when he announced that he was strongly in favour of compulsory voting and indicated that his Government would be moving forward with this concept.

You may also recall that LGAT was asked to have a representative on the joint working group which was established to investigate and make recommendations to the State Government on issues relating to the introduction of compulsory voting in Local Government elections. After much consideration, LGAT accepted the invitation, once again making clear our policy position.

At last year’s Mayors’ Workshop, the subject was canvassed and, with discussions I have had since then, I am getting the feeling that the view of compulsory voting in Local Government elections may be changing. That is not to say that opposition to the prospect has been eliminated. Quite clearly, differing opinions remain and I believe this to be a very healthy situation, particularly as we consider the recent issues paper that has been distributed to councils for their response and input. There is, however, no doubt regarding the desire of the current Government having compulsory voting introduced in time for the 2011 Local Government Elections, which is clearly outlined in the issues paper.

I believe that, given the length of time this topic has been canvassed and the conversations that have occurred, there may be a number of councils reconsidering their position. No doubt the matter will be the subject of further discussion at this year’s conference.

We all know how most changes to the Local Government Act occur, therefore if there is to be a change to the voting system for Local Government, it is preferable that we in the sector have taken time to discuss and consider the implications of that change and how it may affect us. Like me, you can only guess what the situation might be, particularly as right now we are in the midst of a State Election.

We need to give much thought and consideration to the following questions:

• Should the Deputy Mayor continue to be determined by popular vote?
• How do we cater for those registered on the General Manager’s role?
• What is considered to be the most effective and efficient method of filling vacancies?
• Do we favour retention of postal voting?

The list may go on but, as this is such an important issue, we need to continue expressing our thoughts, arguing our point of view and making those views known.

LGAT will be collating all of the responses received from councils and forwarding them to the joint working group, and I trust that we will be provided further opportunities for input into this process.

Life in the Local Government sector is never easy and, whilst we continue to be an entity of the State Government, we can be guaranteed plenty of excitement, frustration and satisfaction. Importantly, we must strive to work cooperatively with Government in such a way as they truly understand the implications their decision-making has on the sector and the state’s ratepayers.
Planning Reform - The Never-Ending Story

ALLAN GARCIA, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
Local Government Association of Tasmania

Several years ago, the State Government embarked on a project referred to as Better Planning Outcomes. There was something in it for everyone. Developers would be confronted with less complexity and greater consistency; councils would benefit from streamlined processes and improved enforcement regimes; and the State Government would reside over a more robust, transparent and holistic planning system.

But, after five years of ongoing implementation of planning reform, we are still a long way from resolving or putting into place all the elements of the initial vision. Coupled with this, is the recent decision by the Australian Government to weigh into the planning debate to overcome what it sees as being gross inefficiencies and inconsistencies in the system.

There is no doubt that 2010 will be the year of planning reform. Already councils are bunkered down developing regional strategies while seeking also to review and put into effect the upgrades required to achieve a template planning scheme for use by all councils. Dovetail with this the draft planning directives associated with underground infrastructure and single dwellings in residential zones and you would wonder whether there was anything else that could be brought into play.

However, it is clear that we are a long way from reaching the reform milestones. The regional planning strategies are progressing but are still some way from finalisation, and it is not clear that all those impacted by them have a full understanding at this stage of their workings and implications. The timelines for the template scheme have slipped and there will be significant effort required on the part of all involved to achieve the required targets for implementation.

There is also a proposal to introduce a residential code to streamline the process for achieving planning approval for the purposes of dwellings. A number of councils are presently trialing a draft code to assess the benefits and limitations. While generally supportive of the concept, supporters and proponents need to keep sight of the fact that this is another implementation challenge for councils and the limited planning resources they have at their disposal.

At the national level, there is also debate about whether the arrangements put in place for public and social housing and education facilities to stimulate the economy should be extended infinitum. Some state governments are vigorously pursuing this action. In Tasmania there has been no significant discussion but the feedback from member councils indicates that there have been a number of key shortcomings including: inappropriate or inconsistent design and location; damage to council infrastructure; inadequate account of infrastructure needs; and lack of community consultation. The initial support for the short-term fast-tracking acknowledged the need to stimulate the economy but proper and due process needs to be part of the overall planning regime. The Association will be ensuring that the Tasmanian Government is well aware of the issues and concerns that have been raised during the program.

Also, nationally, the Australian Government has weighed in through COAG to require that all States and Territories must have in place by 2012 strategic plans for their capital cities that meet national requirements regarding housing, sustainability, transport, and urban development. These plans will be reviewed by the COAG Reform Council, assisted by an expert advisory panel which will be jointly appointed by the Commonwealth and the states. According to COAG, this work will begin next year, with an initial report on each jurisdiction’s plan to be completed during 2011. The key aspect of this decision seems to be the Commonwealth’s announcement that from 1 January 2012, it link future infrastructure investment (for public transport, roads etc) to the States and Territories to the attainment of these requirements for capital city plans. COAG foreshadowed that a future Inter-Governmental Agreement (IGA) will be negotiated to govern these arrangements.

While it is difficult to fault the target outcomes from all the planning reform processes envisaged and underway, the implementation of these arrangements will place significant pressures on the planning resources of councils. We all want to strengthen and maintain public confidence in the planning system but everyone needs to understand that, besides responding to these calls and actions for reform, councils actually have to maintain and manage the system that presently exists with the resources at their disposal. And in doing so, they have to ensure that the integrity of the present system is maintained and those impacted by it are treated fairly, with on time delivery. This is not shirking responsibility, simply highlighting the challenges of the reform process and the potential for a hectic 2010.
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