

Local Government
Association of NSW



Shires Association
of NSW

SPEECH

Local Government Association Conference

Official Opening Ceremony

President's address

Cr Keith Rhoades AFSM

President, Local Government Association of NSW

4.20pm

Sunday 23 October, 2011

Shoalhaven Entertainment Centre

Welcome to the 2011 Annual Conference of the Local Government Association of NSW.

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge and show my respect to the traditional custodians of the land and their Elders both past and present.

Thank you for your generous welcome.

I'd like to welcome and acknowledge some of our special guests here today:

- Mr Craig Baumann MP, Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Planning, Planning and Infrastructure.
- The Hon. David Shoebridge MLC, The Greens Member of the Upper House.
- The Hon Richard Torbay, Member for the Northern Tablelands.
- The Hon Shelley Hancock MP, Speaker of the House and Member for South Coast.

- Mrs. Jo Gash MP, Federal Member for Gilmore.
- Mr. Gareth Ward, MP, Local Member for Kiama.
- Mr Mark Coure, MP, Member for Oatley.
- Cr Genia McCaffery, President of the Australian Local Government Association and Immediate Past-President of the Local Government Association of NSW.
- Cr Ray Donald, President of the Shires Association of NSW.
- Cr Darriea Turley, National President of the Australian Local Government Women's Association.
- Cr Julie Griffiths, President of the NSW Branch of the Australian Local Government Women's Association.
- Mr. Mark Ferguson, President of the NSW Branch of the Local Government Managers' Association.

- Mr. Peter Woods OAM, Patron of the Local Government Association.
- Association officeholders, mayors, delegates, colleagues and friends.

PAUSE

It's a pleasure to be here in beautiful Shoalhaven.

I give credit to the community of Shoalhaven and the Mayor, the Hon Paul Green MLC, and his hardworking councillors and staff, on creating such a wonderful environment for its residents and visitors.

Food and produce, along with friendly locals, amazing landscapes and a relaxed way of living have long been attracting visitors to the region, especially with scenic towns like Berry, Kangaroo Valley and Nowra.

I'm sure the 20 vineyards located around the area have also been a major drawcard!

It's not just people that are attracted to the area – the Nowra region was chosen as the training place for a number of horses including one called Archer, who eventually went on to become the first winner of some little old race known as the Melbourne Cup.

Arwon, which is Nowra spelt backwards, was also another Melbourne Cup winner from the region.

Besides holding a special place in racing history, the region is also very important to our nation, as a home to defence bases like HMAS Albatross.

Delegates will get a glimpse of local and national defence history at the Gala Dinner on Tuesday night at the Air Fleet Museum, which I'm really looking forward to! It's going to be a great night!

The local indigenous culture is also strong, with Shoalhaven, Kiama, Wingecarribee, Shellharbour and Wollongong Councils recently winning the Council Partnerships of the Year Category at the NSW Local Government Aboriginal Network 2011 Awards.

PAUSE

But a special acknowledgement that I would like to make is to our colleagues from Wollongong and Shellharbour Councils.

Congratulations on your recent elections.

It's great to see democracy returned to these communities and that they can now be represented by the people they elect.

This conference is about strengthening the Local Government sector in NSW, and improving services and support for our local communities.

Over the next three days, we'll be considering more than 200 motions ranging from roads funding, to coal seam gas exploration, cemetery planning, emergency services funding and the effect of the carbon tax on Local Government.

The issues are as diverse and wide as the range of responsibilities that Local Government has.

These motions will help set the policy direction and areas of concentration for NSW councils for the coming year.

Over the past 12 months, the landscape for Local Government in NSW has changed significantly.

Especially with the election of the Coalition to power in the State Government, after more than 16 years in Opposition.

In the lead up to the NSW Election in March, your Association, in conjunction with the Shires Association, undertook a major media based lobbying campaign to raise awareness of Local Government's key priorities.

The Associations produced a document which outlined 48 of our key priorities under six themes.

We highlighted these priorities through a range of tactics, including direct lobbying and in the media.

We successfully increased the Associations' presence and share of voice in the media by 300 per cent during the six week period leading up to the election.

This is quite significant, when you consider that many people, including the media, felt that it was going to be a bit of a non-election.

The Association sent copies of the document to all political parties and all parties sent a written response to our priorities.

The clean sweep of responses from all parties was also a first!

We made sure all responses were made publicly available on our website – just in case you or any member of a party or the public wants to check up on what they promised!

The NSW Government has delivered on a number of promises that came about from the Associations' lobbying since coming to power in March.

This includes the repealing of Part 3A and a review of the *Environment Planning and Assessment Act* - something we've been campaigning about for years.

The State Government is currently undertaking consultation sessions regarding this Planning Review.

I encourage ALL councils to take part. It's a major opportunity to really help simplify and change the planning system to better reflect the wishes of our communities.

Another election promise which has been honoured, at least in principle is the return of the management of elections to councils. I'll return to this issue in a moment.

It's important that we stay on top of the Government's promises and we encourage councils to stay involved and informed.

The Associations intend to issue a report card at the one year mark on how the O'Farrell Government is delivering on its promise to Local Government.

As I have mentioned, I'm sure in some areas, they'll be receiving 'A pluses'.

There are, however, some areas of serious disappointment, at least at present.

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As you know, Local Government has a significant and increasing infrastructure backlog, which currently stands at \$6.3 billion and grows by \$600 million every year.

The opportunity should've been taken to do more on this issue within the recent State Budget.

We welcomed the State Government's announcement that it would be supplying interest rebates to assist with councils' infrastructure backlog, but this is merely a drop in the ocean in addressing this issue.

The grades on the 'One Year' Report Card are also not looking great when it comes to the issue of the Waste Levy.

We're tired of being tax collectors for the NSW Government, because without hypothecation, that is effectively what the waste levy represents.

We need to ensure that the money is genuinely used for council waste reduction and sustainability initiatives, rather than being kept by Treasury.

I welcome Minister Robyn Parker's commitment to review the Waste Levy during this calendar year, and point out that the year is fast running out.

This review must be undertaken in full and transparent consultation with Local Government.

Another issue of great concern is the upcoming Local Government elections.

We were all very pleased when the Minister introduced the Bill to return the right for councils to appoint an independent returning officer and manage their own elections.

Unfortunately, the spirit and good intentions of the new legislation so welcomed by the new NSW Government and councils have not been met.

Along with Cr Ray Donald, I met with Premier O'Farrell and Minister Page in mid-September to again request a deferral of the date that councils must decide who is running their elections from November this year to 31st March next year.

This deferment is essential to enable councils to go through the correct procurement and adequate decision making processes.

I'm disappointed by the lack of action.

The existing circumstances haven't allowed councils to have a fair choice or a level playing field when deciding who conducts their elections.

In addition to this tardy response, we're also disappointed with the aggressive approach the NSW Electoral Commission has taken with individual councils.

The Electoral Commission has been advising councils that if they choose to run their own elections, there will be no assistance, advice or supporting material from them.

I know a number of councils are choosing to go with alternative companies and we'll continue to push on this issue to enable councils to make their own decisions in the best interests of their communities.

Besides the just mentioned hitches, our working relationship with the State Government has been growing since it came to power.

I'd like to thank and commend the Minister for Local Government, Don Page, for hosting the recent *Destination 2036* Workshop in Dubbo in August.

In the current climate where NSW councils face immediate and serious challenges, it's all the more important for our two spheres of government to set aside time to think strategically, and work together on the bigger picture and long term future of Local Government.

Like any large business, it's vital that we gather our leaders together to reflect, review and improve on our roles as essential service providers for our local communities.

And we're big business to NSW.

As a sector, we're worth \$89 billion in assets and infrastructure; we bring more than \$8 billion into the NSW

economy every year and directly employ more than 50,000 people.

The *Destination 2036* workshop showed that all NSW councils are largely in agreement about the big issues and changes required to ensure our sector remains strong.

I was very pleased to see that all participants said a focus on financial viability was councils' number one priority.

This also fed into the work the Associations and NSW councils have been doing on the *Modernising Local Government* initiative.

The Outcome Report for *Destination 2036* had a second tier of recommendations which went beyond reform and money, and addressed the capacity building of Local Government.

This includes attracting and retaining a wider range of staff and councillors and up skilling both groups, which we also welcomed.

We can see from the way the Minister and the Division of Local Government have developed and then tackled this two day session that there will be change and reform in Local Government in NSW.

Much of which we've been calling on for the previous NSW Government to deliver for years.

Both myself and Cr Ray Donald represent NSW councils on the Implementation Steering Committee, as we work to deliver on the Action Plan.

PAUSE

Much of this year's conference program has been devoted to talking about improving the image of councils in the eyes of our communities - as we prepare to go to a referendum to recognise Local Government in the Australian Constitution.

This is no easy task!

Initial research across the country has told us that obviously people are more likely to vote yes for something when they feel good about it, and are satisfied with the services they receive.

Therefore, it's essential that our councils join together to investigate and learn what our communities think of us, and how we can build and improve on this.

Tomorrow, you'll be hearing from the Australian Local Government Association, which is leading the campaign for Constitutional Recognition of Local Government.

President of ALGA, Cr Genia McCaffery, along with Professor George Williams, will be updating delegates on the progress so far.

Cr McCaffery will also be updating councils about the Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Local Government, of which she is a member.

It's expected that a referendum will take place in 2013 at the time of the next federal election and the ALGA Board has

determined that we should concentrate on seeking financial recognition of Local Government in the constitution.

In short, we're seeking to add the words "and Local Government" in Section 96 of the Australian Constitution.

As part of the first stage of constitutional recognition of Local Government, the LGSA has undertaken a significant piece of research on the current status and perceptions of Local Government in NSW.

Sandy Belford, from our branding agency, Principals, will be updating us on the research findings and where to from here tomorrow.

This will guide us in building a strategy and an awareness campaign that promotes the good work NSW councils do.

We expect to be able to introduce this strategy and the Associations' plans to lead on the production of campaign messages and materials early next year.

Your Association has recognised that this is an important role the LGSA can play for our members, and we intend to lead the way in providing information, leadership and materials for your councils to use.

Until then, it's helpful if we take some time to reflect on what each of us can do in our own areas to contribute.

We can't assume that our residents look at each of our councils in isolation. Or that the image and perception of councils is a problem with our 'neighboring councils' – we each have a responsibility.

And, a large part of this will be up to you.

Everyone will need to lend a hand as we prepare to get down and do some more, hard work!

We'll need to listen to the community research and the communications and brand experts, both at this conference and as part of the Associations' longer term project.

We must all work together to roll out our campaigns and strategies across the state.

Given Federal instability, it is extremely important that all political parties show their support for Constitutional Recognition.

I'm pleased to report that as far as NSW is concerned, all of the major political parties have publicly expressed their support.

The Expert Panel is currently seeking submissions on their discussion paper by 4 November.

Whilst the Associations will be preparing our own submission, it's extremely important that all NSW councils prepare their own submission to this Expert Panel, supporting ALGA's position on financial recognition.

We need the Expert Panel to be flooded with submissions from all across the state, and country, which stresses the importance and merit of Constitutional Recognition of Local Government.

PAUSE

A singular voice for Local Government will also go a long way in improving the lobbying power of NSW councils.

This year, the two Associations took a number of important steps towards the goal of One Association and One Voice for Local Government in NSW.

I was fortunate enough to attend and witness the Shires Association's decision to rescind their earlier proposal for a divisional structure of regional representatives.

The Secretariat is currently working hard on progressing the legal formalities to form a single Association.

Forming a new Association is quite a long and involved and legal process, even when both Associations are generally in agreement.

A draft set of rules for the new Association based on the twenty seven principles now agreed to by both Associations,

was submitted to Fair Work Australia for preliminary considerations and advice a short time ago.

Within the last few days a response has been received from Fair Work Australia and is being reviewed by the Secretariat.

At first glance the response does not seem to indicate any serious difficulties in the draft rules. There are, however, a significant number of minor issues which will need to be resolved initially in consultation with our lawyers.

Once these issues have been resolved and a new draft constitution prepared, the draft will be referred to all member councils for their further consideration and input.

At the same time, a detailed timetable for future progress will also be finalised and forwarded to member councils for their information.

I'm conscious that we have an annual conference organised for Dubbo next year. I've asked the Secretary General to take this into account when developing the timetable.

PAUSE

On a personal and sad note, I would like to acknowledge my dear friend, great mate and our colleague, Cr Janet Hayes.

Cr Hayes passed away two Fridays ago from cardiac arrest following health complications.

The private family service was held on Friday and a community service is being held right now at Kempsey Showground.

This is a place Janet was committed to restoring and is an important part of her legacy to her community.

Cr Hayes was a close personal friend of mine. She was passionate about Local Government and was dedicated in her role as Vice President of the Shires Association of NSW, and as a councillor and former mayor of Kempsey Shire Council.

We'll miss her fun-loving personality, her bright clothing, the flower in the hair and her practical jokes, as well as her strong commitment to her community.

Our thoughts are with Janet's family, friends and local community. She will be deeply missed by all of us here.

Rest in peace, Janet.

-- PAUSE --

Councillors like Janet are the reason Local Government is the foundation of our local communities.

They want to make a positive difference in the lives of their local residents and be involved in the shaping of the future of their communities.

They want the best for the area they live in and they want to ensure that the people that live there, get the services they need.

For that reason, being a councillor can be both a challenging and a deeply rewarding experience.

Since the Local Government elections will be happening before the next Conference, I'd like to take this opportunity to

thank all Councillors for their commitment to their communities and dedication to getting the best for their local area.

I know some councillors have not yet made their positions public but have made the personal decision not to stand for council in the next term.

Some of them have become stalwarts, indeed legends, in their communities.

I want to especially say thank you to those individuals for their years of service to Local Government. Your communities are indebted to you.

Like many, your Association, wants to see local democracy strengthened and people from a diverse range of backgrounds as councillors, so that councils accurately reflect the local communities they represent.

An example of the work your Association is doing to increase diversity, is the Local Government Association's Women's Committee, who have been working hard to improve the number of women contesting the election.

Councillors play a very important community leadership role and influence the decisions that Councils make about what happens locally.

Good luck to all who contest next year's elections.

PAUSE

Arranging a conference like this is a complex task. Shoalhaven City Council and its staff here have done a magnificent job in coordinating this Conference and we thank them for their hard work.

A special thanks to the Mayor, Paul Green, and his team of councillors for their enthusiastic support of the Conference.

PAUSE

I've enjoyed the past twelve months as your President and hope to continue to serve you in the future.

I'd like to thank my wife, Trish, for her commitment and untiring support in my role as your President.

I'd also like to thank all the wives, husbands and partners of elected councillors in NSW.

For without their support to you, your job would be that much more difficult.

I want to thank the current office bearers of your Association, your Vice Presidents, Allan Ezzy and Allan Smith, your Treasurer, Kevin Schreiber, and our Immediate Past President, Genia McCaffery.

Your support and efforts over the past 12 months are very much appreciated.

I would like to thank my colleague, Cr Ray Donald, the President of the Shires Association.

My thanks to Cr Bruce Miller, whose term as Shires' President ended in June this year.

My thanks also go to each and every member of your Executive for their commitment and support throughout the past 12 months.

A special thank you to Bill Gillooly, our Secretary-General, and the Association's very committed and professional staff for their support, advice and assistance.

Bill, in particular, has an interesting job supporting two masters and I'm sure he'll welcome One Association.

A special thank you also to the Association's very competent Events team - Meg Fisher, Karen Rolls and Jann Hing. Meg and her team are responsible for a number of events throughout the year including the Conference and they never fail to deliver outstanding results.

Thank you to our major sponsors, Essential Energy, the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage, Local Government Super, SITA and many others.

And finally, my thanks to you and the councils you represent.

I look forward to an interesting and informative conference.