

LAUNCESTON RATEPAYERS' ASSOCIATION INCORPORATED

PRESIDENT'S REPORT FOR ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING MONDAY, 17th November, 2008 AT HEATHER HALL LAUNCESTON

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

This has been a very busy year for the Association, and I thank the members of the Executive who assisted where they could. The retirement of our President Mr John Henshaw, due to his relocation to Victoria at the end of last year, has meant that we have been short on resources and have missed John's ability to lead us forwards.

The Association held 9 General Meetings, 5 at Newstead, 2 at Kingsmeadows, and 1 each at Dilston and Invermay, drawing a variable number of people depending on the issues that were relevant at the time. Whilst 4 meeting venues were provided free of charge to the Association, the cost of hiring space, albeit at only a small fee, is an expense that uses up our small income.

The Association is most grateful for the sponsorship it receives from Internet Tasmania by hosting our website. This sponsorship and the management of it provided by Clive Stott, has enabled us to publish our activities broadly, and allow members and the public to access information and details of many of our submissions and correspondences with public authorities. The professional standard of our website has attracted other like organisations, and for them to seek agreement to use some of our research material.

The Association has worked hard to keep abreast of issues in the Launceston community and in the field of Local Government at both a state and national level.

Representatives of the Association have made every effort to attend meetings and forums presented by the Launceston City Council, and we are grateful for the attendance of some Aldermen and senior Council staff at some of our meetings.

Whilst submissions by the Association may appear to be negative and expressing discontent, that will probably always be the case as we are generally responding the issues of concern and questions where the community feels disadvantaged and vulnerable.

The submissions made to the LCC 2006/07 Annual General Meeting in December 2007, did not draw satisfactory answers, and it has caused the Association to keep up the pressure for Council to properly answer our questions and conduct itself in an open and transparent manner. We hope that this attitude will not be repeated at the 2007/08 Annual General Meeting to be held at the Town Hall on 24th Nov 2008.

The substantial submission the Association made last year to the Commonwealth Productivity Commission's enquiry into Local Government's Revenue Raising Capacity was incorporated into the Commission's Preliminary findings leading to the Association being further invited to contribute to the Final Report, which it did in February. We were most gratified to find that our submissions were taken into account and liberally quoted in the Final Report, which has since drawn our Association to the attention of other like bodies and an enquiry from as far afield as Charters Towers in Queensland.

A number of submissions were concentrated around the May-July period, which meant that the Executive was kept extremely busy. The Review of Allowances for Local Government Councillors conducted by the Tasmanian Industrial Commission, attracted our detailed attention. We were disappointed to learn that the significant increases that were awarded went ahead without any apparent regard for opposition from parties sharing our views, and have now only just reached the community's knowledge by recent press lamenting that in Launceston, the budget for allowances has doubled by the added sum of \$150,000.

We presented a submission to the LCC Strategic 5 Year Plan in June, with only moderate influence, in part because our request for much more time to allow for submissions to be made (just 2 weeks was allowed), meant that many issues were only hastily put together, and few submissions were received by LCC. It was at least notable that LCC has admitted it does not communicate well with its community, and we, like Council, look forward to significant improvements in the future. We sought that priority in the Plan be for implementing a fair and equitable rating system that has the specific endorsement of the overwhelming majority of ratepayers. It remains a great disappointment to the Association, that in spite of statements made during the 2007 Election campaign by both new candidates and existing Councillors seeking higher office, that rating systems would be reviewed and that the much criticized AAV system would be abandoned, that the 2008/09 Rate method was virtually unchanged and the Rate increased beyond CPI. We maintain our view that LCC must cut back on non-core activities and manage the municipality within the economic means of its ratepayers. The level of poverty in this City is increasing, and due in no small part to the high rates charged by Council. Further economic pressures on our community filtering through from the World Economic Recession, will hit our already vulnerable citizens even harder.

The State Government has proposed its Climate Change (State Action) Bill 2008, and from our assessment of this, the Association was moved to make a submission, also during June. The climate change effects on Launceston ratepayers hold serious concerns for the physical effects (rising ocean levels, chronic siltation and collapsing levees; droughts causing a drop in winter floodwaters, leading to a reduction in the environmental quality of the Cataract Gorge/First Basin and flushing of the upper reaches of the Tamar); environmental effects which will force reduction of the use of wood heating hence fuel poverty exacerbated by spiralling electricity prices and an absence of natural gas networks; and the propensity by LCC to spend ratepayer's funds and to accept significant liability for major silt eradication works, levee construction and land acquisitions, all of which are rightly the responsibility of State Government with Commonwealth Government support. The Association, whilst wishing to support the ideological aspirations of Climate Change legislation, pleaded with the State Government to undertake a comprehensive investigation into affordable energy alternatives without excluding advanced technologies retaining wood as a carbon neutral and clean emission basis.

The seeming haste at which the State Government announced yet another review of the Planning System in Tasmania, caused the Association to further stretch its resources in June and prepare a submission that strenuously argued against the base Terms of Reference that were imposed, and the assumptions the Issues Paper appeared to make. It is our view that the present Planning System is NOT fundamentally flawed or inefficient, but simply needing strengthening and a greater emphasis placed on making the LUPAA Schedule 1 objectives operational at the level of project assessment, instead of being given mere 'lip service'. We believe that the wider use of mediation, including mandatory mediation, would go a long way to speeding up the process on statutory Hearings and time consuming processes of overworked and under resourced Tribunals and Commissions.

We oppose any suggestion of the amalgamation of the roles of the RPDC and RMPAT as they are distinct authorities and only criticised by those who simply do not understand the planning system. Ministerial influence and the over-riding of the powers and processes of these bodies remove transparency and due process from the public arena and gaze. Left to do their job, and with adequate resources, these bodies will achieve the best and quickest outcomes and not find projects or processes sullied and tainted by political interference. The Regional Aquatic Centre Project was cited as a Case Study by the Association, where in our view sustainable development for Launceston ratepayers has not been achieved. Time will, sadly be our witness to inappropriate decision making by LCC for this project, the single largest capital project in the long and proud history of this, Australia's third-oldest city.

The long-term financial consequences on the Launceston ratepayer caused by this single regional facility, has already been acknowledged in the LCC 10 year Plan, where rates are destined to increase by an additional 5% each year simply to sustain this project. Necessary restraints and cutbacks in other areas in order to restrain overall rate increases will mean that ratepayers will suffer further.

Activities beyond the end of June 2008, will properly become reporting topics for your next Executive, however it is still worth flagging tonight, that your Association has been active in its participation in Council's development of a parking and transport strategy for the CBD, the development of Launceston's Community Plan, and observations concerning the lack of advanced planning in reserve when once-in-a-lifetime opportunities are presented to Local Government to take advantage of an invitation by Infrastructure Australia to put forward otherwise unaffordable capital works projects for special immediate consideration as part of the Commonwealth's strategy to combat the impact of the World Economic Crises on our local economy.

Whilst Launceston has embarked on the preparation of a very long overdue review of our Planning Scheme, that process is in our opinion languishing because of time delays in it, which make any hope of a fresh Planning Scheme, obsolete.

The lack of adequate forward planning and effective controls on the potential impacts of bad planning, is causing problems and unnecessary distress in our community. Examples, where the abandonment of proper planning provisions for an Eastern Bypass Road with well-positioned East-West connections to the present road network and avoiding the central area, include the very unpopular and resultant tossing out of the Forster Street Link road, a road splitting an important residential area from the recreational and cultural precincts, to access a yet-to-be-rezoned industrial area that ought not even be contemplated without an integrated sustainability study.

The fundamental purpose of Local Government ought to be better considered. Local government needs to keep its core responsibilities in sharp focus and direct its efforts and more importantly the financial resources of its ratepayers, to just those core activities. Sometimes, Local Government can be entrusted with funds provided by other tiers of government where it is firstly demonstrated that it will do so efficiently and importantly, be fully reimbursed financially for its administration and management costs.

It is not in my opinion "mini-government", where it aims to emulate other tiers of government, just smaller. It is with such a mindset that Local Government can be criticised for duplication of governance. It is bad enough that in a regional setting, where competing municipalities vie for prominence and fight for a piece of something that if kept as a whole would so much better advantage and serve the regional community. It was newsworthy on today's early morning bulletin, where the

Prime Minister and his government are trying to endear Local Government to help with implementing a capital works program funded by the Commonwealth Government, for which Local Government could be recognised in the Constitution. It has wrangled some people that Local Government was never so recognised, however, the purpose of Local Government is not to be a junior agent of the Commonwealth where perhaps a belligerent State Government may be circumvented and the past cascade of governance interrupted.

The bypassing of State Government and the inevitable politicisation of Local Government could detract from the most accessible level of government and the one that the people can feel part of and influence more directly. Amalgamation of adjoining Local Government bodies just so as to make particular LGA's larger and more powerful is not desirable. Bigger does not make for better, particularly from a local ratepayer viewpoint. By all means consider amalgamations for efficiency, but the question remains as to how the link to the ordinary community will be preserved and fostered.

Membership of associations of our kind remains an important challenge for improvement. This difficulty is certainly not unique to the LRA, and is commonplace in just about every community in our society. Complacency and an unwillingness to contribute to one's community is the bane of all volunteer organisations be they a charitable body or refuge or welfare group. The Executive dreams of a time when they will be inundated with supporters who are willing, not just at times when an issue or cause affects 'their own backyard', but to shoulder the wheel and speak out for the benefit and improvement of the whole community.

It is therefore in conclusion that I ask everybody who is here to go out and enlist membership support, and remind you that the Launceston Ratepayer's Association is not just established for residents who pay rates directly to Council, but by anyone resident in this city.

Thankyou

Lionel Morrell,

Vice President and on behalf of the Executive Committee
Launceston Ratepayers' Association Incorporated
17 November 2008