

Council happenings . . .

with Mayor
Glenn Wall

Constitutional Recognition of Local Government.

The Australian Constitution sets out the terms of the agreement reached between the six separate British colonies when they joined together at Federation. This was achieved after a long and difficult process of negotiations to determine which powers would be transferred to the Commonwealth and how it would be funded.

Local government matters were not included at the time, and whilst individual State constitutions now have provisions for maintaining a 'system' of local government, they do not guarantee appropriate funding nor guard against arbitrary amalgamation or dismissal.

The system of government has evolved significantly since federation with local government being given increasing responsibilities. In 1975, with the introduction of the Local Government Financial Assistance Grants, councils received direct funding assistance from the Federal Government for provision of local services. There have been two unsuccessful referenda seeking constitution recognition, but local government is still yet to be made a genuine partner in the federation.

In 2006 the Australian Government introduced a Parliamentary Resolution that recognised the importance of local government in the system of Australian governance, and last year, the Rudd Government gave a commitment to consult with local government about achieving constitutional recognition.

The Australian Local Government Association will be holding a Constitutional Summit in Melbourne from December 8-11 in order to determine a national position. In the lead up to the Summit, Councils throughout Australia will be debating the need for and nature of reforms regarding constitutional recognition for local government.

The President of the Australian Local Government Association recently said: "Local Councils deliver the nation's priorities at the grassroots community level, providing vital infrastructure to ensure the economy performs. In this day and age, it seems ridiculous that local government only exists under state legislation and has no legal recognition in our national Constitution."

Local Government Elections.

Last week the Maitland Mercury featured a Street Poll asking the question "Do you think there should be more women, young people and people of culturally different backgrounds on Council?" Young Gemma Kennedy from Gresford was polled and her response is as follows; *"I think so because then younger views on things would be heard and young people would have more of a voice. I guess there would be more of a variety of perspectives on issues that way"*.

I could not agree more with Gemma's comments and I applaud her advocacy regarding our youth. The local government election will be held on Saturday 13th September with electoral Rolls closing on Monday 4th August. Voting is compulsory so those eligible for voting, who have not already done so will need to register by that date.

Taking Gemma's comments into account, hopefully members of our community will be considering whether to stand as a candidate for a four-year term on Council. Nominations for candidates will close on Wednesday 13th August.

There is plenty of help available to those who are interested. The NSW Department of Local Government has a booklet called "Becoming a Councillor" which can be downloaded from www.dlg.nsw.gov.au or obtained from council. Also, the Electoral Commission of NSW will be holding a candidate information seminar at Newcastle City Hall on Thursday 22nd of May, commencing at 6.00pm. They will explain the statutory obligations and responsibilities of candidates in the election. No pre-registration is required for the seminar; simply turn up on the night.

Both these resources are highly recommended, as there are many misconceptions about the role of elected representatives in local government.

Local Government is the level of government closest to the people and it is an honour to represent one's community and very satisfying to be part of a council that is functioning properly. Councillors can make a difference, they have very real opportunities to shape the future of this Shire and ensure the philosophy of "Life as it Should Be" is maintained.

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