

Council Governance

Futurists and Stewards or just
Politicians

The role of a local Councillor
unlike any other elected
representative is about being
a star gazer however as we
review decisions being made
across South East Qld we see
a marked lack of recognition
for cause and effect.

Decision making is increasingly dominated by protectionist attitudes. Elected representatives playing to a series of minorities thus producing the Holy Grail of a majority vote. Examples abound over recent years of projects stalled or destroyed by this particular curse of democracy. Be it chairlifts in the Hinterland or new developments to meet the

shortfall of affordable housing in the City, the focus has shifted from visionary plan making to reactionary decisions and base politics.

Where else in the Country would you find a member of the elected body referring to a part of their City...a City where tourism is a key driver....as a pox?

The most obvious case in point is the recent debate over Priority Infrastructure Charges. Make no mistake Ladies and Gentlemen if revenue to Council had not dropped by a reported 38% then this matter would be stonewalled as it has been for more than 6 years by the tried and true catch cry “the ratepayers will pay”.

Unfortunately what is ignored by both media and adherents to the current system is that the people buying the properties with these inflated charges that do not reflect the economic sustainability requirements of the Integrated Planning Act nor inter-generational equity will beratepayers.

The malaise and self interest extends beyond the Council to include a worrying cultural trend within the ranks of junior Officers. The relationship has between Council and the Staff has been described to me by long term Officers as the worst they have seen in their career and “toxic” This is a result of confused leadership, a lack of vision to aspire to and

appropriate governance of the Organisation by the Council.

A recent example of the attitude some Officers have developed to applicants and the community was experienced by members of a pioneering family of this City. When a meeting was requested to discuss a simple boundary realignment the reply from Officers was “this would not be a productive use

of Officers time” This was to a family who pioneered the area over 120 years ago and solid long term productive ratepayers. This begs the question: are staff there to serve the ratepayers or the organisation?

As a result of this lack of inspirational leadership and trust we have seen icon projects such as Bold Futures become nothing more than a

PR exercise. We have seen the numbers trumpeted that almost 12 thousand residents provided feedback but little regarding the quality or focus of that feedback. You may ask what is wrong with this and why does it indicate a lost direction?

Bold Futures was intended to be a highly intellectual exercise in visioning unfortunately it was high

jacked by the spin doctors to produce nothing more than bland statements that do little to address the real issues of environmental, technological and legislative change that will occur in the coming decades and how that will affect the form and function of this City.

What has been produced is a number of strategies that have been adopted with no

thought to cost or ability to pay by a rate base that is burdened by an ever increasing plethora of red tape and dogma. How do we keep Public Transport relevant in the future, what are the technological and social trends that will alter our life style, how will our economy deal with a reduction in population in first world economies over the next 30 years?

The type of work conducted in the 90's and early 2000's that have produced world class results has disappeared. The question is WHY?

Worse still is a marked display of ignorance by some elected representatives as to the actual workings of the economy that maintains this City. During the Infrastructure

Charges debate in Council a number of years ago when the policy was up for adoption the current Chair of Sustainable Growth Committee stated and I quote “the developers are making plenty of money they just need to take less profit”

Ignorance or base politics?

This type of culture is rife within Council and the development industry is seen

alternatively as a cash cow or the enemy intent on pillaging the City.

Our answers can be found in simple yet effective strategies that are both community based and driven as well as supported by legislative change.

The first area that must be addressed is the rapid transit corridor.

Whilst plan making is proceeding slowly we will see once again development applications outstripping the pace of the plan making process. This can only be addressed by increased resources that have a singular focus but beyond that comes the applications that will be required to support the infrastructure and how the

necessary densities and design options will be achieved.

My own opinion is that once the planning documents are adopted the responsibility for implementation be taken out of Councils hands and placed in the hands of a board of suitably qualified and motivated individuals. I do not propose this for the whole Planning Scheme but for those

components that are critical to the well being as well as the form and function of the City. This simple process would ensure that base politics will not intrude on achieving the ultimate aim. Previous experience has shown that populist attitudes can destroy even the most innovative projects but so can parochialism. In fact Robina would have been destroyed as

a potential key centre after amalgamation if it were not for special legislation.

How do we begin to break this listless and insidious infiltration into the management responsibilities of the elected body?

Education surely must play a part. It is no longer acceptable nor logical for industry bodies to simply talk about the cost

to stakeholders. Industry bodies must communicate directly with residents and educate them to the fact that what affects the key industries in this City affects their rates, their neighbourhoods and their livelihoods. When builders and subcontractors state that they think there is too much development on the Coast it is time to address the perception issues.

This leads to the issue of decision or risk avoidance. Repeatedly evidence is emerging that Officers are commissioning legal advice on the interpretation of the Planning Scheme when uncertain of the intent. Why? This is the Gold Coast City Council's Planning Scheme why is that the Council is not asked to give an interpretation

on their own Planning Scheme? A simple procedural process that would not only save ratepayer funds but actually begin to pull the responsibility for the Planning Scheme back to the Council where it belongs.

Further we have seen applications or planning documents deferred in some cases repeatedly in the hope

that the politically palatable outcome can be engineered.

The tourism industry have been despairing for years at the lack of new product coming into the market and well they should when the return on building apartments in our key tourist centres is a far more attractive risk than a new hotel. Absolutely no work has been done since the last

election on potential planning scheme modifications that can encourage new product that revitalises the tourism industry.

Education for Councillors upon election must become mandatory, with both planning and economic components to begin teaching largely inexperienced individuals who no longer take

the time to learn the craft the fundamentals of cause and effect of their decisions.

Party politics will not fix this problem for the simple reason that a party candidate will not defeat a sitting independent in the Gold Coast. The result would be an even more dysfunctional Council with no united vision.

Lastly the continuing purge of democratic rights through increased legislation is rendering the elected representative irrelevant. The paranoia extends to a Councillor declaring a potential conflict of interest in an application because he convinced the applicant to donate a surfboard to a charity raising funds for a woman with cancer.....

When this type of paranoia grips the elected body how can they possibly perform their duties in an effective manner. The result is that more and more power passes from the people to the bureaucrats ensuring we become mired deeper and deeper into process and ideology rather than outcomes.

Mediocrity becomes the norm
and leadership by the people's
representatives becomes
nothing more than a rubber
stamping exercise on the floor
of Council.