

Integrity Act unravelled

Bryn Lummus reports

Whenever issues occur that affect the Gold Coast development and construction industry, you will find the volunteers of SDGCI fighting for a balanced and equitable outcome. Unfortunately, it seems that new policies and contentious issues that need our attention are occurring all too often.

As an example, you are probably all aware of the recent - and still ongoing - confusion caused by Gold Coast City Council's attempts to respond to the Integrity Act. The 'Lobbyist Debacle' was brought about by Council's concerns regarding the implications of the Integrity Act and of the possible criminal charges their staff and Councillors could face when discussing issues with persons not registered as a 'Lobbyist' while acting on behalf of a third party client.

Members of SDGCI themselves heard on 24th February that Council were implementing a hurried policy that was to be in place by 1st March. Council's reaction to the Act was to label as a Lobbyist all persons who interact with Council during the course of their work - thus requiring most of the construction and development industry to register as a Lobbyist.

Given both the significance of their 'solution' and the timeframe of this, SDGCI reacted quickly by discussing the information they had with Lucy Ardern, Chief Reporter of the Gold Coast Bulletin and providing her with assistance and information for the article that appeared in that Saturday's edition of the pro-development local daily. The aim of this was to bring the issue and its implications to the attention of a wider audience and provide a counterpoint argument to Council's stated intent.

It seemed at the time that all persons working in construction, maintenance and other related fields would need to be registered as a Lobbyist in order to keep their communication lines open with Council. In fact, the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA) promptly recommended that all Architects register as Lobbyists in order for us to continue to interface with Council. This was the only possible action given the impossibly short notice period given by Council -who have since quickly backtracked from their initial heavy-handed approach.

Councillor Ted Shepherd (current Chair of the G.C.C.C. City Planning Committee) and Matthew Hulse (G.C.C.C. Manager Implementation and Assessment Branch) addressed the Integrity Act in a Council Industry briefing as recently as 4th March and advised they are still seeking guidance from the Integrity Commissioner on the subject. At the time of writing - Council has made no official statement, so one presumes that business will carry on as usual.

However, it seems there are particular concerns regarding the role of Town Planners and whether they will need to be registered as Lobbyists. Therefore, we are not out of the woods yet.

Personally, I believe that the role of Town Planners is well understood by Council and as such, the professional role that Town Planners fulfil in relation to their dealings with Council is clear. I would ask Council if registering Town Planners as Lobbyists makes their role any clearer to anyone or whether it provides any more legal comfort to Council or their staff. I believe not.

This topic still needs to be watched and I encourage all involved with the construction industry to make their voices heard whenever possible regarding this additional policy and pointless complication to our working lives. We don't need mistrust and further distance placed between Council and us.

For my part, I raised this topic at the recent Community Cabinet held on the Coast on 27th February. I prearranged an individual meeting with Andrew Fraser (Old Treasurer and the Minister for State Development and Trade) to discuss a number of Gold Coast related development and environmental issues that I wished to bring to the attention of the State Govt.

These Community Cabinet meetings are not a forum for detailed debate given the limited time available; however, they give us all the chance to raise topics and areas of concern. There were

certainly many voices of concern at this particular Gold Coast Community Cabinet where I was able to bring the Queensland Treasurer (and his entourage of listeners and note takers) up to speed on the Lobbyist issue as well as a range of other topics that I feel strongly about.

That is not to say that things will change significantly. However, I welcomed the opportunity to add to the swell of public opinion because after all, it is only by participating that we become part of the solution and are able to make a difference. As cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has."

SDGCI continue to address the issues that are holding back and affecting development on the Coast and I think it is worth highlighting that SDGCI are concerned with all aspects of the construction and development industry.

As a group, we focus on realistic outcomes to achieve a balance of economic, social and environmental factors within the development of the City and region. It is in this broad context that SDGCI seek to foster sustainable growth to create a liveable, beautiful and long-term economically successful city for our children and grand children.

Undoubtedly, there is much to deal with and put right. I would therefore encourage you to participate and join SDGCI to help us address the issues that our industry faces on the Gold Coast as a collective voice. Together we are making a difference.