

**NEW SOUTH WALES REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT FORUM AT ALBURY – THURSDAY
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**PANEL SESSION: THE ROLE OF PARTNERSHIPS IN THE FUTURE OF REGIONAL
COMMUNITIES**

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**TITLE: RESOURCING LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN REGIONAL COMMUNITIES – THE
IMPORTANCE OF PARTNERSHIPS**

Regional Profile

The Murray Regional Organisation of Councils, or Murray ROC as it is commonly known, is one of some 40 voluntary regional organisations of Councils throughout Australia. Formed in 1991, it represents, advocates and co-ordinates activities in the best interests of its eleven member Councils in the Murray region of New South Wales, which extends from Albury City, west along the Murray River to Balranald Shire and north to Hay and Jerilderie Shires. The total population exceeds 100,000 over an area of some 70,000 square kilometres.

Local Government today faces many significant challenges across the broad spectrum of its functions and activities. The smaller rural Councils sometimes have particular difficulties in being able to provide the necessary expertise and resources required to cope with some of these challenges individually. A major attribute of Regional Organisations of Councils or ROC's is that they provide a mechanism for a partnership approach to meet common challenges together in unity and strength.

The Murray ROC region is well serviced with primary and secondary schooling. Tertiary educational facilities include Charles Sturt University at Albury and the Riverina Institute of TAFE, which has campuses at Albury, Deniliquin, Corowa and Finley.

Professional Staff Shortages

One of the major issues facing our member Councils is the difficulty of attracting and retaining professional staff across the range of Local Government disciplines, including management, finance, engineering, town planning, environmental health and building surveying. When vacancies occur nowadays, they are often difficult to replace at all, with numbers and quality of applicants less than desirable.

These professional staff shortages are applicable to Local Government generally in regional Australia, and are also being experienced in many other industries and business organisations.

When I started with a Sydney Council back in 1961, the consensus was that Local Government provided a long term career opportunity. The tertiary courses for the various disciplines were generally part time University or Technical College, often studied externally and specifically with a Local Government content tied to the provisions and requirements of the Local Government Act and Ordinances. You gained practical experience during the day and studied for your qualification at night. There were rarely any shortages of applicants for positions advertised in country areas.

It was also generally accepted that to fast track your career prospects, country service was the way to go. In country Councils, staff became quickly skilled across the diverse range of functions, with the Town or Shire Clerks, Engineers and other senior officers very committed to comprehensive training programs, in the knowledge that their "young charges" would be future leaders in the industry. Additionally, most regional and rural Councils provided housing for their senior employees, and sometimes for mid level staff as well, at nominal rentals and actively promoted their involvement in Council activities and the local community. The availability of affordable housing was a particularly attractive incentive for a young family and

the strong culture of on the job training equipped young people for their next step up the career ladder.

That situation has changed to a degree over recent years. The current consensus is that sufficient numbers of qualified and well trained staff are not coming up through the traditional ranks and that some senior management and technical staff coming into Local Government from the private sector do not possess the specific LG knowledge, skills or political acumen to succeed in the industry.

Possibly this has been brought about by a combination of factors including:-

- Changes to the Local Government Act, for example, the relaxation of specified qualifications and certificates for various professions;
- The introduction of fixed term performance based Employment Contracts for General Managers and designated senior staff, which has increased the turnover of professional positions at senior and mid management levels;
- Local Government has become far more political, regulated and complex, making it less attractive as a long term profession. Its overall image in the community is not good, to my mind very unfairly in most respects. As a result, there is far more movement from Local Government to private enterprise and to private sector consultancies for Council services;
- The traditional part time courses, which combined education with practical "on the job" training are no longer available or are under threat;
- Tertiary courses are less Local Government specific, allowing graduates greater flexibility in their career aspirations and employment opportunities. There is strong competition from the private sector for young professionals across all disciplines;
- Remuneration levels have generally not kept pace the private sector, especially at the senior levels;
- Local Government is generally not viewed by young people as an attractive career path, nor is it adequately promoted by Councils and industry associations;
- Career and lifestyle preferences for young graduates seem to be increasingly focussed towards the metropolitan cities and the larger regional centres;

Present Recruiting and Retaining Issues in Murray ROC Region

Last year I carried out a survey of our member Councils to gauge the extent of the difficulties being experienced in recruiting, training and retaining Council staff across all work disciplines. Briefly, the main survey results are as follows:-

- The 11 member Councils have a total staff complement of some 1200, made up as follows:-

Tertiary qualified	197
Tertiary studies in progress	84
Other training certification	590
Other	<u>330</u>
- All Councils have difficulties in recruiting adequately qualified and skilled staff, particularly Town Planners, Health and Building Surveyors, Engineers, and Finance Managers. The main reasons for these difficulties include the lack of qualified people in each profession entering Local Government, difficulty in meeting market and salary expectations, geographic location and inadequate education and other services/amenities located in the HQ centre;
- Similarly, most Councils have difficulties in retaining skilled staff, mostly for the same reasons as before, as well as better salaries and conditions on offer elsewhere, lack of opportunity for early internal progression or accepting other positions for career advancement;
- Most Councils provide a variety of incentives to staff, by way of tertiary fees reimbursement, provision of housing and/or vehicles, over award salaries, performance bonuses and professional development;
- All Councils are interested in programs to attract new graduates to their workforce;

Existing Tertiary Courses and Training Programs

There is a comprehensive range of University and/or TAFE qualifications available at various tertiary institutions servicing the needs of Local Government professions. These generally fall into the following professional categories:-

- Management, Finance and Administration
- Information Technology and Services
- Human Resources and Training
- Public Relations
- Community Development
- Children's and Family Services
- Aged Services
- Libraries and Cultural Services
- Recreational Services
- Engineering and Civil Works
- Water Management
- Horticulture
- Planning Building Control
- Waste Management
- Environmental Health
- Health and Building Surveying

Addressing the Issues – The Importance of Regional Partnerships

There is no single solution to the problem of adequately resourcing Councils in the Murray ROC region. It is essential to implement a range of strategies, including the development of strong partnership arrangements with secondary schools, universities, TAFE, other training and development providers, industry associations and by effectively marketing the region's excellent rural lifestyle and employment opportunities.

Secondary Schools Partnerships

This is an important starting point for a strategy of "growing our own". On a regional and individual Council basis, we must actively promote the diverse range of professions available in our local Councils and encourage students to pursue a Local Government career. This requires a planned ongoing co-operative working relationship with schools, not simply at the traditional Careers Day and Work Experience programs, but through regular communication, publications and presentations, meaningful and relevant Work Experience across the broad spectrum of Council activities and potentially through scholarship incentives.

University Partnerships

A number of universities provide courses relevant to the Local Government industry and again we plan to develop partnership arrangements wherever possible with those institutions to encourage graduating students to seriously consider Local Government as a career option. This can be achieved by advertising in University publications and web sites, making presentations to students and co-ordinating a program of scholarships and work placements.

Already, there are some excellent examples of positive co-operation between Local Government and Universities. Albury City has a comprehensive MOU with Charles Sturt University to enhance both the City and the University and to assist each other in meeting mutual strategic objectives, including an annual program of scholarships, trainees and work placements.

The Riverina East Regional Organisation of Councils (REROC) has in place a Professional Placement Program, in which it advertises the availability of work placements in a number of professions in their member Councils. In the past 18 months there were 38 CSU applicants from a range of disciplines and 9 UTS Engineering applicants and some of these have been

placed. REROC has specifically promoted engineering opportunities by visiting UTS last year to encourage engineering students to consider a rural environment as an option for their compulsory placements and is now looking at the question of REROC scholarships at UTS for Civil Engineering students.

The Faculty of Engineering at UTS is very conscious of the acute shortage of engineering students undertaking an internship in rural areas, which means that the students are not getting the valuable experience that working in a rural location can bring. UTS has therefore developed two new models aimed at increasing the number of students doing engineering in the country, which are to be managed through ROC's.

The first focuses on the long term needs of rural councils, similar to the former popular Sandwich Program, whereby students can apply for Scholarship/Cadetships. The second is more a short term scheme aimed at getting students to do internships in rural councils.

An alliance of Blayney, Wellington and Cabonne Councils in the central west has developed a partnership with the University of New South Wales' Faculty of Engineering for engineering scholarships and also works closely with CSU at Bathurst. Wagga City has an undergraduate engineering scholarship with the University of NSW, as a result of difficulties in filling engineering positions.

The UTS Centre for Local Government provides a Graduate Diploma in Local Government and a range of Professional Development Programs specifically tailored to Local Government. It also works closely with individual Councils on Strategic and Corporate Planning, Structural Reform, Performance Measurement, Benchmarking and other related projects.

The University of Canberra offers a Graduate Certificate in Regional and Local Government Management on a full time (one semester) or part time basis.

TAFE Partnerships

The Riverina Institute of TAFE, through its Business Development Division at the Albury and Deniliquin campuses, works closely with a number of Murray ROC Councils to provide customised training to meet the needs of individual Councils, enhance workplace skills and meet legislative requirements.

This is a very important partnership to ensure the ongoing training and development of existing staff in Councils, particularly in areas of Civil Construction, Front Line Management, Horticulture etc. Albury City has a strong annual partnership arrangement for staff training across various sections and it has a similar partnership with Wodonga TAFE in respect of horticulture and plant operator training.

Private Sector Partnerships – Training and Development

Councils realise that to retain quality professional staff, their employees must be continually encouraged and motivated. In this regard, staff must be provided with ongoing training, professional development and where possible a plan for internal progression.

These objectives can be achieved by developing partnerships with accredited training and development providers. For example, Murray ROC has been in discussion during the past year with Consultants Chandler Macleod regarding the Victorian Local Government Graduate Program, which aims to develop future Local Government Managers and Leaders, improve recruitment and retention of new and existing staff and enhance the profile of Local Government as an "employer of choice" to young people. Two Murray ROC Councils have been utilising this program with considerable success in recent years and potentially a region wide partnership arrangement may be achieved for the benefit of all Councils.

Partnerships in Marketing the Region

In order to attract young graduates and key professionals to rural and regional areas, it is essential to undertake an effective and targeted marketing/promotion program, espousing the country lifestyle and career opportunities. Again, this can best be achieved by developing partnerships with educational institutions, business and industry groups and community leaders. For example, Murray ROC is currently involved in two such projects, firstly the 2nd annual Country Week promotion to be held at Rosehill Gardens in Sydney during August, at which entrepreneurial New South Wales regions will be showcasing the advantages of rural living to Sydney residents.

Secondly, the proposed C Change Project, which is a joint partnership of Councils in 4 ROC regions (REROC, Murray ROC, RIVROC and CENTROC – embracing 46 Council areas in central west and south west NSW) This is an ongoing program of major shopping centre promotions in both Sydney and Melbourne, again targeting capital cities' residents to re-locate to country areas for improved quality of life and employment.

Both of these projects will provide opportunities for recruitment of professional staff in regional and rural areas. However, the key element to success of these projects is to very proactively respond to enquiries received and leads generated.

Partnerships with LG Industry Associations

It is important that this matter continues to be addressed by both the Local Government Association and Shires Association as the employer industry and also by the various employee associations, such as the Local Government Managers Association, Engineers' Association, etc.

All of these bodies are cognisant of the difficulties facing Councils, as is the NSW Minister for Local Government and his Department, which has formed a specific Working Party to deal with the question of skills shortages in the industry.

There is a strong opportunity for all of those bodies to develop a partnership program of industry promotion to attract young people to the industry and to my mind work actively to enhance the image of Local Government in the community.

Summary

Murray ROC Councils, as well as Local Government generally throughout Australia have difficulty in recruiting, training and retaining professional staff in a range of disciplines, but notably in finance, engineering, town planning, environmental services and building control.

There are various factors which have contributed to the current situation, but they must be urgently and positively addressed for the long term benefit of regional councils and their communities.

To address these difficulties, one very important strategy is to develop a range of partnerships with education providers, training and development organisations, industry associations and promotional bodies, aimed at attracting quality people to rural regions and its Local Government workplace.

We all have a part to play in forming those partnerships and ensuring their longevity and success.