



INFRASTRUCTURE

LOCAL CONNECTIONS

A quarterly newsletter for research and policy officers in local government in Victoria

From the Editor

Welcome to the 8th edition of LOCAL CONNECTIONS - marking our second birthday! The final quarter of 1999 promises to be an interesting and exciting one - with the stand out event of the year scheduled and confirmed. This will be a never-before-offered opportunity for officers of local government to meet with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) as a first step towards building better research relationships. Preliminary discussions between representatives of the Local Government Research Network (LGRN), the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV), and the ABS have identified some of the goals and benefits of such an event and have strengthened the impetus for its organising. More details about the event can be found inside this edition of LOCAL CONNECTIONS. In this edition I'm very happy to welcome some new members of the LGRN working group - Lousie Coventry at the City of Boroondara, Glenda Stanislaw at the City of Glen Eira, and Fiona Hando at the MAV. Thanks for your help already and we look forward to your continued involvement!

Hot Topic

Community Indicators

One of the dominant paradigms steering the functions of local government today is customer service. But at what point do customers of local government become citizens with rights and responsibilities beyond those defined in a market sense? Furthermore, what do local communities require to be sustainable and how can we identify and measure these attributes? These are the sorts of questions that more and more local communities throughout the world are seeking answers to through the development of community indicators projects.

In Victoria, there are now some great examples where local government is taking a lead role in undertaking these kind of projects. The Community Indicators and Local Democracy Project is one such example. The project is a national collaborative initiative of Swinburne University of Technology, the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA), the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV), and currently involves the Cities of Moreland and Greater Geelong as local government partners in Victoria. The project emphasises community participation and has two main aims:

- to investigate and 'audit' democratic and participatory practices in local governance in the participating local municipalities; and
- to pilot and evaluate some interesting new local democracy programs, including 'electronic democracy' and democracy audits.

The major research focus in each municipality will be to develop an ongoing, citizen-based system of 'community indicators', designed to measure and benchmark community well-being and community priorities in three dimensions: economic, social, and ecological sustainability.

Evaluating the community indicators will involve ongoing appraisal of their performance in regard to four broad project perspectives:

- as a means for enhancing local democracy, including citizen participation, community development and democratic priority-setting;
- as a tool for improved local governance, especially strategic planning, needs assessment and conflict resolution;
- their application and different consequences and effects in Australian communities of varied size, composition and governance traditions; and,
- their potential for wider national application.

While this is one of the largest and most ambitious community indicators projects currently underway, there are some other smaller, similar projects being undertaken at the local government level, with equally worthwhile objectives. These range from regular customer satisfaction surveys to focus group consultation in the development of Council policies and strategies. Of course, getting community indicators projects up and running is not easy, regardless of their size and scope. At the outset, most Councils will ask 'what's in it for us as local government?' - but the benefits to Councils, like those to the community, aren't always measurable in the traditional sense (ie. quantifiable). They might often be more intangible, but no less significant gains such as stronger internal community stability and support, greater input from the community into local initiatives that have mutually beneficial results, increased awareness of the rights and responsibilities of local democracy and citizenship and, in turn, more participatory and productive regimes of local governance.

While community indicators are often developed for, and by, particular local communities, there are more generic projects underway at the local government level in Victoria, which have broader application.

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Early afternoon Sydney Road, in the City of Moreland

Recent ABS Releases

- *CData96 Tip Sheets* (on ABS website, www.abs.gov.au).
- *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare).
- Census Working Paper 99/4 - Review of Enumeration of Indigenous Peoples in the 1996 Census.
- *CData96 - Information for Users - Hints and Tips, and Revision for use with CData96* (on ABS website).
- *Gambling Industries, Australia, 1997-98* (Cat. No. 8647.0)
- *What Figures - Issue 15* (on ABS website).
- *Australian Social Trends 1999* (Cat. No.4102.0).
- *Y2K Statement by Australian Bureau of Statistics* (on ABS website).
- *Recorded Crime, Australia, 1998* (Cat. No. 4510.0)
- Newsletters: *National Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics (NCATSIS) - Issue Number 5, April 1999*
- *Australian Demographic Statistics* (Cat. No. 3101.0)
- Census Working Paper 99/3 - *1996 Census Data Quality: Housing*.

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A recent initiative of the Local Government Community Services Association of Australia (LGCSAA) seeks to provide benchmarks for community planning and development, community services, local governance and social capital in local government. With assistance from LGPro and the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV), LGCSAA recently launched this benchmarking approach with the release of a document entitled *Working Together To Develop Our Communities - Good Practice and Benchmarking in Local Government Community Development and Community Services*. The aim of the benchmarks, which have been developed by LGCSAA in consultation with local government, is to increase Councils' capacity to assist the development of local communities and measure their performance against the practice of democracy and values of equity and participation.

Thanks to Mike Salvaris at Swinburne University of Technology for information on the Community Indicators and Local Democracy Project.

For further information contact Mike Salvaris at Swinburne University of Technology (tel 9214 8837), Chris Bell at the ALGA (tel 02 6282 2110), Jenny Wills at the MAV (tel 9667 5555), LGPro (tel 9686 3833), Jane Wager at the City of Greater Geelong (tel 5227 0270), or Cathi Walker at the City of Moreland (tel 9240 2365).

News from the Research Unit

For years, decades, and perhaps even centuries, the true name and boundary of Victoria's suburbs has been a point of conjecture. However, at last, through an extensive process of consultation with local government and the community, an official set of suburb names and boundaries is available. The Research Unit has recently acquired these with a view to undertaking time-series analysis of ABS Census data as a way of examining how Melbourne's suburbs have been changing.

The State Government has recently gazetted official definitions of suburb names and boundaries throughout Victoria that were developed through the Department of Natural Resources and Environment's (Place Names Committee) consultation with local government. While suburbs vary greatly in size, they generally correspond to areas smaller than Statistical Local Areas (SLAs), and because suburbs do not necessarily correspond to postcode areas or local government boundaries the task of historical analysis is quite complicated. To date, much of our work with the new suburb boundaries has involved sorting out the Census Collector Districts (CDs) for each suburb back over time - a painstaking, but ultimately rewarding process.

Project Profiles

Community Driven Urban Design

This project recognises that 45% of the Baw Baw Shire population resides outside of a township of less than 500 people and that infrastructure support, community services and development opportunities need to be maintained in these rural districts. However, rather than specifying how this might come about, the project sought to develop a methodology whereby greater autonomy is given to these rural communities in terms of developing a vision and outlining what is needed to support this vision. The project then seeks to make a strong connection with the Council Budget-setting process and those of relevant stakeholders.

The objective is to assist the community in developing its own vision for the future of its township and an urban design framework to assist the realisation of their vision. The project comprises a consultation and design development exercise for ten towns. Four have been successfully completed with a Project Report and Action Plan for each being supported by the local community and formally adopted by Council. Action Plans for each of the individual district projects are then entered in the Council Strategy Action Chart which is a system that determines priority, timing, responsibility and funding. It also enables/encourages the identification of other agencies or funding opportunities which can contribute to the action item, particularly the funding of infrastructure projects.

The project revolves around a community identification of social and economic pressures on the local environment generally as a result of external changes, and seeks to find outcomes driven by the community view about what might best be done to accommodate these pressures. These townscape projects have also provided council with the opportunity to better allocate funds to priority projects of these communities. The community-driven process has been beneficial to Council, community confidence and development of partnerships for implementation activities. Baw Baw Shire Council has provided other Councils with the framework developed for this Project and several Councils have incorporated this into their future urban design projects.

For further information contact Richard Perry at Baw Baw Shire Council (tel 03 5624 2522 or e-mail richard.perry@bawbawshire.vic.gov.au).

Value Adding to Building Records

All Councils keep records of building permits as a matter of course. The City of Ballarat has taken this under utilised resource and value added to create a useful tool. A database, gleaned from the building records and built up over the last three years will allow tracking of building activity within the municipality. A major feature is the ability to show trends in particular neighbourhoods. It also allows the pinpointing of medium density residential developments and also demolitions, a factor watched closely in a city priding itself on its heritage.

The City of Ballarat through its strategic planning section will soon release its first Building Quarterly newsletter based on the information available through the database. The first newsletter will contain graphs and tables, showing building trends over the last three years, as well as detailed information of activities within particular areas of the municipality. The newsletter will also be used as a means of passing on other relevant information to people within the building trade, for instance, the recent alterations to the Building Act 1993 which effects the issuing of Occupancy Permits. The newsletter will be issued every three months free of charge, Council hopes it will be well received by local builders and developers.

For further information contact Liz Orlowski at the City of Ballarat (tel 03 5320 5582 or e-mail Orlowsk1@ballarat.vic.gov.au)