

Leadership within local government – getting it right

Mayors and councillors take a leadership role within their communities with an emphasis on improving the collective well-being of the community. Councils know that failure to address the well-being of the community can impact on the long-term economic, social, cultural and environmental sustainability of the community.

Making decisions on the well-being of the community requires collective action and choices, which have to be binding on the whole community. Councils have the ability to introduce bylaws to deal with specific issues affecting their communities and members of the community are encouraged to share their views during this process.

Local government, because it is close to the community, can easily be approached, and can relatively quickly respond to local needs. People can easily have the opportunity to voice their opinions about the decisions being made and bylaws that are introduced.

Councillors, as the elected officials, have to make difficult decisions. Each decision is a judgment and trade-off where there are tensions concerning different priorities of different residents and it is about making decisions for the collective good of the whole community.

Case study: Leadership – Invercargill style

While all councillors strive to get it right when it comes to leadership Invercargill City Council provides an outstanding example.

Tim Shadbolt as Mayor of Invercargill has managed to achieve what many thought was impossible. His council was faced with the very real problem of a declining population and all the flow-on effects that has. Now Invercargill has turned around a 30 year trend to become one of the very few cities in the world to turn a declining population into a growing one.

When Mayor Tim Shadbolt came into office in 1993 he was faced with leading a city that had been experiencing



30 years of declining population, as he describes it, there was a basically a busload of people leaving every week.

As the former Mayor of Waitemata City and a Councillor for Auckland Regional and Waitakere City Councils Mayor Shadbolt was far more familiar with dealing with the problems of growth.

Now, in Invercargill, he was faced with the flow-on effects of this decline which included school closures, decreasing house and property values and general demoralisation. "Invercargill had a very negative image – there were 2.3 million copies of the Lonely Planet guide to New Zealand saying it was a city to avoid at all costs full of people with bad hair and checked shirts." On top of that the Rolling Stones made disparaging remarks about the city.

Mayor Shadbolt says there was an overwhelmingly negative feel about the place which had been brought about by many factors.

"For a start Invercargill is basically at the end of a dead-end road, it's not on the way to anywhere. There were also global influences at work including the sunbelt drift where people were moving to be closer to the equator and urbanization with people moving from provincial towns to larger urban centres."

Mayor Shadbolt is the first to acknowledge that finding solutions to the issues was no easy task and admits that he got it wrong in his first term as Mayor by introducing the concept of Invercargill International Airport. "We decided that Invercargill could be part of the loop to Australia, people could fly into Auckland, travel down the country and depart from Invercargill."

He says that while Invercargill was the first provincial city in the country to develop an international airport, no aeroplanes came and he was thrown out of office.

Instead of leaving town, Shadbolt decided to stay around and get to know the place better. He tutored at the local polytechnic and did lots of odd jobs about the place.

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In 1998 he was re-elected for a second term as Mayor of Invercargill City Council and is now enjoying his fourth term. The city has gone from a 30 year decline to having a population growth of 0.8 per cent. House prices have increased 28 per cent in the last quarter and 27 per cent in the previous quarter.

So what prompted the turn-around? Mayor Shadbolt says the critical factor in local government leadership and being able to affect change is to have political stability and an excellent working relationship between the Mayor and Chief Executive. He says it is very hard to achieve anything when you are dealing with infighting. Shadbolt was determined to get it right this time having had several not so positive relationships as Mayor of Waitemata City.

"The second thing I had to do was lay it on the line to councillors that we needed to undertake some bold and innovative projects to turn things around."

Mayor Shadbolt says the council had the option to accept what statisticians were telling them and shrink the city to cater for an ageing, declining population or they could fight it by raising loans, investing money to rebuild the city and backing every positive opportunity or initiative that presented itself to the city.

Putting its money where its mouth was, the council decided to increase expenditure on the new swimming pool from \$9 million to \$15 million. It undertook an inner city upgrade to start instilling confidence, it backed the Southern Institute of Technology's (SIT) introduction of zero fees and got behind the ever successful Southern Sting netball team and the associated Stadium Southland.

"Basically we became very opportunistic and if anyone locally was succeeding we got in behind them."

Mayor Shadbolt says the SIT's zero fees policy was a brilliant idea and has had a huge impact on the turn-around of the city. The council decided to make a major investment of \$2 million to support this policy which ultimately encouraged the two Trusts (Invercargill Licensing Trust and Community Trust of Southland) to support the zero fees policy and to match the council contribution.

"That scheme really achieved results - the city went from having 1,000 to 4,000 students almost overnight. Suddenly there were lots of students renting houses, frequenting coffee bars and suddenly the place was a lot more vibrant."

Mayor Shadbolt says most importantly the initiative helped change the perspective of Invercargill as a rural backwater to a dynamic and innovative city on the cutting edge of education.

The city also got right in behind the Hollywood movie – The World's Fastest Indian. Mayor Shadbolt went personally to Los Angeles to meet with producers and assure them of the council's total commitment and support for having the movie shot in the area. The council was able to ensure smooth processes and speedy resolution to any resource consents

needed for the filming. Mayor Shadbolt says the movie was a great way to promote the city and to establish a reputation for being 'film friendly'.

The latest opportunity to present itself is the oil explorations. This is a central Government initiative to appoint a company to explore potential oil reserves in the area. In an effort to capitalize on the future opportunities this could bring to the city the council has responded by setting up a consortium of local companies who are able to provide everything from pipes to pipes for the oil companies.

The council has also bought 1500 acres that it is in the process of re-zoning industrial that could potentially house industry to support oil development.

He says a council can only take bold initiatives if political stability is in place. During the past 10 years Mayor Shadbolt has only lost one councillor – the rest of the council remaining stable. The councillors have the confidence to try different things and to take calculated risks and Mayor Shadbolt says this sometimes involves stepping outside the boundaries of local government.

Similarly bold initiatives only work if the community is behind them. So far the elections have shown that the community endorses the initiatives taken to stimulate growth and rebuild the city.

And while the population increase of 0.8 per cent may seem modest to most, Mayor Shadbolt says when you consider the downward spiral the city was in, the increase is the ultimate victory. The council is hoping to see a dramatic increase in the population figures when the next census figures are released.

Another factor contributing to the growth of the city has been the ability of the council to be flexible enough to respond to opportunities that pop up – things that can't necessarily be anticipated in a Long Term Council Community Plan. Mayor Shadbolt says these are often the opportunities that have a positive affect on development.

So with a growing population and with house prices on the rise there has been an increase in morale and a lot of support for what the council has achieved. While resident satisfaction surveys are always positive, Mayor Shadbolt measures success by the lack of complaints the council receives when it puts up rates and by the low number of submissions received during the Annual Planning process.

Respected Australian demographer Bernard Salt recently visited the council and wrote about Invercargill's turnaround in his article 'Farming on the edge of the New World risks fall into no-man's land' in The Australian 9/11/06.

As the Mayor puts it, "when you are in a downward spiral nothing works, when you turn that around everything works."

