



Western Queensland Alliance of Councils

“Building Blocks for the Future”

Assembly, Richmond: 17-19 May 2021

COMMUNIQUE

“Building Blocks for the Future” was the theme of the 2021 Western Queensland Alliance of Councils (WQAC) Assembly where 183 council delegates, sponsors, government and industry participants convened at the Richmond Shire Hall from Monday 17 to Wednesday 19 May.

Official Opening

The Hon Glenn Butcher MP, Minister for Regional Development and Manufacturing and Minister for Water officially opened the Assembly highlighting the importance of Western Queensland to the State’s economy and acknowledged the strength and determination of Western Queenslanders through the adversity of drought and the Pandemic over the past 12 months since his attendance at the Inaugural Assembly in July 2020.

The Minister outlined the Government’s support for the region’s recovery through recently announced funding for water infrastructure and cluster fencing as well as discounted water pricing for irrigators together with support for manufacturing opportunities available through the Made in Queensland and Manufacturing Hubs Grants programs .

Regions on the Rise

The Assembly commenced with the Regional Australia Institute (RAI) setting the scene about the opportunities for regions to capitalise on the COVID-19 trend of individuals and families looking to “Move to More” based on the attractive lifestyle that rural communities can offer. Delegates were challenged to showcase the ‘Big Vision’, ‘Bold Ideas’ and ‘Beating Hearts’ of their communities and join in the RAI campaign to attract more people to rural and regional Australia.

Successive presentations focused on the ‘Building Blocks to Remote and Regional Development’ with WQAC leaders engaging with State and Federal Ministers, a Queensland Senator, Industry CEOs and Senior Queensland Government departmental executives. Susan McDonald, Senator for Queensland, acknowledged that the WQAC is now “one of Australia’s most powerful lobby groups”.

Transport – Roads – Federal Perspective

Providing a safe and seamless road network was discussed first from a Federal perspective with The Hon Scott Buchholz MP, Assistant Minister for Road Safety and Freight Transport highlighting the opportunities to leverage federal funding programs through improved project planning, gaining pre-qualification status for Civil Construction Contracts and ensuring road priorities are agreed and clearly articulated.

Financial Capability and Capacity – Federal & State Perspectives

Likewise, the financial capability and capacity of regional and remote councils was examined first through a Federal lens, with The Hon Mark Coulton MP, Minister for Regional Health, Regional Communications and Local

Government highlighting the pros and cons of the ALGA campaign to increase Financial Assistance Grants (FAGs) to one percent of Commonwealth taxation revenue and welcoming representations from the WQAC about potential changes to the FAGs distribution methodology.

From a State perspective, Nikki Boyd MP, Assistant Minister for Local Government also acknowledged the need for ongoing funding reform and committed her department to work with the WQAC to progress issues such as a review of financial sustainability ratios as well as programs to improve council's financial governance practices.

Local Government Grants Commission – Methodology Review

The discussion on the future financial capability and capacity of councils was rounded out by Paul Bell AM, Chair of the Queensland Local Government Grants Commission, who shared his aspirations for the impending review into the Financial Assistance Grants methodology. Paul called on individuals, councils and the WQAC to actively engage in the review; present our case for change and support the Commission with its representations to Government. The WQAC welcomes this opportunity and will facilitate this engagement with Paul and the Commission.

Air Transport

Attention then turned to the issue of Air Transport and its importance to connecting communities and facilitating economic growth. Panel members and delegates discussed the challenges to all the parties involved from councils providing landing and airport infrastructure; councils and airlines in meeting regulatory requirements; airlines in providing schedules and aircraft to meet passenger expectations; and the State Government in supporting regulated services. Noting the current review of regulated routes, delegates called for further consultation from TransLink on 'service requirements' before the program of contract renewals is finalised; and also, the opportunity to consider north-south flights in addition to east-west.

Rural and Remote Councils Compact

Alison Smith, Head of Advocacy at LGAQ provided a status update on negotiations with State Government to finalise the Rural and Remote Councils Compact advising that the 'Compact Guardians' would be councils point of contact to provide input and shape the three key priorities the Compact would be based on.

Digital Connectivity

Day One of the Assembly concluded with a panel discussion on digital connectivity where the complexities and opportunities of this matter were unpacked and debated. Collaboration emerged as a key ingredient to tackling the current digital connectivity deficit including the need to better understand the scope of issues, as a first step, as proposed through the Digital Connectivity Study for Western Queensland to be commissioned by the WQAC.

Housing

The severity of the housing crisis in regional and remote Queensland formed the opening discussion on Day Two of the Assembly with Dr Kim Houghton, Chief Economist from the RAI presenting preliminary findings from the WQAC's Housing Study, which revealed that: the problems are multi-faceted and vary across the West on both the demand and supply sides; the solutions will involve multiple responses from and partnerships amongst Local, State and Federal governments; and that, positively, there are private sector construction and financing partners wanting to be part of achieving place-based and fit for purpose outcomes.

Further consultation with councils on the WQAC Housing Study will occur prior to its finalisation in July 2021.

Sustainable Recovery and Resilience

Disaster Management and building community resilience was then next on the agenda with Sophie Cartwright, Executive Director, Flood Branch, National Recovery and Resilience Agency and Brendan Moon, CEO of the Queensland Reconstruction Authority discussing the congruence of policy priorities between both agencies and the benefit from all levels of government continuing to make betterment funding a priority for “building back better” and “front ending the investment” to generate increased community resilience.

Transport – Roads – State Perspective

Transport and Roads were then back on the Agenda – from a State perspective, with delegates hearing from TMR’s three Regional Directors for Western Queensland, who encouraged the respective Regional Roads and Transport Groups as well as individual councils to focus on the future through long term planning and the development of pipelines of projects for funding, being cognisant of the priorities identified in existing Regional Transport Plans.

State Opposition Update

The Assembly concluded with a joint presentation from Lachlan Millar MP, Assistant to the Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Assistant Minister for Western Queensland, Ann Leahy MP, Shadow Minister for Local Government, and Fiona Simpson MP, Shadow Minister for State Development, Infrastructure and Planning who touched on the need for Works for Queensland to be continued and the need for the current tranche of integrity reforms to be simplified. Lachlan, Ann and Fiona commended the Assembly for its efforts and the direction it was heading.

Close

Delegates thanked Richmond Shire Council for hosting the Assembly and extending such warm ‘small town’ hospitality to all involved.

Delegates noted that the actions identified in this Communique will be actioned through the WQAC Leadership Group and, where necessary, individual councils and form the basis for developing the program for the next Assembly to be held in Charleville in mid-2022.

19 May 2021.