

Rural community planning: Love in a dry climate

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Abstract

This article looks at the experience of rural community engagement and planning in the light of some current academic observation. The work explores the challenges confronting local government in working with rural communities as partners in addressing local priorities at a time of significant challenges for rural Victoria. Made up of ten communities located across 8500 square kilometres, the Buloke Shire crosses the boundaries of the Wimmera and Mallee regions of Victoria. Buloke Shire Council used the Community Building Initiative (CBI), a Victorian Government program funded by the Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD), to provide a platform for community engagement, planning and development. This paper reflects on why this participatory approach is so important in rural Victorian shires. What are some of the challenges in moving to a participatory approach? The paper discusses the reality that participatory planning, in Buloke as in most settings, is very much a 'work in progress.'

Why We Need 'All Hands To The Pump'

Margaret Alston and Jenny Kent observe that social capital is the human glue that holds a community together: the participation, trust, generation of networks, etcetera. In practical terms, lower social capital means fewer sporting clubs and other community groups and organisations. In times of drought, social capital can become fragile at the very time it is most needed. The chronic nature of drought, combined with the resulting prolonged economic stress erodes engagement in activities outside of the bare essentials. The revitalisation of social capital may therefore be a key factor in helping communities to manage the impact of drought (Alston and Kent 2004: 98).

An appreciation that planning at all levels represents an opportunity for social interaction for various parties has driven this process. The healthy exchange of ideas drives participatory planning. 'This often calls for a conscious, concerted and active process of reaching or tapping into stakeholder groups, organisations and associations for participation in social planning' (Long, Tice and Morrison, 2006:158,150). Participatory planning has real potential to exist as one of the key elements in the development and maintenance of valuable social capital.

This participatory approach becomes increasingly critical in view of the constantly changing social landscape of rural Victoria. Researcher Dr Neil Barr (Barr 2005: 65) observed in his paper *Changing Social Landscape of Rural Victoria* that we are seeing the ageing of our population as well as the increasing cost of Melbourne property. In

light of this, many country towns in Victoria will face increasing migration from Melbourne, bringing new cultures, skills and networks. These will be crucial to the survival of many small towns. At their best, towns may be transformed into vibrant small places. The example of Maldon in central Victoria, based on a transformation from a mining and small landholder agricultural economy and culture, to one based on history, music and tourism was noted.

In considering this development Barr concluded that many small towns once had very well-developed social networks. Where these networks are tightly linked and have few outside connections, the outcome can be a parochial culture that may exclude alternative views and new ideas. Researchers now consider that effective social capital must be built not only of close strong ties that bind, but also of ties that act as a bridge between networks (Barr 2005: 66). While strong ties provide the greatest level of social support, our broader though weaker ties provide the basis of social experimentation and innovation. Weak ties allow for ideas from different sources. Innovation is more likely to come from persons with access to a variety of ideas from a variety of networks (Barr 2005: 66).

In taking on board the changing social landscape in rural Victoria, balancing the various ties and developing effective lines of communication and participation is an important challenge facing local government. The process of encouraging a complementary rather than competitive approach to community and regional issues is one which continues to challenge all levels of government. The scarcity of resources in rural areas means that many communities are now unable to tackle important issues in isolation. The importance of ties that link networks that may hold differing perspectives is that, as Barr (2005) observed, they may provide the basis of social experimentation and innovation.

Planning On The Ground

Recognising the importance of all community ties was critical to the work in the Shire of Buloke in regards to the development of a more participatory community planning model. It began with Council taking advantage of the Victorian Government's Community Building Initiative (CBI) program as the backbone of a whole of Local Government Area (LGA) engagement and planning project.

Following an application from one of our ten community forums in conjunction with council, funding was received to implement a CBI project across five communities. Using drought-related funding from the Department of Human Services it was decided to extend the program across the entire LGA. As has often been observed in attempts at community development, little community consultation preceded the application. When the application proved successful, significant confusion and delay was experienced. As a result the project began some 11 months late. While the project had been launched with some fanfare and a committee formed with representatives from all ten communities, the delay resulted in the facilitator commencing later than expected. The project was now at significant disadvantage in terms of community

support. The recently appointed Shire CEO, however, recognised it as a useful tool to develop a genuine participatory community planning model for a sparsely populated shire. Senior management involvement in the project has ultimately been invaluable.

The re-engagement of the steering committee required diplomacy and taking on board some acerbic criticism. Nelson, Babon, Berry and Keath (2008) discuss the need for ongoing engagement to develop meaningful communication and trust, and the various challenges this presents. The first few months of the project highlighted the need to take seriously the issues of communication and trust. While we are by no means there yet, significant progress is being made.

Why The ‘Buy In’ Factor Is Important

This initial experience has reinforced for us the challenge presented by the existing power structures in the wider Australian community. Often decisions affecting whole communities are made, without broader consultation, by those who hold a degree of power. The challenge presented is that opportunities for positive experiences are missed due to a lack of community commitment. We have observed that communities will acquiesce to decisions made *for* them, but will take no active ownership of the program or project imposed *on* them. In these cases the ‘silent majority’ feels justified in criticising any perceived failings in the project.

It was notable that Buloke communities felt little sense of ownership of the CBI program. This was due to the fact that the decision to implement the program was made by a select few. While well intentioned, this action almost proved disastrous. Not only was there little community buy in evident, there appeared to be very little buy in from council’s operational team. As Council would inevitably become a key partner in any significant projects resulting from the community planning process, the lack of support from Council departments would make progress difficult. Council officers had been used to responding to the ‘squeaky wheels’ within communities, developing funding applications on the basis of these requests. This historical context helped to explain why communities demonstrated little enthusiasm for a planning process that they saw as needlessly slowing things down.

Here we come to the issue of real community engagement. A discussion by Twyford, Waters, Hardy and Dengate (2006: 19) of community engagement in its various forms, (used in the IAP2 ‘Public Participation Spectrum’), ranges from informing the community, through to empowering them by genuine inclusion, which ‘enables us to walk away with a clear understanding of the what and why of decisions.’ This understanding encourages buy in regarding the decision making process, leading to real community ownership and participation, which they define as ‘placing final decision making in the hands of the public’ (Twyford et al 2006: 133).

The localised bonds holding the original applicants together were not complemented by effective broader connections, or weaker ties, with the other nine communities in the LGA. We have, over the past two and a half years, worked to recover some sense

of understanding of the value of participatory planning and to build ownership of the program by both council staff and communities. We learned the importance of listening to and acknowledging the concerns of confused committee members. While, as mentioned, Council department managers and officers initially felt little affinity or involvement, this situation improved as the practical elements of the planning process increased constructive communication within the organisation. Ensuring that all relevant officers were included in project meetings at the earliest possible stage of planning was critical to this process. It took some time for us to learn this process and to embed the practice in project planning within Council. Valuing legitimate risk assessment rather than labelling it as blocking has also built stronger, cross departmental, project teams.

In view of this the challenge remains to engender community ownership and real participation in the planning process. Some communities are coming to recognise, through ongoing project support and addressing community priorities, that council is, in fact, a partner and enabler in the process. Our challenge is being prepared to wait for communities to move on getting projects up and running or endeavouring to rein in potential 'loose cannons' who unintentionally derail projects through precipitate action and a lack of planning. The key is being patient and being prepared to persevere.

There is no easy way to address the 'just do it' argument. Community planning, like community engagement is often seen as 'just another hoop the government (or Council) makes us jump through. Things would be so much easier if we could concentrate on our core business of making things happen' (Twyford et al 2006: 56). We have begun to scratch below the surface of this deeply entrenched community doctrine. Three years' work has gone into encouraging communities to see the importance of having and working with a documented community plan. The stakes are currently being raised in Victoria with the launch of regional plans.

It's So Important To Know What You've Got

In Buloke the concept of 'Asset Based Community Development' (ABCD) was largely unknown. Communities had been dealing continuously with drought for almost ten years. The LGA average age of residents is 45, so we are an 'old' Shire. The population has been shrinking significantly for some years. Asset based community development was not the basis on which community leadership groups were operating.

As ABCD advocate Peter Kenyon, observed '

traditionally communities have tended to focus on their needs, deficiencies and weaknesses. Today the focus is increasingly on the use of techniques like asset mapping and appreciative inquiry which encourage commitment to identify internal assets and advantages' (Kenyon 2002).

This shift to asset based community planning and development, while initially challenging, has encouraged communities to refocus on the positives in each community. Recognising and building on community assets as opposed to concentrating on deficits existing in communities, allows for a much more positive approach to participation.

One to one discussions with community members in which we asked people to identify what they saw as key assets was a key tool in this process. These conversations provided people with the opportunity to reflect on, and to articulate the value that they place on these. It was notable that people and community relationships figured most prominently in people's thinking.

A photographic record of physical and infrastructure related assets was also greatly valued by residents, who had been living with them and were so familiar with them that many had ceased to 'see' them. The photographs generated more positive conversation when displayed at the Community Opportunity Workshops.

Ongoing conversations with community members, individuals and groups, to record the energy and enthusiasm being channelled into a range of projects, contributes to a refreshed view within communities who are coping with significant challenges requiring resilience and enhanced local capacity.

Just Get Out There and Communicate

The Community Building Initiative model described, has drawn heavily on the ABCD framework. The emphasis on asset mapping and connecting community organisations has been an interesting exercise, providing an introduction to the long term value of the program; that of developing a long term approach to the partnership between Council and the communities across the LGA. While individual projects often provide a short term boost, the capacity for communities and local government to work collaboratively together is critical to the work of maintaining the liveability of communities. Council's support for community projects is often an important factor in their viability. Community ownership and passion continue to be the critical driver that makes real collaboration possible. When community sees projects and activity as purely Council inspired and driven, the loss of 'buy in' mentioned earlier comes into play.

The Buloke community development project has been running since the latter half of 2007, when the first five 'COWs' or Community Opportunity Workshops were facilitated under the DPCD Community Building Initiative. Our first community was a small one of 100 residents. Our decision was to engage the community by visiting each household and personally inviting them to attend the workshop. People were very welcoming and really valued the opportunity to talk about why they lived in the community and how they would like to see it in five years time. This process was continued across the LGA and resulted in positive participation in the community planning process through the Workshops. The 'door knock' method also allowed us to

test the priorities agreed on at the workshops, and greatly increased the interest and participation in the planning process.

Common themes such as the loss of young people and families, the future of local businesses and secure water supplies, soon became obvious. This was of real value to the seven incumbent Shire councillors who joined in the program which crossed over ward boundaries and townships. A Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) staff member also came knocking on doors with us. He commented

‘I’ve been a Community Engagement Officer for five years now, this is the first time I’ve been out to engage first hand like this with the community.’

This phase of the work required the allocation of significant resources in terms of time and face to face communication. The ongoing challenge is getting the message across effectively to a range of people, all listening through their individual ‘static.’ Council is often seen as something to work around rather than with, when developing community projects. Community planning is often seen as ‘something council expects us to do.’ We found that, even communities that moved positively on community planning still saw themselves as ‘doing a job for council.’

Following our experience with this type of community engagement, businesses in the LGA also now receive regular visits from the Community Development team, when we have relevant information to share with them. Invitations to business focused events and activities such as the Buloke Business Excellence Awards, a Business Networking night and a Buy Local campaign were all personally delivered.

Nelson et al’s (2008: 46) concern that

community consultations still tend to centre on invitations to provide information, ideas or responses, especially on narrow or specific development ... rather than opening out broad and inclusive debate through dedicated structures and continuous processes of demographic engagement ...

is relevant to most participatory planning exercises. This challenge has led to consideration of how to engage residents in a way that maximises the potential to empower by genuine inclusion.

Good Things Come In Small Packages

In view of the above challenge, a recent development has been a program of small community engagement events as part of our response to drought and climate change. This has resulted in Buloke Shire Council working with rural residents in a new way.

In conjunction with a range of drought-related service providers, including Centrelink, the Rural Financial Counselling Service, Department of Primary Industry (DPI),

Salvation Army, Wimmera Uniting Care, as well as the Country Fire Authority (CFA) we have been getting together with local rural fire districts and utilising the fire sheds as a gathering point. These sessions have provided farming families with an opportunity to get together socially and to receive relevant information from service providers. The sessions have been conducted informally, with opportunity for one to one conversations and a chance to put 'faces to names.' Courtesy of the Rosebud Rotary Club, we have put on a barbeque, and some much needed social interaction between neighbours has contributed to some memorable evenings.

Council is using this program to build on community engagement across the shire. This is an opportunity to facilitate the 'ongoing conversations and engagement' that Nelson et al (2008: p.46) recognise as so important. There is a need for people to see a positive move from council to engage their participation in the ongoing planning for growth and response to the issues confronting both communities and individuals. This has led to the development of a culture of getting face to face with residents on 'home territory' which has met with a positive response. Councillors, council management and officers regularly attend these gatherings to consult with, and provide information to, residents. No speeches are given and there is not a whiteboard or piece of butcher's paper in sight!! However, as one new councillor observed

'I learned so much tonight. People were relaxed and wanted to talk. I didn't have to push things, the conversations flowed easily.'

The desire to explore this particular setting for community building was informed, in part, by the work of Hayes, Golding and Harvey (2004). Their research into *Adult Learning through Fire and Emergency Service Organisations in Small and Remote Australian Towns* reflected much of what we were experiencing in relation to, both the dissemination of knowledge, and the building of a support network to apply this knowledge to local issues and settings.

The research highlighted the importance of fire and emergency service organisations in small and remote towns as local adult learning organisations, providing a critical focus for community building activities. These continue to be some of the few organisations in which older adults, and particularly older males, are able to sustain a culture of voluntary learning in a local community setting. Through this training a significant proportion of volunteers receive training in team, leadership and communication skills as well. Many of these skills are valuable and transferable to paid work, self-employment, commercial enterprise and other community settings (Hayes et al 2004: 23).

The Importance of Critical Reflection

The sharing of knowledge with families empowers them to actively plan not only for their community but, more importantly, for their future actions as a family. A number of young farming families are accessing information that provides them with the opportunity to look at how their theories of action, or 'why I do what I do' (Argyris

and Schön 1974) drive their thinking, and then use this process to look at the accepted norms that have shaped these theories. For Argyris and Schön (1978:2) learning involves recognising and correcting error. In this context, the assessment of the current situation considers how families would like that situation to look and what needs to change in order to achieve this.

Where something goes wrong, it is suggested, an initial port of call for many people is to look for another strategy that will address the need within the existing governing variables. In other words, 'given' goals, values, and rules are almost unthinkingly actioned rather than questioned. According to Argyris and Schön (1978:2-3), this is *single-loop learning*. An alternative response is to question the governing variables themselves, to subject them to critical scrutiny, discovering and asking what Vogt, Brown & Isaacs (2003) call the 'big questions'. For some younger farming families this has meant not simply asking 'how do I farm?' but 'should I be farming?' This may mean thinking and acting outside generational norms and asking 'am I working to live or living to work?' For some this means considering whether they are working for their family or their forbears.

It is worth re-stating this important element in participatory planning. It remains critical for community leaders, whatever their formal designation, to provide relevant information for their constituents, clients or congregations to enable planning to encompass potential solutions that allow for the governing variables to be tested as to their relevance to the environment in which the plan is to be actioned. The opportunity to participate in planning at this basic but important level and to access information from a range of relevant sources in a supportive environment can build real capacity within communities to remain resilient in the face of significant challenges. The opportunity to engage in conversation with a range of residents in this way is, however, one that requires substantial resourcing.

The commitment of individual service providers to this project has been one of the real highlights. Centrelink Rural Officers have been notable for their ongoing participation as have Rural Financial Counsellors, CFA Peer Support and Community Engagement Officers and DPI officers. Local Resource Centres, Churches, both local and regional, have all made their time available outside of normal working hours to farming families in this setting.

It is important to note that this project is moving us beyond the 'Workshop, Survey, Questionnaire, Public Meeting.' This is an opportunity for Council and the service providers to simply ask 'how are you going?' to have an informal conversation, to make the time to get out of our office into the 'office' of our farming families. The information sharing has been a real two way experience. Councillors, managers and officers have been able to hear first hand the needs of farming residents. Services, including Council, have been able to provide real assistance to families through having spent time in the heart of the community, speaking and listening informally to families.

These get togethers have provided valuable follow up to a visitation program commonly designated 'Farm Gate' which, in the case of Buloke Shire, followed on from the community engagement phase of the Community Opportunity Workshop program. Farming families have received up to three visits from Council Community Development and Drought officers in the past 18 months. The lessons learned through the experience with community consultation through facilitating ten 'Community Opportunity Workshops' (COWs) across the LGA have been critical in shaping our approach to participatory community planning and development.

Speaking Clearly

Getting people involved in planning takes this challenge to a whole new level. The existence of a 'just do it' culture across the communities adds to the reluctance to get involved in 'mucking about in meetings and getting bogged down with paperwork.' While this can make life exciting, the risk issues are significant.

A recent example of this showed up in a small community when the local bowls club wanted to pipe water to the bowling green. A tank was set up at the green and council was approached for permission to set up the pipeline some 1.4 kilometres in length. 'We need to cross under two street culverts and under the rail line, but there's also a culvert there with a water authority pipe through it.' Council agreed, the process was set in train for the necessary permit. The Planning Department agreed to issue the permit on the receipt of written permission to go under the rail culvert. The community members were informed of this by email and the process was begun with the relevant rail authority.

A follow up call to the community members for further information was met with 'what would you say if the job was already done?' When asked why, the response was 'Joe had an email from someone at the council saying it was right to go.' While three weeks had past since the initial meeting, the rail authority response was both cooperative and timely. No unnecessary delay was experienced. However, this process was too long for the community and they had 'got on with it.'

Council officers learned some interesting lessons in communication. It is important to consider the capacity of individuals to interpret communication. More significantly, the message coming across related to the capacity of community members to buy into the planning process and to accept the fact that this requires allowing time for due process. While this has relevance to immediate, tangible actions, the more significant application of this comes into play when looking at bigger picture 'visioning' exercises required in community planning.

The challenge of encouraging communities to question the existing governing variables, such as, 'we always meet at 8pm on Monday' or 'our local economy has always been based on grain growing', and to subject them to critical scrutiny, is now complicated by the increasingly complex environment in which local government and its community partners operate. Situations such as that described above relating to the

water supply are often interpreted by communities as their challenging the governing variables. As local government officers are often called on to challenge assumptions of freedom to act, this is interpreted by community members as putting stumbling blocks in the way of community driven initiatives.

With scrutiny of governance increasingly an element of the climate in which organisations operate, the importance of educating communities is increasingly critical. The requirement of community planning to bring order to development and to build the capacity of communities to work within the constraints placed upon them by an increasingly complex world add an extra dimension to the planning matrix. It is noteworthy that examples such as the one above continue to redefine the parameters of the information needing to be provided to communities in this regard. The need to communicate with community groups with terms such as ‘I have no discretion in this matter’ is becoming increasingly common.

This situation is often seen as flying in the face of the stated desire to partner with communities to enhance their liveability. Without careful planning, the capacity for communities to contribute to local projects through ‘in kind’ support may be severely limited. Keeping lines of communication open between council and community groups must include education in relation to effective project planning and the realities of the regulatory frameworks that we work in.

What have we learned through the process?

Coming through this exercise, for us, has been the continuing need to monitor and improve the way we communicate. The potential for people to effectively participate in community development and planning is directly proportionate to the messages and information that they are receiving which inform their understanding of their options as well as the process involved in participation.

This work of communicating the importance and relevance of the planning process is also critical to the maintenance of community plans as living documents. The increasingly complex world in which we operate will place ever greater pressure on our communication skills and our willingness to communicate with inclusiveness as the goal.

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