



2019 EPLGA CONFERENCE MAYORAL ADDRESS

ROADS OF GOLD WILL NOT LEAD US TO REGIONAL PROSPERITY

Good morning, Elected Members, council staff, sponsors and speakers, and welcome to Kimba, the geographical and I'd argue social heart of the Eyre Peninsula. As I look around the room, I see plenty of old friends who probably feel like they've heard most of the 82 Mayoral addresses at our annual Eyre Peninsula Local Government Association Conferences – especially after an enthusiastic evening of networking at last night's welcome dinner – and plenty of new faces ready to champion the role councils play in the viability of our communities. I'd like to welcome Rowan Ramsey MP, Member for Grey, and thank him for his ongoing support of our region. Clearly no other MP has achieved as much for the Eyre Peninsula as Rowan has. I think I have a file photo of him somewhere. Ah, there it is. Rowan, I've already heard a few brilliant ideas for projects requiring federal help being thrown around the room this morning, so I reckon you'd better brace yourself for an onslaught of advocacy requests. As the Mayor of Kimba, it also gives me great pleasure to welcome Local Government Association of South Australian President Mayor Sam Telfer – who bears a striking resemblance to our very own EPLGA President – and Chief Executive Officer Matt Pinnegar to our incredible little town. From a political perspective, the timing of today's event couldn't be worse, with the Honourable Stephan Knoll MP, Minister for Local Government, Eddie Hughes MP, Member for Giles, Peter Treloar MP, Member for Flinders, and Frank Pangallo MLC all unable to attend due to a calendar clash. Apparently, abandoning a Parliamentary sitting is somewhat frowned upon, so they have all asked me to convey their disappointment at not being able to be here today. Senator the Honourable Matt Canavan, the federal Minister for Resources and Northern Australia, also sends his apologies and best wishes for the 82nd incarnation of the conference.

WHAT DOES PROSPERITY LOOK LIKE ON THE EYRE PENINSULA?

To fully understand the theme of this year's conference – *Our Peninsula: Positioned for Prosperity* – I think it's critical to first determine what we mean by prosperity when we talk about it in terms of the communities we represent. If you thumb through a dictionary, you'll find synonyms like *affluent*, *wealthy* and *opulent*, but also words like *thriving*, *flourishing* and *strong*. For me, it's those latter descriptions which resonate most

and provide a clear focus as the leader of a group of seven individuals entrusted to represent a community of little more than a thousand residents.

According to 2016 Census data, 1,061 people call the Kimba local government area home, a decline of almost 2.5% on the previous Census result. The figures show how reliant the district is on primary production, with 39.7% of residents working either directly or indirectly in the agricultural sector. This number is down 8.56% on the 2011 Census, which aligns with anecdotal evidence that the trend towards larger farming operations, rather than the traditional family-run models, has played a significant role in population decrease. Of course, Kimba's problem is one shared by regional communities in every corner of the country, but we are fortunate that our residents are resilient innovators who are embracing emerging economic drivers to position the town for a sustainable and vibrant future.

One of the issues that throws a spanner in the works of prosperity is that when people leave our communities, they take with them much more than the Census data reports – they take students from our schools, volunteers from our sporting clubs and community groups, and money that was spent locally and played a vital role in keeping the doors of local businesses open. When that happens, it can feel like a monumental struggle as leaders to keep spirits high and the shared vision of a thriving social and economic hub a reality. That's why I believe that our individual and collective ambitions regarding regional prosperity need to hinge on the themes of strength, sustainability and success, rather than those of fortunes and opulence. Who cares about riches and enviable bank balances when we don't have the volunteers to put on our much-loved community events, and the exodus of another family is the straw that breaks the camel's back and forces an established local business that has always been there to sponsor the footy and netball teams to turn out the lights? As the custodians of our communities, we recognise that the prosperity of our own backyards and the Eyre Peninsula as a whole is about liveability, not annual reports that boast stockpiles of cash while roads are ignored, let alone glittering with gold, and the voices of those we represent fail to have an impact. For regional councils, prosperity is about improved infrastructure and services, an appetite for innovation, the foresight to plan ahead, and the flexibility to seize opportunities in whatever form they take.

WAITING ON SOMEONE ELSE WON'T POSITION US FOR PROSPERITY

It's tough to ignore the fact that most of us face the challenge of tackling dwindling numbers within our local government boundaries, and it's even harder to argue that these declining populations have the potential to cause major headaches for rural councils, mainly when it comes to advocating to other tiers of

government for the continuation of infrastructure development and service delivery. Call it simplistic to suggest it comes down to a political numbers game, but it's difficult not to be cynical when those of us who have sworn to act in the best interests of our communities have witnessed first-hand the impact diminishing services have had in the lives of those who live and play in our towns. That we are responsible for the viability and success of our communities is something we readily acknowledge and embrace. In fact, the legislation identifies our principle roles as a council, and I quote, "to encourage and develop initiatives within its community for improving the quality of life of the community" and "to represent the interests of its community to the wider community". We have a tremendous responsibility to ensure our communities are positioned to prosper, but cost- and responsibility-shifting, and having what feels like a perpetual bullseye on our back as a sector are distractions that mean we have less and less resources to devote to discharging what is a fairly clear-cut obligation to champion the sustainability of our communities.

In Kimba's case, that means Council is playing a proactive, very public role in recruiting a doctor to provide general practitioner services and emergency healthcare through our hospital. You certainly won't find sourcing medical professionals in the core business model of any local government, but we are one of several councils across the Eyre Peninsula who are leading the local charge to find a solution to the provision of medical services. It's a scenario none of our metropolitan cousins will ever encounter in a meeting agenda, but when an answer can't be found through conventional channels, the stark reality is that our communities look to us to take up the slack. Talking medicine is a long way from the three Rs of local government, but our Council has assessed the situation and come up with a disturbing realisation – if we don't do it, who will? Small, rural councils having to continually take on more and more functions that are within the remit of the state and federal governments is frustrating, unfair and an extraordinary drain on what are already strained resources, both in terms of the financial and labour investments required. It's irresponsible to assume council intervention will be the panacea to every issue our communities face, and it's a mindset that has the potential to have a severely detrimental impact in our capacity to deliver long-term prosperity to the region. I spelled this out to the Premier when I met with him during his Eyre Peninsula visit last month, so I am hopeful that the message has been heard loud and clear along North Terrace. Regional communities aren't asking for an upgrade or special treatment. All we want is for those who contribute to the economic prosperity and strength of South Australia to be afforded the same resources and respect as those who decide to live in urban centres.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM MUST PROMOTE PROSPERITY, NOT PUNISHMENT

While other tiers of government attempting to shift as many costs as they can to councils is a concern, another area of change which presents an unknown but apparent danger is the push for local government reform, something which has been at the pointy end of the agenda for both sides of government well before last year's election, and looks set to remain there for the foreseeable future. The media and politicians of all persuasions seem hell-bent on painting the sector as one vehemently opposed to any changes which require greater accountability and oversight, but it's a perception that simply isn't true, especially for regional and remote councils. When you are representing communities as small and tight-knit as the ones Eyre Peninsula councils are responsible for, transparency and trust are everything. If our community thinks we are doing the wrong thing, we'll sure as hell hear about it, whether it be at the footy on a Saturday afternoon, or as we try to make sense of our shopping list in the aisles of the local supermarket. We want our residents and ratepayers to have faith in our ability to lead them towards a prosperous future, so it's ridiculous to suggest that our ambitions, and those of the proposed reforms we've seen so far, are not aligned with the common goal of strong, sustainable communities that remain positioned to contribute to the success of the region and state decades from now.

If we make a warts-and-all assessment, we've done a pretty ordinary job as a sector getting this message of commonality across, because any of the positive publicity we've achieved as individuals has been drowned out by the deafening blows of yet more media coverage of councils behaving badly, and politicians using us as a punching bag to argue why local government is no longer relevant to the very communities that rely on us every day. If we're to change this situation, I believe we first need to acknowledge as a sector that some councils have let their communities down, and that their actions are those of a handful of organisations, not all of us. To increase trust in our leadership, we have to put up our hand and call out the sorts of behaviours that do not contribute to the betterment of our communities. It's not acceptable to put our head in the sand and wait for the negative coverage to go away, because it won't as long as the media and Parliamentarians looking to score cheap political points against us in the ring know we'll just sit on our hands as they keep landing punch after punch below the belt. We need to be prepared to come out of our corner fighting, and that means both responding to biased, factually-flawed stories, and promoting whenever and however possible the incredible results that councils are recording for their communities. I think regional councils do it better than most, and there are enough success stories even within the walls of this room to fill weeks' worth of newspapers and news bulletins. As examples, our council has managed to deliver what is probably the most enviable playground infrastructure on the Eyre Peninsula, if not in regional South Australia, while councils on the coast like Tumby Bay are ensuring the liveability of their towns by making their beaches

accessible to residents and visitors of all abilities. From an economic perspective, regional skill shortages are something we know all-too-well, so councils like Streaky Bay have gone on the front foot to offer resource sharing arrangements that provide exceptional value to the ratepayers of participating organisations. These are all positive news stories that are echoed in all of our regions day after day, so we need to do what we can to show that councils must be at the forefront of responsible local government reform if change is to make a positive, sustainable difference to communities.

PROSPERITY DRIVEN BY COLLABORATION AND COMMON AMBITION

Local government is a unique beast in that while all councils are directed by the same legislative principles, the methods we adopt to achieve what is ultimately the same result are vastly different. How Kimba sets itself up to thrive does not mirror how Whyalla goes about business, just as the way in which Elliston approaches achieving social and economic strength would leave community leaders in Ceduna scratching their heads. We might all be doing a remarkable job at setting up our own patches of the Eyre Peninsula, but we have a better chance of positioning this magnificent part of the state to achieve maximum prosperity if we begin to look beyond our local government borders and take a wider, collaborative view that allows us to unlock the full riches and potential of the region. It's time to recognise that a win for another member council is ultimately a win for all of us in the grand scheme of things. Friendly rivalries and ours-is-better-than-yours ribbing will always be part and parcel of local government life in remote regions, but we need to step up and face the fact that it is incumbent on the 11 councils represented in this room to secure the long-term future of the Eyre Peninsula and the people who call it home.

Prosperity for our communities is and isn't about wealth. From a financial perspective, I suspect most residents and ratepayers care little how many millions councils do or don't have in their coffers if they are driving innovation, exceeding service delivery expectations and ensuring towns have the infrastructure and amenity that make people want to live and invest in them. Because delivering in these areas means delivering a sustainable pathway for our communities to flourish, and that's the true wealth prosperity brings with it.