Meeting Challenges through Empowered, Deliberative Participation:

A case study of a WA regional local government

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A paper for the ACELG Local Government Researchers Forum December 2011

Abstract

Local authorities in Western Australia are facing a range of serious challenges in the short and medium term. Issues like population changes, demographic shifts, boundary reform, climate change and growing community service expectations contain elements of both threat and opportunity. Many of these issues may impose a cost, but will also stand to benefit the local governments that have effective strategies for adaptation to the challenges. Many scientists and commentators have proposed that the key to effective strategies in this case will centre on localism and depend on new and enhanced forms of cooperative governance between Councils, local industry and their communities. The barriers to these effective, coordinated local strategies exist at several levels, but often are bound up in the very 'wicked' nature of the issues (ie. complexity, uncertainty of cause and effect in time and space, large, broad impacts). This nature leads many to believe that the search for expert solutions and top-down decision-making will be insufficient in overcoming these barriers. Instead, it is necessary to search for best practices in stakeholder collaboration, but also to create systemic shifts in governance, where ordinary citizens have a critical role to play.

This paper presents a case study of an attempt to develop civic deliberation and collaborative governance at a local government of 40,000 people in regional Western Australia to improve resilience in the face of the issues discussed above. A participative local community is attempting to create mutually agreed strategies and actions through several levels of public deliberation, from small-scale deliberations carried out by trained volunteers to large-scale public events and online interaction. The overseeing and implementation of the outcomes of these engagements is being facilitated through an alliance of industry, government and NGO decision-makers. The interim results of this unique project are explored on the broad level as well in the case of specific statutory planning requirements.

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Introduction

This paper concerns the interim results of part of an iterative action research project designed to investigate the process of embedding novel methods of involving the community in cooperative problem solving and collaborative decision making within local government. The aims of the project will be outlined and methodologies reviewed before a discussion of some of the results of the project is provided.

Background,

Many authors have argued for the need for new 'technologies of cooperation' (McKibben, 2006; Newman & Jennings, 2008; Ostrum, 2009) that collaboratively address large, complex issues such as climate change and sustainability more effectively. Further, deliberative democracy researchers and practitioners have specifically argued that new forms of cooperation between government and citizens, capable of resolving large and complex problems can be achieved through the institutionalisation of deliberative democracy (Warren 2007, Fung 2006, Levine et al, 2005). Deliberative Democracy is the practice of democracy that "emphasizes participation, cooperation and discourse characterized by reason-giving" (Hartz-Karp and Briand, 2009 p.127). The importance of forms of public participation such as deliberative democracy as a remedy to a range of issues challenging local governments has been pointed to by authors concerned with this sector of government (Pillora and McKinlay, 2011; Aulich, 2009). The need for deeper development of these 'technologies of cooperation' seems clear.

In late 2009 a project was conceived around a partnership between researchers at Curtin University Sustainability Policy Institute and the City of Geraldton-Greenough. Known as "Geraldton: 2029 and Beyond" The objective of this initiative is "…to harness the informed, deliberated views of the people, and together with decision-makers, address the often complex sustainability issues facing the region." (City of Greater Geraldton, 2009 p.1).

The structure of the project is deliberately and rationally designed to maximise the likelihood of inclusion, deliberation and influence and this structure is clearly described during its inclusion in the final seven of the Reinhard Mohn Prize 2011, 'Vitalising Democracy through Participation' (Hartz-Karp, 2011). The entire project structure will not be described here other than to make specific mention the Alliance Governance Group as a unique attempt to support best practice in deliberative democracy. The Group is an innovative governance team of key government, industry and NGO regional decision-makers as well as randomly selected local citizens that has been created to provide the project with strategic direction, oversight, accountability and to help determine and implement prioritised proposals. Observations have been that this team has provided added legitimacy to processes it is involved in and has been useful in recruiting participants for events.

Geraldton is 424 kilometres north of Perth and is Western Australia's fourth largest city with a population of approximately 40,000. Fishing and agriculture (wheat and wool) have traditionally formed the economic core of the region but collapsing fish stocks and drought has sent these industries into decline at the same time the mining industry has undergone an expansion. Due to these trends, expectations are that the City Region will increase its population to between 80,000–100,000 residents by 2029 (Hartz-Karp, 2011).

It is intended that the output from the "2029 and Beyond"project will be used to assist the City in planning for the projected future as well as fulfilling statutory obligations such as Region Planning, Local, Town and

Precinct Planning (City of Greater Geraldton, 2009) as well as contributing to reporting requirements under the Integrated Planning Framework (DLG, 2011).

Aims,

The overall research aim of this project is to provide tangible techniques that citizens and local governments can use to collaborate more effectively to address large, complex issues that often impact on local governments, such as planning for the future, land use, growth, climate change and sustainability.

Several research questions were created to accomplish this aim. They are:

1. What is the quality of the deliberations on complex issues? What design features enhance the quality of participant deliberations? And, what outcomes are influenced by variations in quality?

2. What are the effects of the deliberations on the long-term motivations of participants around complex issues such as climate change and sustainability?

3. What are the effects of the deliberations on the civic capacity of participants?

4. Do the deliberations strengthen the legitimacy of action on complex issues by policy makers?

5. What are the implications of linking Social Media to civic deliberation?

Methods,

The primary methods used to measure variables associated with the research questions are longitudinal quantitative surveys and interviews across the deliberations in the initiative. These methods are also supplemented by field observations of the deliberations. Depending on the research question being addressed these methods are applied to participants, decision makers or community members as appropriate and in the following ways.

Quality of Deliberation: By definition, deliberation involves careful, reasoned, informed, and respectful discussion hence there needs to be an assessment of these aspects to even know that a deliberation took place. The aspects of quality of deliberations described by Gastil (2009) are the presence of disagreement, emergent directionality of opinions, and informed and coherent post-deliberation views and all of which can be probed by surveys and interviews.

Effect on Motivation: The deliberations are expected to change sustainability behaviours and encourage greater activism, i.e., attention to sustainability and climate issues and participation in activities to address them (Hartz-Karp and Briand, 2009). The challenges of changing these behaviours are well documented (Moser & Dilling, 2006). Intermediate steps toward altered behaviour include changes in values, priorities, identities, internalisation, political interest, political efficacy, and knowledge about sustainability. Some of these intermediate steps can be probed by surveys and interviews.

Civic Capacity: Civic skills such as experience in public speaking, writing letters, planning, and participating in a meeting, are factors promoting political engagement (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995). Participation in deliberations could build skills and capacities that promote engagement in sustainability and climate change. This research will measure whether deliberations enhance comfort with these civic skills, as well as changes in knowledge about sustainability and climate change, and discussion and action networks that build greater local sustainability.

Legitimacy: A crucial ingredient in the stability and efficacy of political systems. (Tyler 1997; Jost & Major 2001) In particular, legitimacy is crucial to addressing intractable issues such as climate change and sustainability, in which adequate responses involve deep social, environmental and economic changes. Using Tyler's measures as a basis, surveys will examine how deliberations on sustainability and climate change impact the legitimacy of and confidence in institutions and political leaders.

Social Media: For investigating the effects of social media on deliberation, social network analysis tools, such as UCINet, were used to map the links between individual users and clusters of participants in different social media. This information can be combined with textual analysis tools to map issues, opinion leaders, and frequency of communication within the network.

Findings

Due to the brief nature of this Forum paper only some of the results for two deliberative events that were part of the 2029 project will be examined: a calibrated deliberative poll and an enquiry by design event.

Calibrated Deliberative Poll:

The calibrated deliberative poll consisted of two survey processes which were intended to complement each other. The first, a community survey, is the most reliable indication of general prevailing opinions in the community; and was sufficiently sized to allow statistically reliable exploration of differences between demographic and attitudinal groups. The second, a deliberative survey, is a more intensive process, requiring participants to complete the same survey both before and after a deliberative forum. The purpose of this latter survey is to see if considered views (after deliberation) change to an important extent from the top-of-the-mind views that exist in the community. Calibrating the starting position of participants to the community survey allows interpretation of these changes to be more sensitive and the input of participants to be better placed in context.

The community survey was a relatively long survey at 8 pages (City of Greater Geraldton, 2010) and was intended to illuminate:

1. The extent of understanding of and support for the region becoming carbon neutral;

2. The extent of understanding of and support for the region trying to achieve a sustainable population (ie expanding the population Vs fly-in, fly-out mining/building/professional workforce);

3. The extent to which and how the people wanted to be engaged in the critical issues facing the region;

4. Clear but general guidance on local government decisions by using a dichotomous choice between two principle-based options related to eight topics of concern to the City officials.

The first two foci are highly contested issues in the region. In trying to coordinate action, City officials indicated it was not known if the 'loud and prevalent' voices (stating only the economy matters and hence becoming climate neutral is a luxury as are policies/strategies against a fly-in fly-out workforce) were actually in the majority or the minority. Finally, the survey was vetted and approved by the Alliance Governance Group for framing and fit-for-purpose.

Since the surveys did not involve any sort of political or economic gain, a request to the WA Electoral Commission (WAEC) to provide a random sample from the areas included in the region was favourably received. The WAEC actioned the request through computer random sampling of its electoral rolls to produce a relatively large sample which did not require further stratification. 3,000 residents of the City of Geraldton Greenough (COGG) were randomly selected from the Electoral Roll, and mailed a copy of the community questionnaire. The response rate was an acceptable 20% and the sample size of 557 was well above the minimum levels required for reliable analysis. Age and gender proportions in the population were not perfectly reflected in the raw data (in particular, older people were over-represented), and this was corrected by statistical weighting. A similar skew towards older people was observed in the deliberative survey participants, but because of the smaller absolute number of people involved (62 for the pre-deliberation survey and 51 for the post-deliberation survey) this could not be corrected by weighting.

On the issue of expansion of the city versus fly in / fly out there was a clear preference for an expanding city option ahead of a fly-in / fly-out option.

Figure 1: Preference for the expanding city or fly-in / fly-out options.
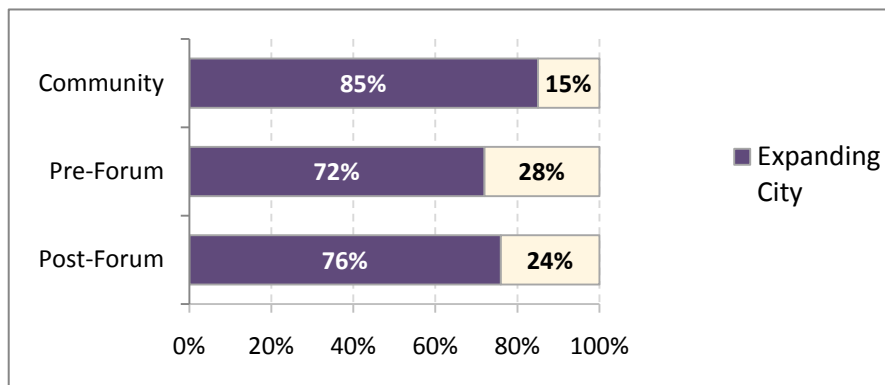
Sample size: Community N=557; Pre-forum N=62; Post-forum N=51

On the issue of carbon neutrality there was a very strong preference for the COGG to start investing in becoming carbon neutral (90% of community survey respondents). At the pre-forum survey stage 85% of participants in the deliberative survey shared this preference, increasing significantly to a near consensus at 98% in the post-forum survey.

Figure 2: Preferences for the City investing in becoming carbon neutral.
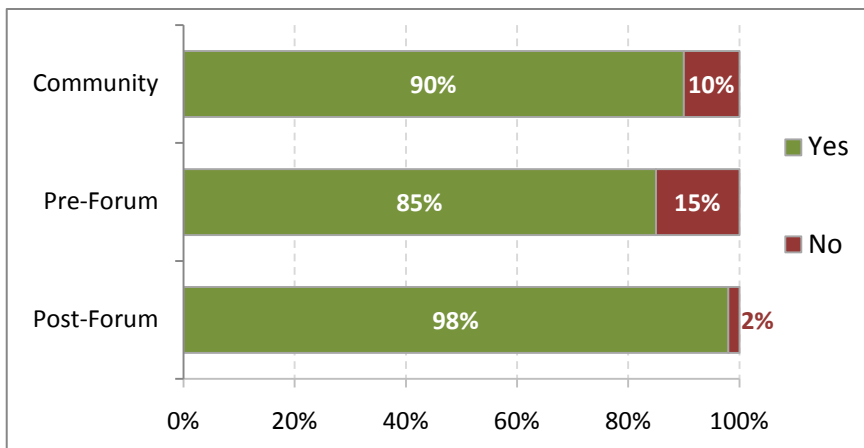
Sample size: Community N=557; Pre-forum N=62; Post-forum N=51

These preferences occurred in spite of all participants in all surveys only perceiving a moderate threat from climate change as indicated by average threat ratings of between 4.6 to 6.2 on a 0 ('No threat at all') to 10 ('A huge threat') scale.

The results of preferences for guiding principles related questions are shown below in Table 1.

Table 1: Preferred guiding principles for the City of Greater Geraldton.

Com Survey	Pre-forum	Post-forum	Option 1		Com Survey	Pre-forum	Post-forum	Option 2
34%	27%	26%	Our region treats all new developments equally as long as they pass basic minimum planning standards	Or	**66%**	73%	74%	**Our region gives priority to new developments that pass higher standards and balance social, economic and environmental interests**
21%	19%	22%	Protecting natural areas of conservation value is less important than driving economic development	Or	**79%**	81%	78%	**Protecting natural areas of conservation value is of the same or more importance than driving economic development**
71%	60%	69%	**Accessible and well maintained recreational and sporting facilities should be a priority in budgeting for future Greater Geraldton City Region development**	Or	**29%**	40%	31%	Recreational and sporting facilities are a bonus but are not a priority in budgeting for future Greater Geraldton City Region development
29%	25%	10%	We should wait until there is better evidence about climate change before we make any changes in planning for the future of Greater Geraldton City Region	Or	**71%**	75%	90%	**We need to respond now to climate change when we plan for the future of Greater Geraldton City Region**
52%	38%	36%	Arts and cultural facilities are a bonus but are not a priority in budgeting for the future development of the Greater Geraldton City Region	Or	**48%**	62%	64%	**Accessible and well maintained arts and cultural facilities should be a priority in budgeting for the future development of the Greater Geraldton City Region**
71%	70%	80%	**Minimising the 'carbon footprint' of Greater Geraldton City Region is a key consideration in any decisions made about our future**	Or	**29%**	30%	20%	Minimising the 'carbon footprint' of Greater Geraldton City Region is only a secondary consideration in any decisions made about our future
11%	8%	10%	Our elected officials should get on and make the decisions with only some input from others	Or	**89%**	92%	90%	**Decision-making should be more collaborative (that is: involving everyday citizens, experts and action groups to a greater extent)**
69%	66%	82%	**In making decisions, the long term broader sustainability of the Greater Geraldton City Region is given priority over the immediate economic benefits or costs**	Or	**31%**	34%	18%	In making decisions, the immediate economic benefits or costs are given priority over the long term broader sustainability of Greater Geraldton City Region
557	*62*	*51*	*Sample size*		*557*	*62*	*51*	*Sample size*

Overall[4], it is clear that more than two thirds of the community had common preferences for seven out of the eight topics with the eighth topic indicating no clear budgetary preference for arts and cultural facilities in the community survey (but clear in the forum participants). This information is valuable for City decision makers at many levels, including addressing internal and external resource allocation, planning, project assessment and strategic direction setting. Anecdotally, some elected officials and senior City staff have remarked that the result of preferences for protecting natural areas of conservation value over driving economic development was the opposite of what they expected. Their expectation was that the community preference would be based on their aggregated experience of previous consultations and their personal views of community attitudes. Additionally, the decision makers who were observing at the forum also expressed surprise at the willingness of people to be engaged in these issues.

An additional value of this community survey conducted prior to the forum was that it established that participants of the forum began the deliberations with very similar views to those of wider community as measured by the community questionnaire. This was an important finding as there were concerns that the nature of forum would be non-representative and that the City could not have high confidence that it was starting with a deliberative group that represented not just the demographics of the community but also the attitudinal characteristics. This also validated the selection process used for participants.

Enquiry by Design:

The other event of significance this paper will explore was a planning focussed deliberative event branded as 'Designing our City'. 'Designing our City' was an interactive 3 day (13-16 August 2011) public deliberation process to enable the community to work with planning and design experts to help inform Greater Geraldton's strategic and statutory planning documents on how the City-Region's natural and built environment will be managed in the coming years. The process was based on the 'Enquiry by Design' methodology developed by Professor Janette Hartz-Karp in the early years of this century in her work with then WA Minister for Planning, Allanah MacTiernan.

The desired outcomes of the 'Designing our City' process were:

- To assist the community in understanding the challenges and opportunities facing the Greater Geraldton City-Region of the future;

- To give the community 'ownership' of the future City's key design principles and aspirations which will then guide and inform community action plans, the Local Planning Strategy and the form and underlying principles of 2029 City-Regional plans.

- Create inter-agency buy-in to the final plans with each contributor taking responsibility for their part in creating the future of the City.

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[4] There were age and gender differences seen (primarily in the community survey, as the sample size in the deliberative survey is not sufficiently large to allow any but the most dramatic differences to be significant), but as noted above, these tended to only be in magnitude – not direction. It was noticeable that female respondents to the community survey were more definitive in their views than the male respondents – in every case where a significant gender difference was seen, it was the females who had the more clear preference, while slightly more males tended to prefer the minority view.

To achieve these outcomes the process incorporated the values and feedback of the community stakeholders from the workshop on the first day. Representativeness of the workshop participants was maximised by including community members that were identified through random selection as well as community members who responded to advertisements to nominate themselves as participants.; The inclusion of random sampled participants ensures that community members without specific interests are represented (Hartz-Karp and Newman 2006). This is essential to ensuring that the workshop outcomes are more closely representative of a broad cross section of the population rather than giving voice only to those that normally participate the "incensed and articulate" (Carson 2001:61). This does not mean that stakeholder representatives for various government agencies and non-government organisations were excluded. Those identified as stakeholders and invited to send representatives to the event were from:

- The Midwest Development Commission (MWDC)

- The private sector development industry

- Oakagee Port and Rail

- The Department of Transport

- The Department of Planning

- Landcorp

- Service Agencies (Western Power, Water Corp)

- The Mid West Chamber of Commerce and Industry

- The Midwest Aboriginal Organisations Alliance (MAOA)

- The Department of Indigenous Affairs (DIA)

- Bundiyarra Aboriginal Community Aboriginal Corporation

- The Department of Environment & Conservation

- The Northern Agricultural Catchment Council (NACC)

- The Department of Water

- WALGA (Biodiversity Section)

- Landcare and Coastcare Groups

- The Public Transport Authority (PTA)

- The Department of Agriculture & Food

- Main Roads

The processing of the feedback from the community and stakeholders evolving toward data and plans that could used for later planning purposes was the responsibility of the Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT). The MDT was made of up experts from government, industry and community, representing a variety of fields that were judged to have an important contribution to make to the development of regional and city plans. The MDT specifically consisted of around 25 people made up of the City of Geraldton Greenough planning team and representatives from:

- Private sector consultants (Mackay Urban Design and Steven Ames Planning)
- The Department of Transport
- The Public transport Authority
- The Department of Sport and Recreation
- The Department of Environment & Conservation
- The Northern Agricultural Catchment Council (NACC)
- The Midwest Aboriginal Organisations Alliance
- Geraldton Port Authority
- The Department of Planning
- UWA Landscape Architecture (Professor Richard Weller and students)
- Curtin University Planning (Students)

Once again the Alliance Governance Group played a role in vetting materials for the enquiry by design but also recruiting members of the MDT and stakeholder attendees.

Day One of the Enquiry by Design was a deliberative community workshop using 21st Century Dialogue technology[5] to interactively develop greater understanding of the context for future planning in the Greater Geraldton City Region (physical and social context, sustainable planning, emerging issues/challenges/parameters, and broad scenarios) and to develop community aspirations and high level planning principles for the future. A prioritisation process was used to rank values associated with the City Region. The survey results for this day showed a priority hierarchy of issues that strongly related to those community values and did not change much across the day of deliberations. The strongest themes were around environmental protection and community security.

On Day Two the MDT developed 6 planning scenarios based on the input from Day One and how they could be integrated into the planning process. Each of the options was related to themes from the previous day and was bounded by the requirement to accommodate the extra population projected over the next couple of decades. This led to the production of maps of the Greater Geraldton City Region Area (roughly bounded by distances of 25 kilometres around the City) that explored planning themes such as, preservation of existing conservation value land, design focussed on transport, high density CBD living plus infill densification, medium density multiple development nodes with infill densification, preservation of environmental value of the coastal strip and development limited to within 2 kilometres of the coast. During the evening of Day Two, community participants were invited to analyse these maps and scenarios through structured deliberation with members of the MDT whilst their feedback was noted on each of the options.

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[5] Further details available at http://www.21stcenturydialogue.com/

On Day Three[6] the MDT developed a single preferred community option with amendments from all the scenario maps from the previous evening. This was presented back to the community during the evening of Day Three for final comments and further deliberative processes were used to add detail around the broad structure. Finally, the City Director of Planning committed to the community using the data gathered in statutory planning at the scheme and precinct level and in community planning activities.

The majority (189 out of 240) of participants who took part in Day One of the 'Designing our City' process on 13 August 2011 completed a survey at the start of the large scale one day community forum, and a second survey at the end of the day. Of the 189 total survey participants, 148 did both surveys, 28 did the pre-forum survey only and 13 did the post-forum survey only. 115 of the participants were identified as community members (73 who were randomly invited and 42 who 'self-selected' to participate); 43 were invited stakeholders; and 31 were undefined. The survey asked questions about hierarchies of planning related values, opinions of local government performance on these values and satisfaction with the experience of the Enquiry by Design process.

Overall, participants were satisfied with the deliberative forum experience, with 43% 'very satisfied' and 94% at least 'quite satisfied'. These proportions were effectively consistent across participant groups (and if anything the self-select community members were the most satisfied). Willingness to participate again in other events was closely matched to overall satisfaction, with 44% saying they definitely would participate again, and 94% that they at least probably would do so.

Conclusions

This paper has looked at two parts of a larger project studying the use of deliberative democratic principles and processes in a WA regional local government.

The first part examined was a community survey combined with a deliberative event to inform the decisions of the City with a high degree of legitimacy. One of the most important results here was seen not in any particular response, but rather in the high level of agreement on many key issues across the survey.

There was an unusually strong and consistent pattern of views expressed by both respondents to the community survey and by participants in the deliberative survey. This consistency of majority preferences is not always observed in surveys – but what was more unusual was the magnitude of the preferences seen. Often 60%:40% splits are seen as quite decisive in community surveys, but in these surveys several preferences well above 70% were seen, and in some cases in excess of 90%. Some of the most clearly defined preferences were:

- Protecting natural areas of conservation value is of the same or more importance than driving economic development (79% in the community survey, and similar figures in the deliberative survey).

- We need to respond now to climate change when we plan for the Greater Geraldton City Region (rather than waiting for better evidence about climate change) (71% in the community survey, increasing to 90% in the post-forum deliberative survey).

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[6] There was an estimated 10-15% drop off in attendance on Day Two and Three compared with initial attendances on Day One.

- Decision-making should be more collaborative (that is: involving everyday citizens, experts and action groups to a greater extent) (89% in the community survey, and at similar levels in the deliberative survey).

- In making decisions, the long term broader sustainability of the Greater Geraldton City Region is given priority over the immediate economic benefits or costs (69% in the community survey, and increased significantly after deliberation from 66% to 82% in the deliberative survey).

- 85% of the community survey and over 70% of the deliberative survey group preferred an expanding city model over a fly-in / fly-out approach to dealing with people who will come to the City Region for major projects in the next 5-15 years.

- 90% of community survey respondents wanted the City to begin investing in becoming carbon neutral. In the deliberative survey this figure started at a lower (but still very definitive) 85% - but then increased to a near consensus at 98% in the post-forum survey.

While there were effects of deliberation observed, these were in the main secondary to the significance of the starting position; at no stage did a majority position change as a result of the deliberation. Where a difference post-deliberation was seen, the moves tended to be to a more pro-sustainability position. Examples include increased preference for responding to climate change now rather than waiting for better evidence; making decisions giving long term sustainability priority over immediate economic benefits or costs; and starting to invest in becoming carbon neutral. Based on this work the City has already been able to move with confidence on these results – for example the announcement of a plan to plant one million trees by 2013 (LivCom, 2011).

The survey results surrounding the Enquiry by Design suggest that there is a relatively clear hierarchy of issues that were important to the participants, that this hierarchy is fairly stable. 'Protecting beaches', 'community safety', and 'preserving land for nature' remained the top 3 throughout the process – representing, it would seem, a broad, common view. In terms of performance, that is, how well Greater Geraldton was doing on each of the built form, social and environmental issues, participants felt only a low to moderate satisfaction on most indicators.

Recommendations for policy and practice

There are several recommendations that flow from the experience of the authors with this case study:

- Local Government decision makers are well advised to pay attention to process design when engaging with their communities on issues of complexity or contention. Inclusive, representative bodies of citizens deliberating on topics with the confidence they can be influential in decisions can provide a wealth of direction and, more importantly, confidence for municipalities on any aligned actions.

- The formation of a cross organisational group similar to the Alliance Governance Group has potential to confer greater legitimacy through an oversight role as well as a focus for communication and activism by stakeholders who have been engaged in the process. It is likely that this could lead to

greater levels of 'buy-in' from stakeholders which may be instrumental in achieving the visions of communities of interest. We would expect this to be more important to regional local governments in the Western Australian context subject to State and Federal bodies with strong influence and distant control hubs in the capital cities.

- Although, further data needs to be gathered and analysed on this recommendation, anecdotal evidence seems to suggest strong positive influences on City of Geraldton Greenough staff who attended deliberative events. Conversations with staff members show decreasing levels of scepticism about citizens' ability to balance planning decisions and an awareness of a responsibility to actualise any outcomes of public deliberation as soon as possible. Staff seemed to be strongly aware of the impetus to definitively link actions by Council to any public deliberation outcomes both through public relations as well as strategic indicators.

Acknowledgments

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