

Local Government Voices Series

01-2012

June 2011

Managing Complexity in Community Planning: A Conversation with Andrea Selvey, Director of Creative Communities, City of Greater Geraldton, Western Australia

Bligh Grant

Centre for Local Government, UNE

Abstract: Located in Western Australia (WA) approximately 400 km north of Perth, the City of Greater Geraldton is a recently formed Local Government Area (LGA) created by 2 consecutive council amalgamations in 2009-2011. The municipality's '2029 and Beyond' community engagement process', inherited from the City of Geraldton-Greenough at the time of the first consolidation (City of Geraldton-Greenough 2010) recently won international acclaim as one of several finalists for the Reinhard Mohn Prize 2011, 'Vitalising Democracy through Participation' (Hartz-Karp 2011). Bligh Grant talked with Andrea Selvey, Director of Creative Communities at the City of Greater Geraldton, about her experiences in the local government sector, the process of community engagement in the rapidly changing context of the Geraldton municipality and the place of community engagement in the overall planning framework of the Council and of Western Australia more generally. The portrait which emerges is of local government managers balancing complexity and deliberation in community engagement processes while conforming to a complex framework of statutory planning requirements.

Keywords: *Community engagement; Geraldton-Greenough; local government; Western Australia*

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Centre for Local Government, School of Business, Economics and Public Policy, University of New England, Armidale NSW 2351. Phone: + 61 2 6773 2500, Fax: + 61 2 6773 3596. Email: bdollery@une.edu.au

Bligh Grant I am sitting in the office of Andrea Selvey, Director of Creative Communities for the City of Greater of Geraldton. The office is housed in council buildings in the suburb of Utaarra, located approximately 5 kilometres inland from the port town of Geraldton, 400 kilometres north of Perth, Western Australia. It is a very bright and very hot day – very different from the temperate, flood-affected summer experienced in the eastern states of Australia in 2011-12. Andrea, thank you for agreeing to talk with me about your role here and the ongoing process of community engagement in Geraldton.

First, I would like to know a little about your background, if that's alright. How did you come to be in local government? Did you have a position before taking on the role of Director of Creative Communities?

Andrea Selvey: Yes, I did. I actually started in local government, many years ago, in libraries. So I've always had a very strong affiliation with the community development capacity-building role of local government, initially through the public library system but then more broadly in community development and community engagement. All together, it's been something like 25 years that I've been in local government. I have stepped out occasionally and worked in the private sector for short periods of time – years or so – but I've always gravitated back towards local government.

Bligh Grant How long have you worked at this particular council?

Andrea Selvey: I started with the City of Geraldton (as it then was) approximately 10 years ago.

Bligh Grant What was your position then?

Andrea Selvey: I was the City Librarian ... then Director of Creative Communities – the role that I currently hold.

Bligh Grant: How long have you been Director of Creative Communities?

Andrea Selvey: Just over three years.

- Bligh Grant: Do you mind if I ask if you undertook any specific training to do this - or did you just move from being a librarian to being this position?
- Andrea Selvey: I did but I am doing further study as we speak. I'm doing my MBA.
- Bligh Grant: Interesting... Why an MBA? Did it just seem like the most appropriate qualification, with a good mix of skills including things that people like you and I don't know about -- like accounting and so on?
- Andrea Selvey: Yes; exactly that. My decision to undertake an MBA was about governance capabilities. So I'm doing my company director's course. My goal is to improve my understanding of good governance.
- Bligh Grant: How would you describe your current as Director of Creative Communities?
- Andrea Selvey: My role is to provide the strategic direction for the Creative Communities Department; to advise and provide information to council to enable them to make good decisions for the community; to provide the link between council's strategic direction and our operations: Making that link.
- Bligh Grant: Just before I ask you more about your role specifically, I wonder if you could comment on the amalgamations which have led to the formation of the City of Greater Geraldton. As someone who has viewed the process from the inside of council, how did you perceive the amalgamation of firstly, the City of Geraldton with the Shire of Greenough – a process initiated in 2005 and completed in July 2007, and then with the Shire of Mullewa in July 2011? These consecutive consolidations have been portrayed as relatively conflict-free, equitable and beneficial compared to amalgamations in other Australian state and territories¹. What has been your impression?
- Andrea Selvey: Internally it made enormous sense, the first amalgamation particularly – the City of Geraldton with the Shire of Greenough – because we

¹ See, for example, ACELG 2011, 95-101.

were providing a service to a community, we weren't providing a service to a particular local government area: The two local government areas were to all effects and purposes one community. So to have different levels of services if you lived on one side of the road as opposed to the side didn't make sense, particularly when people were accessing city services like the library...

There was a real recognition of this overlap within the community. Yes, there were opponents - there's no doubt about that. There were people who did not want amalgamation to progress for whatever reason. But on the whole the community supported it and could see the benefits. I also believe from a council officer's point of view the benefits have been tremendous because, as a larger organisation, we can do so much more than the two small local governments could do.

Bligh Grant: So the capacity-building promise of the amalgamations has really been borne out?

Andrea Selvey: I would say that what we are delivering for our community has increased exponentially. The sum has proven to be far greater than the efforts of the two individual councils...

Bligh Grant: And I would imagine that what happens on the ground is so much bigger, so people are more likely to notice it?

Andrea Selvey: Yes. And we have a much stronger voice now as an organisation. So the outcome has been incredibly positive for this community, from my position... Also at a very operational level there's been a marked improvement...

Bligh Grant: Some people would argue that larger councils mean that there's less community engagement. How would you react to that proposition?

Andrea Selvey: I think that this sort of criticism might apply to very small local governments, where people know each other and you can have an event or an engagement exercise where everyone knows each other. This kind of exercise does get harder in the larger communities – to

engage effectively across all spheres of the community. You do have to work harder at it. But I think that at an organisational level, the processes we have put in place are much more transparent and robust than they were with the smaller organisations.

Bligh Grant: Before I ask you about '2029 and Beyond' project, you've mentioned a couple of times now the concept of *effective* community engagement. How do you personally define that idea of effective community engagement?

Andrea Selvey: For me it is about an informed conversation that is ongoing. It's an informed and respectful dialogue with the community that's effective for the community-- it's about an ongoing, deliberative process. Indeed our focus is deliberative democracy where we involve ordinary citizens in understanding the issues and finding a common voice, which then influences our plans, policies and decisions.

Bligh Grant: Moving now to the '2029 and Beyond' project: How did it come about?

Andrea Selvey: Firstly, recognition within the organisation that a community engagement program could be effective. A new CEO arrived in Geraldton with fresh eyes and could see there were opportunities, but also the potential for some real challenges facing this community. For example, the resource sector had started having an increased impact on the region at about the same time and was going to bring some challenges for our community. Did we want to be reactive to that? Or did we want to exercise some collective strategic planning and manage the benefits?

Bligh Grant: There should be broader economic and social dividends?

Andrea Selvey: There should be social outcomes, absolutely. So, there were opportunities in Geraldton but unless we actually knew what we develop from those economic opportunities, we wouldn't be in a position to capitalise on this unique opportunity... We recognised there

was so much potential for this community, economically but also socially and culturally. It really is about planning.

But at the same time we recognised right at the very outset that the Council alone doesn't create the community – that we needed to involve partners from sectors across the community because developing a strategic direction was not something which the Council could achieve by itself.

Bligh Grant: Looking at the 'Community Prospectus' published by the City of Geraldton-Greenough in 2010, there were a lot of statutory corporations initially involved as well as different elements of the Western Australian Government². You've also mentioned the crucial role of the CEO as in terms of the leadership. Besides these statutory organisations and the Council, were there any other key people from the community that were getting involved? For example, were there business organisations that were keen to participate?

Andrea Selvey: The media, the local media – because without their buy-in ... and we weren't asking them to be a voice for the council but to be a critical – a critical friend I suppose... Not just to put our press releases out but to take an active interest in the process and become part of the voice of the community and give the community a voice as well. They were critical to that.

Also the Midwest Chamber of Commerce and Industry - the President, Jodi Bevan, has been a longstanding supporter of the 2029 process. He recognised what it could do for this community, what it is doing for this community, and has been incredibly supportive as the leader of the peak body of the business sector in Geraldton.

² The listed partners are Greater Geraldton City Region community, Mid West Development Commission, Mid West Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Geraldton Port Authority, Geraldton Iron Ore Alliance, Shire of Chapman Valley, Shire of Mullewa, Western Australian Planning Commission, Northern Agricultural Catchment Council, Member for Geraldton, Mr Ian Blayney, MLA, Regional Development Australia, City of Geraldton-Greenough, the Geraldton Guardian and Oakjee Port and Rail (City of Geraldton-Greenough, 2010).

Bligh Grant: With respect to the media, from the online evidence it's obvious that *The Geraldton Guardian* has been heavily involved. Has there been any radio involvement?

Andrea Selvey: Absolutely. There was the local ABC Radio, also the Indigenous radio station here, Radio MAMA - we have a presence on this fairly regularly. But radio wasn't as much a part of the conversation as the print media. We did some research in the form of survey work, asking the community what their primary source of information was, and print media was constantly identified as the main source.

We also partnered with Curtin University, jointly applying for and receiving university and LotteryWest grants so we could create an ongoing, leading edge public deliberation process. By doing action research in this way, we can all learn from our experiences as we go.

Bligh Grant: All right ... that covers the genesis and who's been involved in '2029 and Beyond' since the outset. What about the process itself? It's been quite a lengthy (and I think that's perfectly justifiable. Some people might say that it's not efficient, but I'm not an economist). What for you have been the key points in the process thus far?

Andrea Selvey: Internally, key points were actually defining what this project was... But I don't know if this is the time to talk about it. It's not something that we're following a formal procedure, where we can say: 'Right, first we're going to do this and then we're going to do that'. We have plans, but opportunities arise, so the process itself has unfolded as we've worked with it. This has been anything but inefficient. Rather than sticking to a formulaic plan that is no longer relevant to what's happening in the Region (which is not only inefficient but ineffective), each step of the way it's been analysis and evaluation to find out whether or not we continue a particular element of the program or move direction. That's something really important to let you know.

At the same time, we did start with the usual official launch, the 'externally-facing' key points— because you had to have something that would spark people's imagination that this was something different; that the council and the city were really going to try to do something differently. This wasn't going to be the usual engagement or consultation/engagement process of running a few workshops, do your document and there it is put out for public comment...

Bligh Grant: Can you just briefly describe the launch?

Andrea Selvey: Sure... Again, the media was a huge player in getting people along to the Queen's Park Theatre. We probably had some 350 people come to our theatre. These numbers may not sound huge but if you think about the size of our community...

Bligh Grant: That's a good result.

Andrea Selvey: Yes... What we're trying to achieve with this is a balance of getting that spark of inspiration externally, but also valuing the contribution that our local community can make to this. It's not just about getting a keynote speaker from somewhere else. We've had Charles Landry, who is a creative thinker and works around the world, and Steven Ames, who has been involved in community action plans around the world. They came and spoke, but they spoke alongside local people...

Bligh Grant: Could you call these local people 'leaders' in the community? In civil society?

Andrea Selvey: In a way. But it wasn't the usual leaders, I suppose. We looked around for people in the community who might have strong opinions about the future, and asked them what they thought this community could be, and asked them to present on their vision for 2029.

Bligh Grant: From the outside it looks like there was quite a lot of consultants; more so, perhaps, than elsewhere. Do you think that their impact has been tremendous or were they self-affirming for you, as someone in your position?

Andrea Selvey: Well, I suppose it depends on how define a consultant... We can talk about consultants but we could have had consultants who come in and actually undertake the whole process. Rather, what we've done is brought people in to provide that little spark of inspiration; to give us a little taste of what's happening out in the world. But they didn't design, run or evaluate the process for us. We are doing this with our community. Having outsider experts was also about capacity-building because, as I said, this is new for us. We're all learning. The involvement of external consultants has been about capacity-building for our staff, including myself – and about bringing a different view to our community, and leaving it with us to then decide how we progress with it, rather than directing or running it for us – writing our plan while sitting over in Sydney, for example...

Bligh Grant: This is quite an interesting point because of the number of community strategic plans which are now legislatively mandated across Australia... The temptation would be to employ somebody to write the community plan – which happens in a lot of small communities that are under-resourced, that don't have strategic capacity. I don't think that the legislation is particularly subtle when it comes to the differences between empowered councils on the one hand and regional and remote councils on the other...

Okay. I wanted to ask you a question about how you reacted to the City of Geraldton-Greenough Social and Creative City Project Draft Strategic Plan 2029 (Palmonari and Sutherland, 2010) which is on your website. It has lots and lots of detail about Geraldton being a creative arts centre and things like that. What was your feeling about this? Of course I recognise it's a process and that it's still very much a 'work in progress'. However, how do you see that particular document fitting into the overall plan?

Andrea Selvey: The 2029 process, as I said earlier, is recognising that the city alone doesn't create this community. So we've got this vast body of

information, much of it not relating to city actions or activity. This information sits there as something we're progressing with the community and broadly with other stakeholders. The output will of this will be the Community Action Plan. But this has to be consistent. We haven't got our Community Action Plan yet. However at the same time we needed to have a Strategic Plan – an internal document – for our own purposes.

Eventually those two processes will merge. This new Community Strategic Plan that Council has recently adopted (and a lot of work has gone into it) encompasses key actions that are falling out of the 2029 community engagement process, a deliberative process.

We, i. e.: the 2029 Alliance Group, the Community Champions and City staff undertook a very careful review of the actions and the activities and the aspirations that were coming out of the 2029 process and attempted to identify where our responsibilities lie in all of this, and what things we could start to implement in the short term. This is because our Community Strategic Plan, compared to the 2029 project, is shorter term and has shorter-term goals - one- to five- to ten-year goals. They're not the 2029 vision but they're the guiding actions of the City now. So we're starting to guide the actions as part of the 2029 process.

Bligh Grant: So the Community Strategic Plan has to been as an element to the far broader 2029 process?

Andrea Selvey: Yes.

Bligh Grant: In this way, 2029 and Beyond is a procedural-political process which is actually about proceduralism in itself, as it were. Then we've got a Community Strategic Plan which is an operational document, as well as the Community Action Plan. Did the Community Action Plan arise from the 2029 process?

Andrea Selvey: Yes.

Bligh Grant: How does the Community Action Plan sit with respect to the City of Geraldton-Greenough Social and Creative City Project Draft Strategic Plan 2029 (Palmonari and Sutherland, 2010)?

Andrea Selvey: The City of Geraldton-Greenough Social and Creative City Project Draft Strategic Plan 2029 (Palmonari and Sutherland, 2010) is very specifically about one particular area of service delivery -- the creative and social outcomes. So it's one particular area of focus that informs us. However, the 2029 process is such a complex project because the world hasn't stopped while we do our planning. We're doing a very robust and long-term deliberative process as part of this conversation with the community. It's about empowering our community to have the sorts of conversations that really get to the things that matter; rather than a superficial response to a question. It's about becoming gradually more informed, it's about being willing to listen to different perspectives, being respectful of a variety of perspectives. Because within a community of 38,000 - probably just over 40,000 people now, it's about being respectful of a variety of views and trying to come up with directions that will be respectful of all those views.

So we've got this deliberative process which is on-going and while with the 2029 project we may get to some outcomes by 2013, our hope for the deliberative process is that it will become institutionalised as the way we do business with the community; an ongoing conversation with the community that results in finding common ground and leads to collaborative action.

Parallel to that, because we need to do some planning now, we've initiated plans like the Social and Creative City Plan, and we're adopting the same sort of principles -- deliberative conversation principles -- in developing those plans. So we've got a number of plans that are being progressed at the moment: Social and Creative City, City Vibrancy, Land Use Planning. Some of them are statutory - the town planning statutory documents -- and others are more about

creating our community: City Vibrancy, the Social and Creative City Plan, Youth Strategic Plan -- all of these are happening as a parallel process.

People get cynical if they don't see action. It became very clear as we started this process that while the World Cafes were all about starting the conversation, people wanted to see some action from that. Now, out of the World Cafes, there must have been 500 different ideas that were put forward. How do you determine which of these to pursue?

We had to go through a very robust process to say: 'What are some of the key ideas and key things emerging that we can action immediately? We also have to involve the stakeholders in making this happen. It's about creating that governance system that will allow that to happen. So there's all these strains of work that are happening together and they are informing each other and in some cases shaping each other as well.

Bligh Grant: As you have stated, Council has to comply with statutory planning requirements, which must be uppermost at some points in the process. For example, after you initiated the 2029 process, the Department turned round and announced the IPR [Integrated Planning and Reporting] framework (DLG [WA], 2011a). The Department has even gone so far as to provide examples of how you can go about this: Models from New South Wales and Queensland (DLG [WA], 2011b). You must have been thinking: 'Well, we've initiated all these processes already...'. How did you view those statutory requirements? It looks as if you were already doing that anyway...

Andrea Selvey: I think the statutory requirements are great because we already had some community engagement in place. Our 2029 process began in 2009. These statutory requirements didn't come into effect until 26 August 2010. I think we - not I think, I *know* – that we have exceeded these requirements.

Bligh Grant: I still haven't – and it's not your problem, it's mine -- I still haven't wrapped my head around the interrelationship between these various plans except for the idea that they're running concurrently. I'm not really sure about the hierarchy of them although I do understand the statutory requirements. However, I do understand that quite a lot of them have to do with land use planning...

Andrea Selvey: Some of them are, but there are also the cultural and social plans, which we have talked about. As you are aware, we are required to produce numerous plans and an inherent problem is interconnecting them so they have an obvious common direction. One of the aims of 2029 is to develop a coherent direction forward, one that not only the various arms of government understand and 'own', but also the community. If we do that, we can develop more effective collaborative problem solving and governance. That's no easy task.

Bligh Grant: There's also planning at the regional level. For example, Regional Development Australia Committees that are forming regional plans, with which councils interact. Is this problematic for you?

Andrea Selvey: And it's not just RDA; you've got a Development Commission which undertakes its own planning, and then NACC [Northern Agricultural Catchment Council], that does its own planning. Then across the community you have different agencies at different levels of government doing their own planning. So ultimately – and this is what I was talking about, the governance we need to put in place – to ensure that, for example, yes, RDA have to have their own plan but it's another element of 2029 - it has to be consistent with 2029.

I think it is worth emphasising that any agency in Geraldton that is undertaking planning can take what we have done from 2029 because they're in it as much as we are. They were part of the initial governance group that helped define that. They own it, they take it, they use it now to inform their own planning so that across the board there's consistency; there's one vision.

That's the overarching point: Whether we have to report to a state government head office or at the national level – that we all, as a community, know where we're going and we're all contributing to it in our own different ways, in our area of speciality. So we keep reminding and making sure that the information that's coming out of 2029 isn't just for the City to use; it's for any agency to use.

Bligh Grant: I just have one final query with respect to this complex web of planning requirements: How do you personally see that your role interacting with state government, and in particular the Department of Local Government? Is it just a matter of you looking at their websites and conforming to their processes? Or do you have personal interaction with people from the Department?

Andrea Selvey: Not personally, because it's such a big project. I'm the Project Director for 2029. We also have a Director of Corporate Services at the City of Greater Geraldton [Cheryl Wood] who has ownership of corporate planning. She is my peer and we work together. She understands fully what's coming from 2029 and how this relates to corporate planning.

Bligh Grant: How many other peers do you have in the City of Greater Geraldton Council?

Andrea Selvey: Phil Melling – he is the Director of Sustainable Communities. He looks after the planning portfolio; the town plan and strategic planning. He knows what needs to come out of 2029 – he's guiding 2029 to achieve the outcomes he needs, or he's guiding the way – he's making sure we work through a process that will give him information he can use in strategic planning. In his role he has the connections to the State Government through the Department of Planning and the Australian Planning Commission: That's his area of expertise and he's the one who has that connection. Together, we undertook an 'Enquiry by Design' towards the middle of last year, with Phil's Directorate taking the lead, because he knew what information he needed to inform some of the statutory planning documents that he has to develop.

They're the key people I work with most closely at my own level: The Director of Corporate Services and the Director of Sustainable Communities. However, we have 5 Directors and all of them are involved in some level. For example, our Director of Community Infrastructure works very closely with Phil Melling. It's very holistic. I think our CEO has put 2029 in the right Department because we're about community. So my role is to make sure the community is involved and engaged and the voice of the community is heard and we develop this Community Action Plan to make sure that what's coming out of this informs all areas of planning.

Bligh Grant: So the Community Action Plan is your baby, then?

Andrea Selvey: Yes.

Bligh Grant: Okay. In the couple of minutes that we've got left, is there any element of the 2029 and Beyond process, and related processes, that you think we have not discussed, or anything that you'd like to emphasise?

Alternatively, is there anything you'd like to say about the fact that I've come into your office and asked you all of these questions?

Andrea Selvey: Oh, I think they've been great questions. It's been a really good conversation. The thing is, it's really good to be asked about the project and asked some hard questions about the project because, as I said earlier, we're learning as we go. We're trying to do something differently. To summarise, I think what we are trying to do differently are at least 3 things - 1/ to be more inclusive of ordinary citizens in our engagement, for example we often use random sampling, or we do small group discussions in local cafes, or we use social media; 2/ to be more deliberative, giving people the opportunity to understand differing viewpoints, consider different options and see if they can develop a coherent voice; and 3/ to be more influential, in that the outcomes of that considered discussion will impact on policy and decision-making in a transparent way. I'm really passionate about it.

So we need to review continually. It's great to have some outside scrutiny of the project because we have to learn.

Bligh Grant: From where I was standing, it looked to me like the Draft Social and Creative Cities plan sat at the middle of everything - which is entirely inaccurate. But I don't think I could have really found that out unless I had a chat with you.

Andrea Selvey: I think we need people to look at this project as an ongoing process and offer a view on it - and for us to learn from that. We're always learning. The thing that I'm really interested in next is how we can maybe learn from the Occupy Movement.

Bligh Grant: Really?

Andrea Selvey: Yes. What can we learn from that? People are willing to come out in droves, spend nights out in the street to tell us what they *don't* want. But how can we get people to participate as willingly in what they *do* want? I was watching an interview with a participant in the Occupy Movement and she was saying it's really hard to articulate what you want. I guess this 2029 project now needs to look at how we can inspire the same passion, but in this instance, giving people the space, the resources, and the ability to articulate what they want.

Bligh Grant: I really appreciate your time, Andrea.

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