Written Report

The Barossa Region Resident’s Association and civic engagement in the Barossa – historical, present and future opportunities

September 2012

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This paper examines the challenges of communication between communities and the tiers of government that represent them. It looks in general at the difficulties experienced by community organisations in maintaining a level of involvement and, in particular, at the case study of the Barossa Region Residents’ Association (BRRA). The critique of the case study involved analysis of the BRRA’s constitution and Issues Paper (March 2006, Appendices A, B). Interviews were conducted with key representatives from the Incorporated Body and online survey responses were sought from past membership and the general public (Appendices C, D). The paper then considers a model that could provide a template for much improved communication between individuals and organisations and governments.

Community engagement and governance

Community engagement with all forms of government is essential if elected representatives are to be made aware of the concerns of their constituents. One of the most important principles of Western democracy stresses the need for information and consultation to be a two way process between government and community and ideally this should be on both a regular and a need-to-know basis. In reality, governments inform but do not consult except in the rarely used referendum and small focus groups on specific issues, while communities, with the exception of a few special interest groups, do neither. Governments claim that regular elections are a form of consultation with the community but, in reality, these emphasise short-term aspirations on the part of a political party rather than any meaningful consultation with the population at large.

The issues that can galvanise communities and individuals into communication with governments are as diverse as the individuals within any community. Concerns range from the reactive to the proactive: rural and urban planning and the environment figure largely, as do community facilities or the lack thereof. Examples of reactive movements can be seen in the push for the Federal government to apologise to Aboriginal people for their treatment at the hands of officialdom, and closer to home, in the reaction to the South Australian government’s urban planning decisions in the Mount Barker area (Adelaide Now, 2012). Proactive campaigns to inform governments of community concerns vary across the spectrum of human behaviour: environmental activism in Tasmania, the anti-nuclear lobby, and the republican movement.

It is this perceived need for change that is at the heart of community action, and it is the need for change too, that brings individuals together to form associations of different sorts to pursue such needs. Progress associations, ratepayers groups, small business lobbies and service groups, among many others, are examples of input channels through which needs can be communicated to layers of government. Some groups are formed with a specific intent and, once their need has been fulfilled, are disbanded. Some expand their area of interest as further community needs become apparent and grow to be umbrella organisations for a number of issues.

Since every community is a dynamic organism that changes over time, its concerns change with it. In the more than a century and a half of the Barossa’s history, for instance, the early emphasis on issues relating to the church has given way to the importance of the environment, the character of the area, and government policies that affect the lifestyle of the residents.
The Barossa Region Residents’ Association

The BRRA was founded by concerned Barossa residents in the mid-1980s to address and lobby against government decisions that threatened the future of agricultural land and old vineyard plantings. At the time, the Barossa’s future was under threat by unsustainable development and the government vine-pull scheme (Wine Companion, 2012). The objective of this community movement was to voice their concerns by lobbying local and state governments in order to force the issues to be addressed (Appendix A, 3.1 Objects and Purposes).

Following the assembly of BRRA’s founding committee members, a constitution was produced and through civic engagement, (Appendix G), membership peaked at 1200, the largest association of its kind in South Australia.

Some major achievements of the BRRA’s large agenda include:

- establishing the value and significance of old vineyard plantings to assist their preservation
- identifying the boundaries of the Barossa’s Geographical Indications (GI) as a wine producing region
- establishing the Barossa Wine and Tourism Association
- assisting and underpinning the amalgamation of five Barossa region councils in to two

The Barossa as we know it would have been adversely compromised had it not been for the existence of the BRRA. Without their actions and clear focus the unprecedented success of the Barossa as a famous wine-growing region is likely to have been challenged. Urban sprawl, insensitive development and a deterioration of viticulture activity would have inhibited the Barossa’s lucrative contribution to the economy and tourism. An agenda that acknowledged the significance of the economic, social, environmental and cultural sustainability has most definitely helped preserve and enrich the Barossa today.

Unquestionably, the highly motivated individuals who brought the Barossa’s issues to governments contributed to BRRA’s success. They engaged in consultative relationships with councils and governments that were not combative or divisive which achieved common goals and visions with the Planning Minister for the State and local government. Community meetings were socially engaging, providing a strongly united and cohesive group: a group prepared to focus on the big issues, rather than personal agendas.

In recent years BRRA has disbanded and failed to reform. As many of the founding issues were addressed and resolved, committee members became exhausted and retired from the group. Although certain individuals within the last executive retained their enthusiasm and passion to maintain BRRA’s agenda, there simply wasn’t an adequate succession plan or groundswell of broad support to maintain the level of momentum that had been so successful in earlier years. The association remains incorporated and financial. Many of the organisation’s strengths remain relevant today, particularly as a conduit for information and a community network.

As our investigation unfolded, it became apparent that there is currently some cross over with other community groups and organisations’ agendas. More importantly however, our research suggests that there is still a need for an organisation like BRRA to act as a support mechanism for the whole community, in order to identify the key cultural, social, environmental and economic characteristics of the region that should be retained. There is an excellent opportunity to understand how the Barossa community defines itself, and to protect and enhance that definition. We recommend this platform to be the initial process beyond this group’s project.
Civic engagement in the Barossa and beyond its borders

In the Barossa region there is a multitude of issues that could change the way the Barossa operates, how it looks and what its primary functions are. Engaging the community to discover what elements are deemed to be non-negotiable by the community for the future of the region is one way to future-proof the region. From this understanding, a long-term plan could be made and agreed upon and which could be used as a guiding tool for decision makers on issues that impact the region.

A recent example of community engagement that has gone awry is the State Government’s Character Preservation Bill, a strong and important action, but one in which the community was not heavily involved in consultation. Stronger engagement and information sharing on a large scale could have ensured a more streamlined outcome and, whilst the final outcome is presently not known, a far more accessible and engaged approach would have removed much confusion and community angst.

To demonstrate how community organisations can effectively focus attention on community issues, the following models serve as examples:

- La Piazza Delle Valle Italian Heritage Committee: A local grass-roots community led organisation initiated a community members, grape growers, wine makers and business people in McLaren Vale. The committee leveraged off the strong Italian heritage in the region, linked with the local RSL and historic Town Hall to create a town square for the whole community to use (The Adelaide Review 2012) (Appendix E).

- Renew Newcastle: An initiative that manages the look and use of vacant buildings in Newcastle to bring them and the township back to life. Renew Newcastle achieves this through physical changes (new coat of paint, basic maintenance) and then “finding custodians” who use the buildings for cultural, creative and community purposes until the owner finds a permanent tenant or a redevelopment is ready to proceed” (Renew Newcastle 2011).

These examples demonstrate that determination, focus and desire to listen to and involve the community to make decisions based with attainment of a real community voice, delivers real community outcomes.

Unquestionably the internet has changed the face of community engagement and social involvement. When the BRRA was initially established the internet was a twinkle in Microsoft’s eye and, as the internet became internationally used as a place to research, engage and inform, BRRA did not utilise this opportunity. Whilst the initial members were passionate and focused, research shows that gaining and retaining membership numbers became harder in later years. Should a new Resident’s association be developed, in whatever guise, the internet, social media and online communication should definitely be at the forefront of engaging with the community, along with more traditional methods of community interaction such as open meetings.

Community engagement for a region like the Barossa has unlimited potential. There are industry groups; Barossa Grape & Wine Association (BGWA), Barossa Lower North Futures, Regional Development Australia Barossa (RDAB), Barossa Food and Tourism Barossa Inc. (TBI), Town Committees, educational and health care institutions; that already have strong links to their networks. So to (re)establish a resident’s association which can link into these industry groups would ensure a broad community approach and, ultimately, let the whole Barossa voice be heard.
Recommendations: A Barossa vision with a forum for tomorrow

A society that operates under a productive governance system requires an environment of interaction between citizens and decision makers, where ownership in the future of the community is the responsibility of all. Ideally the system encourages ongoing dialogue that is open, honest and influential.

How do we create a future that enables and encourages rather than diminishes the power of everyday citizens? What is required to establish a system that invites feedback, utilises community sentiment and educates people about decisions that impact on the whole community? How do we develop a bureaucratic system that involves constituents in the process of government and examines activity through four lenses of sustainability; economic, social, cultural and environmental?

To facilitate this type of environment it is imperative that there is commitment from both sides of the bureaucratic wall; from governments and organisations who must willingly offer consultation opportunities that are diverse, educative and fundamentally authentic; and from the community who must willingly articulate their values and beliefs and endeavour to be collaborative and cooperative. We propose the following project to

- improve civic engagement
- encourage organisations and governments to support citizens to navigate through bureaucratic systems including planning, strategy development and general services
- develop ongoing dialogue for all sectors of the community which is consistent, unifying and useful for decision makers
- assist the BRRA to evolve into a contemporary residents’ association that is relevant to the needs of the community it serves.

The Barossa Charter Project

As previously suggested in this document, the success of the BRRA can be partly attributed to its clear and concise focus that was relevant to the economic and cultural wellbeing of the whole community and the use of both rational and sentimental ideals galvanised the community. Its singular strategy, ‘Saving the Vines and Stopping the Urban Sprawl’, unified the community and provided a values-based ideal for people to contribute their voice, time and money. We would like to propose the development of a new vision in the form of a Barossa Charter.

The Barossa Charter would reflect the values, beliefs and future visions of the Barossa and it would reaffirm that which will not be compromised. Similarly to the early days when the BRRA established itself, the Charter would identify the key characteristics of the region which are valued unequivocally and articulate the vision for the future in light of these characteristics. The purpose of the document would be to honour the history of the region, recognise the Barossa’s unique qualities and provide a guide for decision-making that incorporates the values of the community.

To ensure relevance and acceptance of the document, its establishment would require a robust engagement process involving community organisations, governments and a considerable number of individuals from all demographic groups. It would be divided into four areas that correspond with the four pillars of sustainability; economic development, social connectedness, a cultural lens and environmental stewardship.
The development, review and protection of the Charter would be governed by an organisation which could be adapted from the existing BRRA. The process of establishing the document would encourage the evolution of an organisation that is representative of the community and focussed on key actions that relate to the Charter. The organisation would not be designed to weigh in on all issues across the region but to be activated when issues arise that may impact on or threaten the Charter.

The Barossa Charter is expected to be a long-term document that could be used in a number of ways. Its development would provide opportunities for people to discuss values and decision making, and identify a vision for the Barossa that they would like to see maintained and honoured over time. We expect that in some ways it will be better understood by future generations rather than by current residents and we propose (but not limited to) the following suggestions as to how it might be utilised and disseminated throughout the community:

- Migrants that make their citizenship pledge in the Barossa are encouraged to also acknowledge the Barossa Charter as part of the ceremony.
- Schools offered an education package about the Barossa Charter to be utilised when teaching students about patriotism and local history and civics.
- Organisations and events such as the Barossa and Light Councils, RDAB, Foundation Barossa, BGWA, the Vintage Festival and the Barons of the Barossa invited to endorse it and have it accompany their vision statements and help guide their strategic planning processes.

Many organisations currently operating in the Barossa conduct consultation and endeavour to engage the community in a range of activities that aim to develop, grow and promote the region. It is apparent however, that the current resources and expertise do not achieve the results desired by either the organisations or the community (Appendix D).

The project plan (Attachment F) proposes the development of a number of training options phased over a period of time that will provide training and information for local government and community organisation staff, board members and Councillors on the benefits and methodology of community engagement and consultation. The project, incorporated into the Charter, is to be delivered over a period of time to ensure there is a focus on developing these skills and to ensure there are enough people in the region who have the appropriate skills to ask questions, manage feedback and develop relationships – encouraging empowerment and a civically motivated community.

The interaction of communities and governments will always be limited by the modes of communication used by either body. It is essential, however, that community members have their say in decisions concerning local issues whether individually or through the medium of an association. The proposed Barossa Charter could provide a timely and compelling beacon for residents to rally behind and an avenue for the considered vision of the Barossa region to be voiced to governments as well as improving the two-way communication that is so necessary to good governance on a local level.

Words: 2,601
References

- Viewed September 2012


Appendices

A – Barossa Region Residents Association Incorporated Constitution
B – Barossa Region Residents Association Issues Paper March 2006
C – Record of interviews with key representatives from BRRA
D – Questions and responses to Project team’s Online Survey – September 2012
F – The Barossa Charter Project outline – October 2012
G – BRRA Newsletter October 2008