



Being the Councillor you want to be – a New Approach to Councillor Development.

Original presentation by Alice Aird, (Strengthening Communities through Womens Participation Project) to Shire of Yarra Ranges *Networking Dinner for Women in Council*, 21 August, 2003. **Updated 2008**

It's my great pleasure to be here at such a gathering of women who are leaders in their communities in different ways – as Mayors and councillors and officers in various councils. It's also my pleasure to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people who we owe so much to for their long custodianship of the land that we are meeting on – which now the Yarra Ranges Council are responsible for in the very different context of 2003. I want to warmly thank to Mayor Di Moore and the Shire of Yarra Ranges Council for their tangible commitment to supporting women in local government by offering this dinner tonight.

I am lucky enough to work as a project officer with the Women's Participation in Local Government Coalition (WPILGC), a job I share with my wonderful co-worker, Linda Bennett who unfortunately can't be here tonight. Your brochure includes the members of WPILGC which include the MAV and VLGA and a number of women's and community organisations and individual members. This coalition supports women's participation in local government and local leadership in a variety of ways. The project Linda and I work on is actually called Strengthening Communities through Women's Participation (SCWP), which is a project of WPILGC. The work of SCWP project has probably been most visible in local government circles through our activities around election time and in particular the *Women Get Elected* workshops leading up to the elections in 2002 and 2003.

It is often assumed that we are only interested in getting new women councillors elected, however a central message tonight is that our work also includes supporting current councillors. That includes offering campaigning tips at re-election time by the way! But tonight I'll be talking in particular about our latest ideas about a support and development program for women councillors. We decided to call tonight's talk "**How to balance the pressures and become the Councillor you want to be**" as a catchy way to encapsulate some of the ideas we've been working on and get your response to them. It's a way of 'testing the water' as there are many years of experience in this room which we value highly. We would greatly appreciate and value your response to these ideas.

In relation to current women councillors, it's our intention that women councillors feel acknowledged for their valuable service to the community. We want to support women councillors by offering a process and a framework for reflecting on and planning their approach to their work as a councillor. The approach encourages each woman to think about the qualities and clarify the principles, values and goals they uniquely bring to the role, so that they can find ways which work for them to build on those strengths in serving their communities as councillors.



The idea is to offer information, learning opportunities, and frameworks for thinking and planning, which give women the tools to engage with all stages of participating in local government in a confident and informed way. We see every woman's experience as crucial to the future of women in local government. A woman who runs an energetic and effective campaign can have a great experience whether or not she is elected. The Women Get Elected workshops encourage candidates to define their own success, independently of the election outcome. Many women have done this and speak very positively of the experience of being a candidate. They are usually keen to have another go and are very positive advocates for the campaigning experience. This can only help us to reach equal representation.

We have 8 current councillors here from 5 municipalities and without even knowing you, I want to acknowledge your service to your communities and for having the courage and commitment to taking on the councillor's role - and so many of you more than once. I do know what it's like as I was on Macedon Ranges Council 2000-2003. It's a very demanding and expanding role isn't it. The workload is huge and the remuneration isn't! It's incredibly interesting and stimulating..... What else is it? There's no doubt many who've never done it consider it an arduous and thankless task – with some good reason. But there are many rewards, I hope you would agree - learning so much, having an influence....broadening your perspective, influencing outcomes for your community.

Universally, women who have been interviewed in recent research have had positive things to say about their experience. And the researchers have had positive things to say about the many inspirational women there are among Victorian councillors! The research I'm referring to is in a paper by Nicole Reichelt called Support Practices of Women Councillors (see the Library on the WPILGC web page, hosted on behalf of the Coalition on the VLGA website. www.vlga.org.au/issues/women_gov.html) It's interesting reading! Look out for it.

Women councillors also have had many challenging experiences. There are many critics of councils and councillors and can be a lot of conflict and it can be very painful. It's important to acknowledge that there is a mix of experiences and to offer opportunities to prepare for and respond to the challenges.

I loved being a councillor in many ways and experienced powerful grief when I didn't win at the last election. In passing, that is another phase which has been neglected, supporting councillors in the transition off council. There is grief and it is a hidden grief – most people would not think you should grieve about it. That loss has taught me a lot, and has contributed to the insight that we need to address and support women through all phases of the experience of putting your hand up for council.

All of you have until Nov 2005 in this role, just over two years, and a little less time than you expected. This is useful time to pause and reflect. One of the fundamental ideas of this 'new approach' to councillor development is to encourage women to ask themselves questions about what they are doing and why, throughout their term - so as to become really *conscious* of what you are doing and why. Of course we all do ask ourselves questions about our motives and intentions, but it can really help to have a structured set of useful questions which are appropriate for the different stages of the council term.

Let's talk about the last year of your term first and a big question you will be consciously or unconsciously mulling over: **Will I or won't I stand again?** (So many of you have been through this one before – you may already be quite clear about that).How you answer this



has many repercussions. The knowledge that a councillor really does want to get back in for another term can greatly effect what councillors do. The thought of the public representation of their actions and the possible effects on their likelihood of getting re-elected can be very inhibiting.

Some would say continuously campaigning throughout your term makes you more accountable. Even in our own WPILGC publication *Now You're a Councillor* some councillor's contributions suggest this is a good idea. It gives you a profile, yes, and some say, makes you answerable to your electorate. But does it? Or does continuous campaigning perhaps make you more confused and unsure how to act? We would really love to hear your thoughts on this.

Another question worth asking councillors: **Would *knowing* you wouldn't be back after the next election, for whatever reason, change what you do today?** Would councillors more easily shed some of the 'shoulds' and find it easier to focus on what they really believe is important if they let go of thinking about the possible effect on votes? Does the constant thought of how people might vote, pressure councillors into doing things that they don't really believe are important, for the sake of a very uncertain return – possible votes in an election they may not be in?

I am going to suggest something bold and unusual - that you will do better at being the councillor you want to be, if you can put aside the thought that you may want to get re-elected. That by acting as if you are definitely not standing again, you will be better able to use your term to achieve the things which motivated you to stand for council.

Is it more powerful and effective to think of your current term as what you have, nothing more, nothing less?

Just imagine that right now, you will definitely be ending your term in November 2005. What do you feel? Does that make a difference?

I'm not trying to encourage you not to stand. I'm in the business of increasing women's participation after all!! We want current councillors to confidently and enthusiastically stand again, if that is the right thing in their lives. We also suggest that it is better for councillors not to live with a vague, untested assumption that they will be going to election again, or will have another term to achieve what they want.

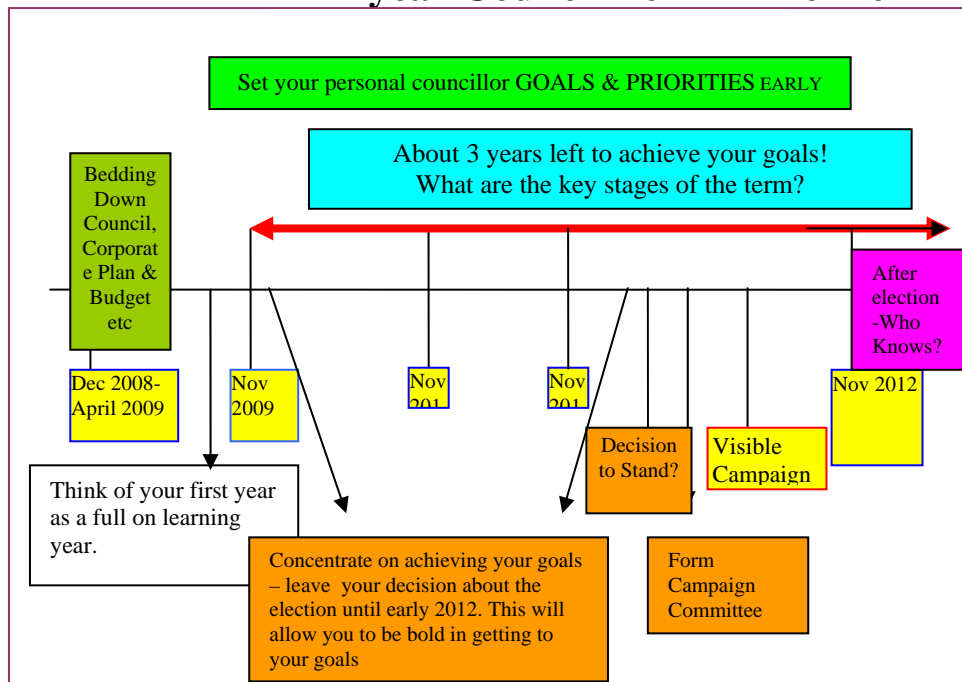
Overview of Council Term

I want to introduce a diagram here, a sort of timeline of your council term. The idea is to see better where you are going in order to answer some key questions and make key decisions early. With the help of experienced councillors, we would like to develop a picture of the phases of a council term and the important considerations at each stage. From this overview perspective, and with a framework of questions to ask, councillors will have a guiding process to regularly pause, reflect, regroup, refocus and go forward confidently with greater awareness of what matters and how to use their energy to achieve their goals.

For instance, the diagram below has been constructed to show the current position of councillors who are going to election to November 2005 and some key questions to ask at particular points of time.



4 year Council Term Timeline



How does this all fit together? We are encouraging councillors to look at their whole council term from the beginning and to plan how they are going to use it; to take hold of their term and make the most of it. To relax about getting elected again and decide what they do by examining and being clear about their own principles, values and goals. To be strategic and use their energy well in the context of their own lives.

We are confident that this approach will produce the best outcomes for themselves and their communities. This confidence comes from experience of many councillors, which shows that for the vast majority, their core value is serving the community they represent to the very best of their ability.

About the pressures of council

This brings us to that question of pressures. What are they really? Where does the pressure come from? There are only a few things you are bound by statute to do as a councillor – fundamentally only to go to council meetings and vote on each motion put before the Council.

It is your own principles and values which tell you that you must inform yourself sufficiently to make sound decisions. And that you owe certain things to your community.

Is there just one set of values for a 'good' councillor, or are there many different principled approaches to this role?



I suggest that each of you has unique and valuable perspectives and gifts to bring to this role, and that acknowledging and consciously offering those unique qualities and skills is the best focus of your aspirations.

From my own experience on Macedon Ranges Council, I found that every councillor influenced my thinking, expanded my understanding at some point. I acknowledge that all 9 councillors brought value to the table, even the ones amongst my eight colleagues that I mostly disagreed with on issues and/or processes!

How many different beliefs are there in the community about how a councillor should be? Thousands!! How many people have expectations of you as a councillor? Lets list them: Other councillors (both in your own council and beyond), CEO & other officers, peak bodies like MAV& VLGA, family, friends, thousands of community members with very diverse views, state and federal politicians, journalists and other media, support material like Now You're a Councillor!!!!

All those advisors, all those critics, all those judges.....

Can any councillor meet all their expectations? Are you a bad councillor if you don't? Does being a good councillor mean being the councillor everyone wants you to be? Can you say yes to everyone who asks something of you? How many should you say yes to? Is it OK to say no, or maybe, 'I can't do that, but this is what I can do?'

Saying no!

I was at a 'Meet the Minister' brunch recently with the Minister for Local Government Candy Broad, and she was asked how she managed to balance her life with all the pressures of ministerial life. She gave a very interesting answer: She said: "When it comes to juggling the different pressures you have to make those decisions for yourself. It's about learning to say 'No'. It's very much about learning to allocate your precious time." She said that "if a politician works all the time, they get out of touch with the very things they are trying to improve in people's lives." She told a funny story about how she learnt to say no. She was running Joan Kirner's office when Joan was Premier, and she said that the stream of ideas Joan had was amazing and it was wonderful to work around her – but it did teach her to draw the line and set priorities from among them all! Working for Joan Kirner she *had* to learn to say no! And she's very grateful for that intense training ground.

There was a lot of energy in this story – clearly there was a lot in it for her; it was a key and crucial learning.

To sum up...

We at WPILGC plan to assist with this process of learning and development for women councillors. We see our role as assisting women to have a good experience. We are developing a pilot program for Councillor Development and there will be an invitation to join that program in the next few months. Before that we will be running a survey/focus group to ask some women councillors about the best way to design the program. We are thinking that the pilot might include an initial training day, some coaching and/or mentoring plus an ongoing link with a coach or mentor over a 6-9 month period. We will be asking the participants to agree to being trained as future mentors of women councillors. We also believe that a high quality program of this kind needs resources – it can't run on nothing. We think councils themselves need to recognise and value their councillors as much as they do the staff, and invest in them in a far more concerted way than occurs presently.



A new Councillor Development Program would be based on principles like these:

- Work consciously on becoming the councillor you want to be
- Know and build on your strengths
- Examine and clarify your principles, values and goals
- Prioritise your action according to your own principles and values
- There are as many ways to be a good councillor as there are councillors.
- Allocate your precious time and energy carefully.

Our suggested approach for councillors right now is:

- 1) **Get clear about what is important to YOU as a councillor. What matters?**
What are your principles and values?
- 2) **Set clear and realistic goals regularly** (Make them realistic, they're not for publishing, some may be achieving tangible things the community wants, some may be personal. It would be great to work with a friend or buddy on this. Perhaps a fellow councillor from another council?)
- 3) **Acknowledge yourself regularly:** Start by making a list of 50 things, big and small that you are proud of in your life, from whenever. Keep adding to it and include big and little things about being a councillor on the list - from having the courage to be a councillor, to how you've improved (however slightly) in managing the paperwork, to the relationship you have forged with a difficult character, to managing to restrict your coffee intake..... anything you have personally found a challenge and succeeded in getting somewhere with.
- 4) **Ask yourself the following two questions regularly:**
What's working well?
And do more of it!
What do I want to change?
List from most to least important and work on the top one or two.

(In answering these, consider both your council work and the *balance* of your family/personal/council life)

One last principle:

Relax and have fun!

You've got the position; you don't have to keep justifying that. Just do your best to give what you have to give and trust yourself. Your contribution will be valuable.

