

GOVERNMENT

The power of local knowledge

The new chief executive officer at the Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) is ready for a busy year and a lot of travelling.

Maree McPherson aims to visit as many Victorian councils as possible in the coming months and, as well as asking them about their concerns, she wants to know about the things they do well and help them share those successes with the whole local government sector.

A former regional manager with Anglicare Victoria and executive officer of the Gippsland Area Consultative Committee, McPherson believes the VLGA can expand its role of helping councils learn from each other.

"We expect to meet with mayors, CEOs, councillors and paid staff," she says. "We have been providing connections between councils for a long time and the annual tour is a way of promoting best practice. We hope to build up material on our website and we'll be open to

hearing suggestions from councils about other ways we can help the sector share information."

More than 15 years after it was formed to give voice to community and council concerns over forced amalgamations and councillor sackings during the Kennett era, McPherson says the VLGA has become a mature organisation with about 16 staff and a membership that includes community groups, individuals and 58 Victorian councils.

"We have a growing membership base and my focus will be on consolidation and supporting our current members.

That support includes training for mayors and councillors, advocacy and campaigns on social issues and forums to address topics of importance to people interested in grassroots democracy. The VLGA regularly campaigns on issues including affordable housing, responsible gambling,



On the road . . . new VLGA boss Maree McPherson. Photo: Luis Enrique Asculi

IT PAYS TO HELP

Voluntary involvement in community groups and campaigns can broaden the perspectives and knowledge you bring to your paid work and the causes you support.

Maree McPherson, who has a home in Gippsland, says her membership of Rotary, audit-committee work with an organisation for adults with intellectual disabilities called Noweung, and her membership of the advisory committee to the Gippsland Community Leadership Program, all help her professional life in the community sector.

"Having a career and a personal commitment to community has enhanced my understanding of my professional role and brought about some partnerships that might not otherwise have happened," she says.

accountability and compliance: "We ran our Essential Mayors Weekend in January and more than 30 mayors attended.

"There is a strong thirst for knowledge and strategy in the local government sector."

The association is taking part in an Australia-wide project to make 2010 the year of women in local government, supporting initiatives to increase the number of women elected as councillors and working at senior levels in the sector.

CAROLYN RANCE

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excellence and improving democracy. I believe that through our forums and other events we are able to pick up on community perspectives. I've had a long career in the community sector and regional planning, and the attraction of this job is that the VLGA is all about capacity building - improving people's ability to engage with the democratic process. It helps them understand how government works and brings forward information to keep them informed."

McPherson says the emphasis on education and networking helps councillors deal with the challenges of representing communities at a time of high demand for

women's participation in local government and climate change, and it increasingly works with other community organisations and peak bodies in and beyond the local government sector.

"I've arrived here at an interesting time, when the organisation has the opportunity to move to the next level . . . when I was thinking about applying for this position, it was brought home to me through a number of conversations what a positive reputation the VLGA has and how much people in councils value membership, the networks it offers and the social justice role it plays.

"Governance is about more than government - we are talking about