



## **Leading the Agenda Activating Community – Wrap Up**

On Thursday 11 April, the VLGA hosted a Q&A style panel discussion on 'Activating Community', moderated by Dr Susan Rennie, Mayor of Darebin City Council. This panel discussion focussed on meaningful and productive community engagement to achieve change. Panellists shared their different experiences in organising diverse groups to deliver long term positive outcomes which enhanced community health and wellbeing.

The panel was comprised of:

- **Louise Page** – President of the 'Save Westernport' campaign
- **Rose O'Leary** – Community Engagement Officer (Gambling), VLGA
- **Michele Purtle** – Advocacy & Communications, Whittlesea City Council

Below is a summary of the discussion. For the video recap, click [here](#). Thanks to Pitcher Partners for hosting this event.

### **Louise Page**

The nature of community campaigns and activism means that there will always be a learning curve for committees in understanding the technical knowledge and language used by the industry concerned. In the case of 'Save Westernport', it meant that the committee of laypeople needed to understand the complexities of the energy market and other technical considerations to do with natural gas and AGL's business operation.

The campaign was able to successfully utilise engagement methods such as rallies, public meetings and social media initiatives.

For a successful community campaign, goals need to be front of mind from the beginning. For Save Westernport, this was ensuring that the proposal went to state government so that an environmental effects statement was provided – that was achieved.

Although not a professional in politics or campaigns, Louise's background in hospitality and enterprise risk management gave her skills which equipped her to be an effective community activist.

'Save Westernport' is not just a short-term, single issue campaign, but one which will ensure the longevity of the community awareness and participation that have been fostered. The committee has aimed to make the campaign about the future of Westernport and protecting its environment.

### **Rose O'Leary**

In her role, Rose provides notification and support and facilitates participation in communities that are facing poker machine applications.

People are very passionate about opposing the negative impact that poker machines will have on their communities. The challenge is harnessing that anger and passion into effective action.

The successful campaign against the 2018 poker machine application in Officer harnessed the energy of the community, empowering residents to use their voices. Finding key activists and community leaders is crucial to provide community-specific knowledge and spread the workload.

The name of the campaign, 'Keep Officer Healthy' recognised that this pokies application was a health issue, keeping this at the forefront of residents' minds. It was also a catchy name that made the campaign easier to market!

### **Michele Purtle**

The 'Access Denied' campaign for the Mernda railway line and on/off ramps for the Hume Freeway at Epping was not a political campaign but was driven by dedicated community members and council to achieve a commitment from both state and federal governments to extend the railway line to Mernda. There was also a commitment made to freeway entry and exit ramps at Epping North.

From initially being told that the train extension was 20 years away, to having it built during the first term of government (completed in 2018), the success of this campaign would not have been possible without pressure from the community.

Community members like Darren Peters were able to empower and activate others. There were around 45,000 emails generated through this campaign, ultimately achieving \$700 million in additional state and federal funding for the City of Whittlesea.

The momentum in the community was recognised by the local newspaper, which provided 33 weeks of campaign branded articles for free. The community's next challenge is to get the rail line extended to Wollert.

### **Audience/ panel discussion – tips for activating community:**

**Use catchy slogans** – examples include: 'Access Denied', 'Save Westernport', 'Catch up', 'Keep Officer Healthy'. These make your campaign more accessible and memorable.

**Should elected representatives be afraid of activating community?** The short answer is no. Dr Susan Rennie [articulates this best](#).

### **Councils and community should be a partnership.**

Councillors quite frequently agree with their community members but do not always take action. **Councillors should see community activation as a positive** – giving them a mandate and allowing them to take a stand on difficult issues.

**A relatively small group of people** who are united, whether it be physically, on paper or in their messaging, putting pressure on elected representatives **can make a huge difference**.

**How do you bring the community together when there are differences of opinion?** Use messaging that unites rather than alienates. Don't get aggressive, don't fight with those in disagreement – listen to them and understand their point of view. This helps you to be a better advocate.

Community members get angry **when they feel that they're not being listened to**. **Engagement with community on a meaningful level** immediately fosters good will.

It's important to **bring community with you** – being able to communicate effectively with the community the challenges that may eventuate, especially with regard to process and competing interests: it's not that we haven't heard you or aren't with you.

**Young people are often discounted when it comes to community activism** or seen in a tokenistic way, to the detriment of those campaigns. Young people can be incredibly fearless when it comes to campaigns and campaigning methods. Social media is also dismissed often as superficial, but it really does start conversations and campaigns.

We shouldn't coopt young people into our campaigns or advocacy agendas but bring them with us. 'Youth led advocacy' can match issues from more senior council campaigns. Ask "What are they interested in and how does that fit?"