

A Catalyst for Regeneration

The town of Bingara lies within the Shire of Gwydir in North Western New South Wales.

It faces problems similar to other parts of rural Australia: declining population with resultant lack of employment opportunities; withdrawal of services to provincial and even metropolitan cities; and a difficult future maintaining its viability.

The General Manager of the Shire, Max Eastcott, recognised that if something was not done to arrest these trends, the future looked grim indeed.

He has said that

local government has a role to exercise community leadership and engage in long-term strategic planning on behalf of the community, which takes into account social justice principles of equity, access, participation and rights (as per the Local Government Act 1993).

He understood the steps towards regeneration were in the development of training and employment opportunities. He formed the Gwydir Learning Region overseen by an advisory committee comprising key educational, business and community partners, saying that

from the point of view of local government, the Gwydir Learning Region demonstrates the importance and value of Council involvement in new partnerships and Council involvement with the social infrastructure of rural and remote communities, where those communities want to build social capital and create their own positive options for the future.

In the heart of the town was the Roxy theatre, built in the heyday of the town's growth and accommodating around 400 people, but now run down and disused. With use of heritage money and local resources, the Theatre was restored in a way that allowed multipurpose use: theatre productions; film evenings; social occasions; receptions; musical evenings and so on. It became a focus for gatherings of people from the surrounding districts.

Within the theatre, the café was also restored and established to serve the township generating additional business and employment.

Additional local and government resources were sought to build a training commercial kitchen adjoining the theatre, setting up training facilities for hospitality students. Local government and businesses provided the trainees. Thus it not only provided training for such students but in addition it could be used for catering purposes for the various functions held in the theatre.

The Gwydir Learning Region is a leading member of a Australian learning community network (a support network around Australia of local governments and other organisations engaged in this work). Learning communities are place-based community-led initiatives that engage organizations, businesses, government, and individuals in building social and economic initiatives and using learning to regenerate and build sustainable communities in the face of increasing change faced by the world today.

The redevelopment of the Roxy Theatre is only one of the various strategies undertaken by the Shire of Gwydir to combat the loss of social and economic opportunities, but it illustrates clearly the many of the principles underpinning a learning community.

- The need for local “drivers” or catalysts
- The learning community concept is concerned more about the process that leads to a variety of learning possibilities rather than course provision itself
- The initiation of a governing community committee facilitating in a neutral way, the local decision making, the creation of partnerships, and community input
- The promotion of social inclusiveness with the use of the Roxy Theatre as a community hub
- The generation of the economic benefits of training and employment giving local people opportunities within the locality rather than leaving the district in search of such prospects.
- The bringing together of resources through partnerships to address the problems.

Around Australia there are other examples. A small community, Mt Evelyn, on the outskirts of Melbourne uses a planning day to involve the whole community. Another suburb in Melbourne, the City of Hume, uses a two level governing committee, along with substantial local resources to plan and organise.

The Gwydir Learning Region and the Hume Global Learning Village were the subject of a research project under the auspices of the Australia Centre of Excellence for Local Government with PASCAL Associate, Leone Wheeler as one of the co-authors. The project explores in more depth how such learning partnerships can help improve social outcomes, build community capacity and strengthen community governance. The Learning Community Framework is a practical resource which can be used to guide the development of a community learning plan.

Here are links to the full [report](#) and [framework](#), and for convenience of subscribers both documents are attached.

For further information on the Australian Learning Communities Network, contact the Hon. CEO, Jim Saleeba at alcn@tpg.com.au or on 02 6021 5690

