

Lessons from engaging a behemoth- an action learning approach to community engagement in local government

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Introduction:

Engaging the behemoth is a case study of policy development and engagement activities in the eighteen months following amalgamation at the Sunshine Coast Regional Council. (SCRC). It attempts not only to tell the story honestly, albeit from the perspective of the two staff who were most active in the development of the policy, but also to draw some lessons from this history relevant to engagement practitioners and to postulate on how community engagement itself will help shape the future of the Sunshine Coast Region.

This story, like many epics, has multiple beginnings and commences in the three former local government shires of Maroochy Noosa, Caloundra in South East Queensland.

Like all local governments, these three Councils engaged with their citizens in making decisions that impacted on the shape of the landscape, the built form, community infrastructure and people's health and wellbeing. Some decisions were made autocratically in back rooms with no consultation, others involved fierce community debate, while some enjoyed remarkable consensus and a few overturned the strongly held positions and dogma of previous generations.

The Sunshine Coast region is a recent construct, with a former Queensland Premier, Mike Ahern, the then State member for Caloundra and a group of local businessmen and property developers coining the phrase in the 1980s in an attempt to cash in on the commercial success of the Gold Coast. Up until then the area of coast from Caloundra to Noosa Heads had no singular identity rather it was defined by the particular characteristics of the townships which dot both the coast and the hinterland. By and large this situation still remains today with the region being a community of communities each with their strong and unique identity and voice.

The Sunshine Coast Regional Council was created in March 2008 following a wide ranging review of Queensland Local Governments undertaken by the Beattie Governments. The amalgamation of the Caloundra, Maroochy and Noosa Councils was strongly opposed by the residents of Noosa Shire – the smallest of the three councils by approximately 93% of residents - who when consulted on the proposed amalgamation said NO as loudly and for as long as they could. Approximately 10 000 people marched up George St to express their protest but it was to no avail and the end the forces of big business, academia and the State Government combined to override the wishes of the people and a behemoth was born.

The new Sunshine Coast Regional Council covers an area of 3127 square km, it has over 200 km of coastline, over 4,000 km of roads, nearly 800 km of bikeways and over 13,000 hectares of parks and bushland. So in many ways it is a great green and blue behemoth with veins of black asphalt. The current population is estimated at 313,000 people a total that is expected to grow to between 430,000 and 520,000 people by 2026.

So why did so many Noosa residents march against amalgamation and so few people in the larger Caloundra and Maroochy Councils even care. One school of thought is that Caloundra and Maroochy had grown so intertwined in terms of their borders and their identities that amalgamation was inevitable even sensible. Another thesis however is that one of the main reasons that Noosa residents did not want to amalgamate is that they had a long history of working with and being engaged by their local Council.

Noosa's BBQ diplomacy

Community engagement and transparency were two of the cornerstones of the way in which the Noosa Council did business. The former CEO, Bruce Davidson, had a word for it BBQ diplomacy. In return for a glass of wine, and a bite to eat Council would engage the community on a raft of issues and in a variety of different ways. As a practice community engagement in Noosa grew from a twelve month experiment to engage the community in the development of a new Council planning scheme in the late 1990s. A scheme which with significant community support introduced the concept of a population cap and helped consolidate the Noosa brand and values.

At a formal level by 2007 the Noosa Council had instituted a number of sector boards which discussed and made plans for the social, environmental, economic and cultural development of the shire. Their influence waxed and waned and at times they were consumed by internal politics, but their voices were listened to and they were influential in ensuring a number of progressive and far reaching policies and programs were implemented. The concept of development within the Shire being restricted to a sustainable carrying capacity, the tourism levy, the creation of the J youth and community centre, and the nomination of Noosa Shire as a UNESCO Biosphere reserve can all be attributed in whole or in part to the influence of the Sector Boards.

As well as the Sector Boards there were a number of formal and informal working groups that came together on a project basis to assist Council with its planning and program implementation, these included a rating reference group, a transport working group, SHINE, a group which over one week end built 3 houses for victims of domestic violence. There were also a Friends of the Botanic Gardens and a Friends of the Art Gallery group, in short the residents of the Shire were involved with Council across the spectrum of the Council's activities. Community engagement was run by the CEO from his office, all of the Councillors were involved to varying degrees. Importantly community engagement was resourced for success and embraced by the Mayor. It was also constantly evolving for example a year before amalgamation Council instituted a community reference panel to gauge the feelings of the average resident. Over 1000 people signed up.

Community engagement in Noosa was based on two key principles. These being:-

1. the community had a key role in debating and helping to set Council's strategic directions,
2. by working in partnership with the community Council could deliver an enhanced range of services.

Caloundra City's policy based approach

If Noosa could be characterized as having an organic approach to community engagement – experimenting and learning as it went, Caloundra City's approach was much more policy driven. They used their community involvement policy to generate a consistent, organisation wide approach to working with the community.

Caloundra City's consultation policy held that everyone within the organization, from Councillors to Managers and Leading Hands, was responsible for their engagement with the community. The policy was developed by the Community and Lifestyle branch who had responsibility more broadly for the development of social policy and as a group were also responsible for the community engagement policy's implementation.

To assist implement the policy the Branch employed a Community Consultation Officer whose role was primarily to provide training and development across Council to enhance the skill level of Council's employees and also to provide advice to various departments on major projects which had significant community involvement. In 2007/08 the Branch also developed a Community Consultation toolkit. This toolkit was subsequently condensed and modified for use in the new SCRC .

Caloundra City's engagement policy was dynamic and evolved through multiple iterations. The first policy was based on global research and consultation with local governments around Queensland and Australia. In the second iteration the policy embraced the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum as the bases for engagement.

Like Noosa, Caloundra had a number of formal advisory committees with membership appointed by Council, in Caloundra's case these advisory committees were focused on environmental, economic and social issues reflecting the City's triple bottom line approach to governance.

Within this formal policy structure the Mayor Don Aldous retained his right to engage with the community and had established a Caloundra Futures Forum to provide him with advice. This committee gave business a seat at the table in return for a fee which was used to undertake projects and research. This committee was quite controversial with many members of the community wary of what they saw as businesses buying influence however Mayor Aldous was a staunch defender of this approach citing examples from

around Australia such as the Committee of Melbourne, where businessmen worked with Council to promote and develop their local government area.

Maroochy Shire & public participation

The Maroochy Shire Council's public participation program (MPPP) was developed in 2003 at the request of the then CEO Kelvin Spiller. The main purpose of this program was to provide opportunities for residents who were affected by, or had a demonstrated interest in, a pending Council decision to become involved in that decision. While essentially responding to community demand to have a say the MPPP also recognised that public participation could enhance the resulting decision, planning or project.

Two key sources were used to develop the MPPP. The first of these was the International Association of Public Participation whose belief that by reframing community consultation into public participation Government's can improve their decision making provided the philosophical underpinning of the MPP program along with an extensive range of tools and helpful hints for practice. The second source was the City of Vancouver whose six step approach provided the inspiration to develop an integrated program that links with the Corporate Plan and project management processes as well as key technologies involved in determining direction (principles) and objectives for all public participation activities.

The MPPP was made up of a policy, strategy, manual and toolkit, intranet website which included a learning centre, software register and champions who were used to promote and support the program. The MPPP Manual was a step-by-step "how to" guide for staff to use when preparing for a public participation. The manual consists of a large array of tools, worksheets and a management authorisation process that guide our staff through the PP framework.

The MPPP Policy provided a high level overview of the best practise public participation standards. These standards include guiding principles & ethics, which all projects were to take into consideration if there was a need to undertake public participation. Overall the Maroochy Shire Council's public participation program complimented and aligned to the IAP2 framework, values, ethics and principles.

All in all the MPPP provided an excellent theoretical framework for community engagement in the shire, but there was a serious question mark about Council's political commitment to the process which was no where more profoundly expressed than in its failure to endorse the ground breaking piece of work that was the Maroochy 2025 plan. A two year, multi faceted, engagement activity that stumbled at the last hurdle and failed to gain Council endorsement.

The three different Council's approaches to engagement mirrored their working and political cultures. All of these elements were thrown into the melting pot as a result of the Local Government Reform Process.

Local Government Reforms as an opportunity

Despite its disruption and sweeping away of history the 2007/2008 Queensland local government reform process which resulted in Council amalgamations and a new Local Government Act has provided a unique set of opportunities to progress the community engagement agenda in Queensland. To understand these opportunities it is necessary to understand some of the historical background to the state Government's reforms.

In May 2007, the then Department of Local Government established a performance evaluation and reporting project based on key recommendations from the Local Government Reform Commission. This Commission was tasked with the identification of a wide range of local government reforms and was the body responsible for recommending the new local government boundaries to the State Government.

The performance evaluation and reporting project sought to implement the results from the Reform Commission and the *National Frameworks for Sustainability*, as part of the Queensland Government's attempts to improve the ongoing sustainability of local governments throughout Australia.

The *National Frameworks for Sustainability* promotes three main ideas;

1. Long term asset management and reporting,
2. Financial management; and
3. Integrated planning.

The outcomes from the performance evaluation and reporting project have been largely incorporated into the new Local Government Act 2008 which will have the effect according to the newly re-structured Queensland Department of Infrastructure & Planning (DIP) of ensuring that Councils across Queensland '*increase (their) standards of planning and forecasting in order to manage the expected growth and adequately deal with the commitments inherent in the current infrastructure*'.

Specifically, in the new Act there is an emphasis on performance evaluation and reporting. As a result of the new Act DIP requires Council's to '*assure the Department that the key planning elements are in place, that is, that the council has asset management plans and long term strategies and forecasts, long term financial models, corporate plans and community plans and budgets that address minimum requirements*'. This assurance will take place in the form of annual returns that link to the desired outcomes in the National Frameworks. Thus, by combining the National Frameworks together with the performance evaluation and reporting project in the new Act, the Department of Infrastructure and Planning has identified five core evaluation themes for innovation and monitoring. These areas are:

- ▶ Asset management
- ▶ Financial management
- ▶ Financial planning and reporting

- ▶ Governance; and
- ▶ Community engagement

The inclusion of a requirement for long term community plans into the new Act 2008 and a DIP requirement for local governments to have a community engagement policy and report annually on their engagement activities has the potential to enhance democratic representation, aid social inclusion and ensure that local governments in Queensland are held accountable for the creation of preferred community futures.

No small task and a worthy agenda. It is a pity that the forced amalgamations that took place in Queensland in 2008 paid such scant regard to the wishes of many communities and leave a legacy of distrust and disempowerment.

Community Engagement in the new Sunshine Coast Regional Council

A new beginning

The 2008 Queensland Local Government elections saw Cr Bob Abbot previously the Mayor Of Noosa, elected Mayor of the Sunshine Coast. 12 other Councillors representing particular geographic areas or divisions were also elected. These Councillors do not have party affiliations and are probably best described as community minded independents. All but two of them were councillors in one or other of the previous three councils. However none of them have had experience working in a council as large as the new Sunshine Coast Regional Council and it is my observation that most of the Councillors have felt a loss of intimacy and connection with their constituents in this move from local to regional government.

As is to be expected, the new Council has struggled to combine not only three organisational but three political cultures as well and this struggle 'to find a best new way' is clearly demonstrated in the organisation's evolving approach to community engagement.

Mayor Bob as part of his electoral platform was keen to implement a Noosa style sector board approach to community engagement but what had worked so successfully in a much smaller Council was difficult to translate into the much larger regional context with multiple local nuances and differences. There were challenges about how to constitute the sector board and how the board's membership might successfully represent the various different communities on the coast and hinterland. There were also resourcing challenges as the Sector Board model of engagement is both expensive in terms of dollars and resource hungry in terms of staff time.

While prepared to consider the Sector Board approach some other Councillors were interested in establishing local boards to provide them with advice from their Divisions which now comprise approximately 25 000 people per division while others wanted to

agree a broad framework and holistic policy to guide Council's overall engagement activities.

In the meantime the day to day business of Council went on with Councillors and staff having to work with and respond to the community immediately the new Council opened for business on the 16th March 2008.

Initial Policy Discussions

The SCRC councillors have a genuine commitment to engage and consult with their communities and within the first two months of the life of the new Council, the Governance Department was asked to present some options for a community engagement framework to councillors for their consideration. To this end the Department undertook:-

- Interviews with Councillors
- Interviews with State & Local Government engagement units
- Discussions with Twyford Consulting (Max Hardy & Vivien Twyford)
- Discussions with Australasian President IAP2
- A literature review and review of IAP2 recommended practice.

Subsequent to undertaking this research a presentation was made to Councillors which asked the following key questions

- How do we develop a pro-active engagement culture in the SCRC?
- What are our communities' expectations & interests?
- Do we want an activist or a disengaged community?
- How do we make our engagement activities future oriented?
- Where on the IAP2 spectrum should Council focus?

The presentation did not hit the mark - perhaps it was too theoretical, perhaps it lacked a clarity of purpose, perhaps it exposed the different understandings of Councillors, but the overall feeling of the Councillors was don't over complicate the issue with theory and philosophical mumbo jumbo just get out there and find out what our community thinks.

This was an unfortunate, but given the organisation was in an early storming phase a highly predictable, reaction. It however left the Governance Department with a considerable challenge because without an agreed engagement framework people would continue to do what they had always done or worse still do nothing and the new approach would become increasingly fractured.

However the presentation to Councillors had given the Department one mandate which was simply to just do it. So the next step in the journey of the SCRC community engagement journey was to undertake a major community engagement project. Without a clearly defined engagement philosophy, or a shared understanding of engagement practice, it was a major risk but one that we clearly had no choice but to take.

Developing the Corporate Plan

One of the first significant strategic tasks for the new Council was to develop its corporate plan. At a retreat in July 2008 involving councillors and senior staff, Council decided on a draft vision and seven key themes for that plan. As importantly it also decided that it wanted to test this vision and these themes with the community to ensure that there was community support for Council's proposed direction. This engagement with the community was to be by way of a community conference with the conference being seen as important both in terms of process and also symbolically in that the conference represented Council's commitment to work with and for the community.

The community conference was the Sunshine Coast's mini 2020 summit. It took place in November 2008 and was a highly controlled engagement activity. There was a call for community nominations and 70 delegates were selected to represent a broad spectrum of community interest, demography and geography.

The conference was facilitated by Professor John Martin, who had also facilitated the councillors corporate plan retreat. It ran for one and a half days and was deliberately held in a non council, non coastal venue – the Big Pineapple (which for those of you who don't know it is a Queensland tourism icon). The first session looked at the history of the coast and from there discussions moved to Council's proposed vision for the future. The discussions were lively and at the end of the conference a number of recommendations were made to Council about changing the proposed vision and adding a new theme that of managing growth to the Council's plan.

Crucially all of the conferences recommendations were accepted by Council and have found their way into the final corporate plan document which was endorsed by Council in May 2009. The success of the community conference has been crucial to progressing the community engagement agenda in the SCRC. It was a new technique and one which none of the previous council's had used. It garnered positive results and enhanced the outcome and vitally it gave the community through its representatives a say in the future of the region.

An action learning approach

Building on the success of the Community Conference and the need for the new Council to commence working on a number of the urgent priorities identified in the corporate plan, Council has subsequently established a number of taskforces and working groups to provide advice and community input on a range of major issues and projects from affordable housing, waste management, community transport and sustainability. While on the ground, councillors were consulting their local communities on a range of issues and staff were also active in this arena. The result was potential chaos with no one knowing really knowing what was happening and no quality control or corporate consistency.

Given the organisation's desire to get on with the job, its state of flux, the difficulties that had been encountered in reaching a philosophical consensus on community engagement, the success of the Community Conference, and the emerging plethora of engagement activity the Governance Department decided to develop a community engagement framework for the new Council based on the experiential action learning cycle of "action --> review --> planning --> action.

This action learning approach has become the cornerstone of both our community engagement policy development, our engagement activities and the roll out of training and development programs for staff.

This approach is also slowly gaining the support of councillors and staff because they can see that our policies and procedures are based in the real world and are evolving day to day as we simultaneously engage with our community, establish a policy framework and develop engagement tools such as the community engagement toolkit for use in day to day operations.

Developing a Community Engagement Policy through internal dialogue

In retrospect one of the most interesting discussions that took place in developing the Sunshine Coast Regional Council's community engagement policy, (apart from did we really need a policy at all!) was how much to involve the community in the development of the policy itself.

Ultimately given our belief that community engagement is a tool to help improve Council decision making and enhance community involvement rather than an end in itself, the policy was developed primarily through a process of internal dialogue. This decision was made not by the Councillors but by the Council Officers charged with developing the policy.

The policy development process built on the previous research and then brought together a number of key staff from each of the three previous Council's in a series of discussions and debates. From these meetings a discussion paper was developed, which was then circulated for further comments. An amended paper was then reviewed and critiqued by councillors in one of their three weekly discussion forums designed specifically to provide feedback on key policy initiatives.

Following that forum a policy was drafted which was extensively reviewed by the Executive leadership team prior to being put forward to Council for their formal comment and approval.

This process commenced after the community conference and took approximately eight months. It has resulted in a broad consensus by both councillors and senior staff that the policy represents a positive step forward and provides a framework for future engagement activities. However the policy process was not without its challenges there

was significant debate about the definition of engagement, the outcomes sought and how we might use the new technologies and even in the final Council debate, one of the senior councillors challenged whether or not we should reference the IAP2 spectrum within the policy because she believed that we as a Council were very unlikely to empower the community and therefore any reference to empowerment was potentially misleading. After some debate the reference to the Spectrum was retained in a modified form after other Councillors championed community empowerment as something the SCRC should aspire to in certain circumstances.

The Councillors' debate was recorded in the local press, but interestingly since the policy was passed in early August 2009, we have had only one person from the community question why we did not engage more widely in developing this important procedure. Engagement fatigue perhaps!

Definition

There are many definitions for community engagement, one of the best known of such definitions defines engagement in process terms as:-

“any process that involves the community in problem solving or decision making and uses community input to make better decisions”

In our Community Engagement policy the Sunshine Coast Regional Council sees engagement not so much as a process but as a dialogue defining community engagement as:

an ongoing dialogue with our community to identify civic issues and opportunities, assist with planning and inform decision making.

There was considerable discussion and debate around this definition. This is not surprising because language is not neutral, it shapes and colonises meaning. A community consultation policy is quite different in its intent than a community engagement policy. In trying to reach our definition of engagement some people argued that it was too passive in that it implied the community was always on the receiving end and commenting upon Council initiatives. Others argued that the word dialogue was inherently active implying two way communication. Ultimately the impasse was resolved by adding a policy outcome which seeks to elevate Council's relationship with the community to one of partnership and by linking community engagement to the achievement of Council's vision of becoming Australia's most sustainable region. The final wording of the policy outcome is:

Communities partnering with Council to improve services and create a sustainable region.

A principles based approach

Having finalized the definition and the policy outcome there was much less argument on the need for a principles based approach to SCRC's community engagement practice. These principles build upon the concept of engagement as a dialogue and a means to develop a partnership with the community.

Our principles based approach has the benefit of providing consistency, cohesion and will also facilitate the alignment of Council's performance reporting requirements under the new Queensland Local Government Act (2008). Each principle seeks to clarify the purpose of why Council engages with the community and guide how that engagement occurs.

Our community engagement principles are:-

- ▶ **timeliness:** council will engage with its community in ways that are timely, open to all, easily understood and not overly bureaucratic or resource intensive.
- ▶ **information and feedback:** the community has the right to be well informed on issues and receive feedback from council on how its input has been used to inform council decisions.
- ▶ **mutual respect:** council's goal is one of inclusive involvement. All voices matter, all opinions are valued and considered.
- ▶ **action learning:** council is committed to the development of innovative engagement approaches, learning from each engagement experience, and using such learning to improve our approaches to engagement.
- ▶ **foresight:** council engages with its community not only to learn about and respond to present needs, but also to gain a better understanding of our communities' perspective on emerging issues that may affect our preferred future.

Going forward

Now that the policy has been endorsed there are a number of challenges facing the Council.

The first is how to engage the community in developing both a new Planning Scheme and a new Community Plan. Developing both of these strategic documents will be a challenge to Council because of the sheer scale of the task and the ambitious timeframes which have been set to complete the work.

The second and perhaps even greater challenge is now to garner the learnings from the various engagements which Council is currently undertaking. As a result of the policy being endorsed a cross departmental team has been established to monitoring and

reporting on the implementation of the policy. This team is coordinated by the Project Director Partnerships and Engagement and has representatives from each Department on it. The group which consists of many of the people involved in developing the Discussion Paper has met once earlier this month to discuss how it will undertake its brief. It will continue to meet quarterly or as required. As well as this cross departmental team, a network of practitioners is being formed with over twenty Council staff from all geographic zones in the newly formed SCRC meeting regularly to discuss what went right and what went wrong and new and better ways of engaging. This network is potentially the key to the success of our proposed action learning approach.

The third challenge is how to roll out a range of community engagement training programs for staff and Councillors given that the number of staff employed by Council is over 2 800. Here again the policy has proved to be important. It talks about developing a culture of engagement, endorses the Community Engagement Toolkit and states that Council will provide community engagement training for both Councillors and staff.

The fourth is how to develop performance indicators to know how we are performing one key measure is of course what the community tells us but we are currently researching best practice indicators from around Australia and across the globe.

The final challenge is how to find innovative new ways to engage with our communities as we engage in the complex process of developing our region. One of our very real challenges is now to ensure that we do not burn out our community as we continue this long and interesting journey.

The answer to this the problem of burnout is probably best expressed by the Manager of Learning Communities who stated in a recent discussion about the community plan:

we'll have achieved our community engagement policy outcomes when we no longer have to speak about how what engagement activities we will undertake with the communities on any given topic but we just work with them.

Echoes of BBQ diplomacy?

Lessons from engaging the behemoth – focus on the future

The amalgamated Council is a paradoxical beast it is clumsy, uncertain and lumbering, however its citizenry have very little tolerance for the newborn. They have been fed a stream of State Government propaganda and spin that says the new local government will be more efficient and more responsive. The challenge for councillors and management in the new Council is how to move forward during a time when many staff are struggling to come to terms with a new reality, having had to move location, or now having less authority or maybe their team has expanded more than threefold.

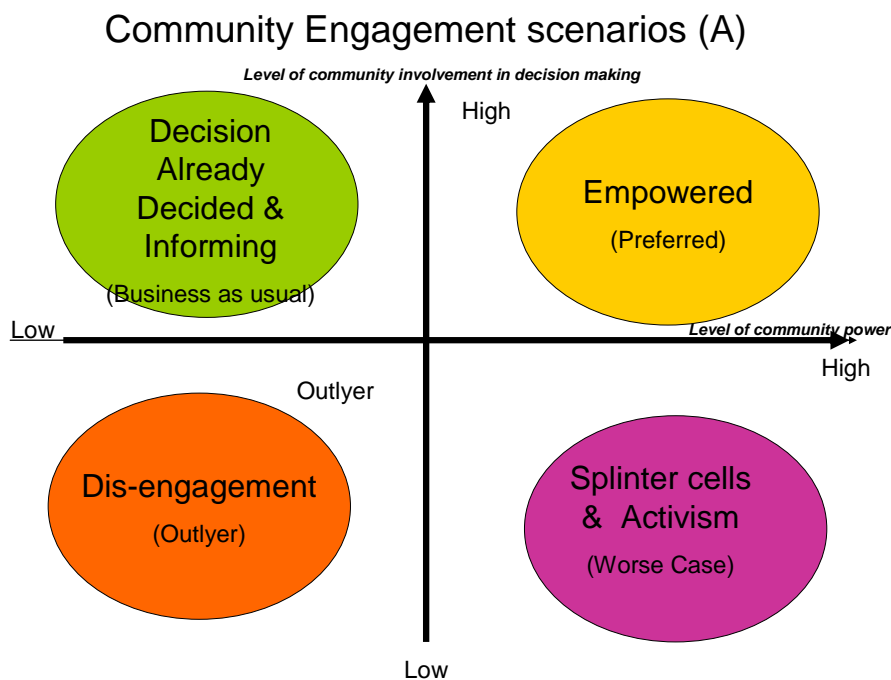
Community engagement offers a key to moving beyond the amalgamation blues because in entering a meaningful dialogue with the community staff can move beyond the daily

tedium of non functioning systems and endless discussion on populating the structure back to the reason why most of them joined local government in the first place which is quite simply to make our communities better places in which to live.

However in moving forward we also need to acknowledge the past and accept that there are still many different levels of understanding within the council and the broader community about what community engagement means, how and when it is undertaken, and who is responsible for its delivery. This is not just the dead weight of engagements past but also the lifeblood of future engagements.

In being future focused we also need to recognise that a number of different scenarios beckon depending on the actions and decisions we take now. Potentially there are at least four possible outcomes for the SCRC that could be the outcome of our engagement activities. These are:

1. Information/business as usual
2. Dis-engagement
3. Active communities who see Council as a bureaucratic obstacle
4. Empowered communities working in partnership with Council



Our hope is that the policy framework, the engagement training and the networks we are developing will help us move from a passive information as usual engagement culture to one where there is exciting dialogue and partnership possibly even empowerment. But as we contemplate the future it is worth pondering on the fifth principle in the SCRC's engagement policy, one which was skipped over lightly before and that is the principle of foresight.

Pondering the future, the big question is not so much where we will end up but rather what are the tools we need to develop to assist our communities deal with the big issues of climate change, an ageing population, ever increasing costs of health care? And while the question is somewhat rhetorical in that many of these tools have not yet been invented it is worth reflecting on the words of international futurist Soheil Inayatullah an academic currently based at the Sunshine Coast University who states:

'Futures thinking can simply be about training, helping individuals and organizations with new competencies and new skills. At a deeper level, futures thinking can help create more effective strategy. By understanding the past, present and future, organizations can become far more innovative. At a deeper level, futures thinking can create capacity. It is not so much predicting correctly or getting the right strategy, that is, using the right tools, but about enhancing our confidence to create futures that we desire. Futures methods thus decolonize the world we think we may want—they challenge our basic concepts. They deconstruct. Enhancing capacity empowers individuals—this liberates and is scary for many as the safety of having others make decisions for one is taken away'.(Inayatullah, 2003)

Our next challenge at the Sunshine Coast is to ensure that our engagement activities are future focused and to re-frame the way we think about community engagement and the assumptions we hold as community engagement practitioners to ensure we create resilient communities who can grasp opportunities and solve issues as they occur so together we can create our vision of becoming a sustainable region.

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