

Women in Local Government – Making a Difference in Your Local Community

Date: Thursday 16 September,

Time: 6pm – 8pm

Address: Campsie RSL Sub-Branch Club, 25 Anglo Rd, Campsie

Sponsored by Canterbury City Council

I wish to acknowledge the Traditional Owners, the Bediagal people, on whose land we meet.

The 2010 Year of Women in Local Government, is an initiative to improve the participation of women in Local Government, leadership and management. Local Government is one of the most important levels of Government and as a Council we work hard on the ground to be directly involved with the Community, and, to listen to and serve the needs of our residents and local businesses.

We deliver many of the services that make a Community - from libraries to environmental initiatives, children's services, aquatic centres, parks, town centres, footpaths, roadworks and supporting our Community with facilities and events like this one tonight.

A career in Local Government can be one of the most rewarding career paths, yet less than a third of Councillors are women; 20 per cent of Senior Managers are women; and only seven per cent of Chief Executive Officers are women.

Building a rewarding career in Local Government can help you make a difference in your Local Community and tonight we'll provide some insight into a possible career path for you.

Before I stood for Local Government I was a primary school teacher and active in union politics. I was my school's Federation Representative, my Association's president and representative on Teachers Federation's Council. I also served as a Relief Officer in the Federation. So I had some familiarity with politics and associated organizations and processes.

However, I only became involved in a political party after I attended a meeting with local politicians before a federal election. It was organized by the Teachers Federation and I was quite vocal in my questioning of candidates on Public Education issues. As a result I was asked to join an Education Policy Group and through that involvement decided the Greens were the party I needed to join. And as they say, 'the rest is history'.

When I moved into the Canterbury area I joined my local group and agreed to be on the Local Government ticket in 2004 if I could be guaranteed I would not be elected. I was still not sure I wanted to be number one in 2008 but after much debate agreed. It is a

decision I have not regretted. Entering Local Government has been one of the highlights of my life so far.

Being involved in politics means being involved with Community. I enjoy talking and relating to people. I like assisting in finding solutions to my Community's issues whether it is a bus seat for the elderly, fixing up a footpath, assisting with a road closure for a Xmas party, getting bike signage or extra bins in the parks. There are also the bigger issues like planning our Town Centres, Ewen Park, Riverwood Wetlands and Wolli Creek. There is the setting up of the Environment and Sustainability Committee and starting Community Gardens, also trying to foster greater transparency in government and greener attitudes.

Working in the Canterbury Community means working with many different types of people. I am a member of both the Hurlstone Park and Earlwood Chambers of Commerce; the Disability Committee; the Aboriginal Advisory Group (which I had joined prior to becoming a Councillor); Youth Committee; Multicultural Committee; Economic Development Committee; Cooks River Association and Mudcrabs (again member prior to my election); the Greenway Project; Environment and Sustainability Committee; Traffic Committee. There are also meetings with groups outside Canterbury which means you can have an impact beyond the local area.

Over the last couple of years I have, as the only Green on Council, been asked to look into issues all over Canterbury, not just in my Ward. I have enjoyed these excursions. They have involved me in groups that I might not otherwise have met. For instance, I have been to a few of the Muslim Women's Association events in Lakemba, a mosque in Kingsgrove and recently I visited the Riverwood Neighbourhood Centre to learn about all the wonderful support services they offer.

I think this gives a taste of some of the different types of activities and issues you can become involved with when a Local Government Councillor. You can be as active as you wish. Not every Councillor gets as involved as I have. Being retired, I have the wonderful opportunity to get really involved in the Community. I have also had the opportunity to participate in a number of Conferences over the last two years. There have been Conferences on the Environment, the Annual Local Government Association Conferences in Broken Hill, Tamworth and this year Albury to name a few. Also, I have attended in-services on topics like finance, Development Applications and planning to help me get up to speed on how Councils work. These conferences are meaning my knowledge is expanding into a wide number of areas, great for reducing any chances of my brain deteriorating in retirement. Seriously, it is exciting and interesting to have a greater depth of understanding on some of the most important topics of the day, like Climate Change and what are the changes we need to make within our Community, to issues that are vital to Local Government as to what decisions need to be made in terms of future directions. Then there are the local forums that Council puts on like Mental Health Week and the Multicultural Planning Forum that put you in contact with the Community and its issues in an informative way and can produce positive new initiatives.

Another aspect that I have really enjoyed is the people I work with. I have found all the people, from my Councillor colleagues to the staff in Council helpful and patient. Now that does not mean that I never get a hard time. Of course I do! Sometimes they do not support my motions, even in amended form and they can be highly critical at those times. However, it is important not to take it personally. It is all part of the political process. I am still learning how to give as good as I am given. Now, what I mean by this is that I am learning how to argue my point of view so that I convince others on why they should vote my way.

However, a lot of what can be achieved is not done at Council meetings; it is done through discussion outside meetings. I work with the Directors on resident and business groups' issues whenever I can. They are the ones who know what is possible on many of the practical issues that residents and Community groups have.

I canvas colleagues to see what would be an acceptable motion. Being The Lone Green, I cannot assume I will always have someone to second a motion, so I need to talk about what I am putting forward with colleagues. In fact, I think that that has its positive aspects. On the floor of Council can be a difficult place to explain all the background to the reasons you think an issue should go forward and to have the time to get appropriate amendments thought through. Discussion with others before the day about your proposals is much more likely to produce consensus.

Having other women to work with is vital! I enjoy the repartee with the males I work with, but connecting with a female Council staffer or my fellow Councillor is different. I was not really conscious of this until I began this speech. One young Council officer helped me clarify this when she told me that when she was even younger (everyone looks young to me these days), she garnered strength seeing women Councillors in the room when giving a report, even though they were asking just as demanding questions of her. Women often offer unspoken support that other women gain sustenance from. Sometimes I have been given a hug or smile just when needed, indeed, even when not needed that warmth has been just as validating. We talk about things women talk about, general chit chat that builds connections that go beyond the job. I do not think we women just give this support to women. I think we give it to everyone. However, I am recognizing its importance for helping women getting involved in Local Government.

On a personal level I believe I have developed greater confidence in my skills and abilities to communicate, elucidate and persuade. I have developed diplomacy skills no one in my circle of family and friends could have predicted I would ever have. I have learnt that I can hear both sides of a discussion and negotiate a positive and acceptable 'to both sides' solution. I am much more assertive and confident in getting my ideas heard. I have lots of imaginative suggestions for a variety of situations. Another pleasant discovery was how much respect I have for our Council and all involved. Again, I do not agree with everyone all the time, but I believe everyone involved has the Community's interest at heart.

If you enjoy people, have a passion to improve our lives and the environment then get involved in Local Government as a Councillor, Community Activist, or as member of one of the many committees Council supports.

Being involved in Local Government just isn't about obtaining employment and building a career in Local Government. It is also about becoming more aware of what is happening in our City, neighbourhood and Community and taking part.

I hope that my experiences encourage you to get involved in Local Government. It is a richly rewarding experience, one that brings you very close to the people you serve.