

## When Ronnie met Sydney

*The National Economic Development Conference drew 230 economic development practitioners from Australia and beyond to Darling Harbour, Sydney. Grant Meyer provides some colourful impressions of the event.*

**By Grant Meyer**

Hosted by Economic Development Australia (EDA), and organised by Hallmark Conferences and Events', the National Economic Development Conference was an outstanding forum for shared learning, professional development and networking.

Fine connoisseurs of conferences suspect that the real deal' requires international speakers. Why? Because they add colour and movement into what would otherwise be a home brand' product. Two flew in from across the waters for the Sydney event - the Chairman of the International Economic Development Council (IEDC), Mr Ronnie Bryant, and Ann Verboeket, Director of the Economic Development Association of New Zealand' (EDANZ).

Ronnie Bryant's presence was a highly significant show of support for EDA from the influential IEDC (US based with more than 4,500 members worldwide) with more collaboration set to follow. An MOU between the two organisations was signed at conference.

Insightful, relaxed and engaging in his keynote address, Ronnie preached the value of bringing together multiple levels of government to help promote regions. He said that working closely with the private sector to realise new investment opportunities for companies was very important.

Ronnie spoke about his experiences with a range of economic development agencies. One attendee asked him from the floor: "Concerning your agency, what's in it for individual businesses in your region?" His response: "A rising tide lifts all ships."

If we bring investment into a region it helps all firms, and that's why investment attraction agencies are critical. The private sector must step in and help with facilitation and brokerage of information, communications and stitching up deals. His team spend much time working closely with consultants who represent the interests of prospective / current investors.

Ann Verboeket, Director of the Economic Development Association of New Zealand' (EDANZ) was the second international speaker. The EDANZ represent s about 70 regional economic development organisations. They have teamed with the private sector to deliver assistance programs to business and are heavily focussed on partnerships.

EDANZ is also respected nationally for the high quality of advice it provides to central government. Furthermore, the EDANZ College of Practitioners is the core of the professional development program, led by Ann, which is heavily focussed on practical training.

Selective points of interest from the speakers who grasped the podium over the two days of the conference included:

- Small communities should consider banding together with like communities in a region to take advantage of opportunities. Furthermore, academic institutions should locate closer to the heart of town centres. It is important for students to be in an environment conducive to social and entrepreneurial interaction (Colin Dunn).
- Town planners have to move from control' to facilitating good development outcomes'. This comment, from Tom Senti, drew rapturous applause from many. Tom went on to state that we shouldn't be planning just for population growth but need to ask: "How are we going to create jobs?" He cited that only 40% of students who attended Tweed's university lived locally. One opportunity to redress this imbalance - to work with developers to help facilitate the provision of low cost housing.
- Tony Chadwick of Lendlease described the firm's Yarrabilba project in southern Queensland with 20,000 dwellings set to be constructed. The development will have a big focus on environmental sustainability. Of note, it will have the world's largest business sustainability cluster and so far over 70 companies have put their hands to join in. Tony spoke about his desire to blow apart' our existing inefficient residential construction supply chain. New Chinese construction material technologies are set to shake up our markets like never before. In terms of prefab building materials coming out of China, we have an advantage as we don't have to pay for freight and logistics. However, we will need to get ahead of the game and develop the manufacturing capacity in Australia pronto.
- Strong charismatic leadership with a focus on including local people, improving liveability, and aggressively reversing a negative culture can go a very long way. Cr Paul Pisasale, Mayor of Ipswich, left no doubt in anyone's mind about his commitment to the task at hand and the importance of adapting to change. Many strong initiatives are being pursued by Council including: Harvard Medical School is establishing a presence in Ipswich; major new residential developments; high rise apartments; an international hotel, and establishing a Future's Committee).

The keynote speaker at the Economic Development Awards Dinner was the acting Director General of the NSW Department of State & Regional Development (DSRD), Mike Cullen. He congratulated all awards finalists for their contribution to local economic development activity and went on to say that local government and regional bodies have a vital role to play in stimulating employment and business conditions.

Stepping away from his hectic schedule Tony Kelly, NSW Minister for Regional Development, took to the podium with gusto and opening the batting' on day two. He talked up the strength of the NSW economy but acknowledged that there were some communities being left behind and it was important for economic development practitioners to assist. He covered topics including the drought, increased global competition, skills shortages and the need to create a more diverse economy.

Minister Kelly referred to the New England region and its major city Armadale, which in recent times has lost skilled labour. In response local groups have created the Iron Man Welders Project' and State Government has funded a project coordinator to assist. He also spoke glowingly of the Wider Learning Region' project, one that is upskilling many local people in small towns (e.g. aged care).

---

Another example cited was the Illawarra Advantage Fund' (based around Wollongong) that has provided important skills development for the labour force (e.g. a pool of IT graduates). Other recipients of Government's help included the Newcastle Airport as it looks to build this region's air industry capacity. In a worrying concession, he observed that Victorians were kicking goals with the Rail Trails' and this was something he was keen to replicate, given their substantial multipliers.

Later in the day, some attendees suggested there was a need for practitioners to further engage businesses with young people, get additional skilled migrants into the country, better upskill our existing labour force and respond more meaningfully to climate change.

In summarising the program, it was evident that the standard and sophistication of the economic development profession is continuing to rise. With a comprehensive program of professional development being crafted by EDA in 2008, this will only add to the momentum. Conference speakers demonstrated holistic experiences and insights with subjects such as: urban design, strategic land use planning, place management, social planning, strategic transport planning, project management, arts and cultural planning and property featuring prominently.

On a lighter note, over tea and lunch breaks, blackberries (affectionately known to junkies as Crackberries') were consulted and caressed lovingly / grudgingly.

Fashionista's observed that conference attire was generally smart casual with ties largely discarded. Whites, blacks, blues and purples featured strongly as did a smattering of corporate insignias that were fixed proudly on clothing. The red EDA lapel badges also proved popular and were summarily dispensed to all attendees. These brightened up many a dark suit and sensible formal dress.

In 2008 the National Economic Development Conference heads north to Brisbane - mark it in your diary now - October 8&9 at the Sebel Hotel. With a strong economy, growing southeast Queensland development pressures, and a newish premier in the chair driving reforms, there will be no shortage of subject matter.

Author, Grant Meyer, is an EDA Board Member and works as Coordinator Place Management at Knox City Council in Melbourne. Tel: 03 9298 8534. Email:[grant.meyer@knox.vic.gov.au](mailto:grant.meyer@knox.vic.gov.au)