

Integration of emergency management into day-to-day local government functions

by Greg Burgess, General Manager, Municipality of Tasman

This article is very much my personal account of events after the Port Arthur tragedy. I hope it will give some insight into how a small rural council in the south-east corner of Tasmania dealt with a tragedy of world significance.

It is not meant to be a 'manual on how to deal with disaster recovery'. Any disaster will have unique characteristics that sometimes demand unconventional responses — ones that are not written in any plan or text. However, the experience of the past eighteen months has reinforced some basic principles that apply in to any disaster recovery, namely 'information', 'communication', 'leadership' and 'co-ordination'.

It is also very helpful, if you are fortunate enough, to have one or two people on the team that have the ability to manage the media!

Planning

In Tasmania, all municipal areas are required, through the Emergency Services Act, to have an Emergency Management Plan.

Tasman Council has a plan. Like most emergency management plans, it identifies hazards, talks about command and control, operation support centres, administration and finance, communications, response and recovery.

However, we didn't have this hazard one listed. While the response was immediate, the recovery has been traumatic and will be going for a number of years.

The community

Tasman is a small rural municipality located on a peninsula in the south-east of Tasmania. It is a small, close-knit community of 2200 permanent residents which can swell to around 8000 with the summer holiday influx. The community is island-like, fiercely protective (some would say 'inward looking'). It is an extremely beautiful part of the world. The economy centres around tourism, agriculture, aquaculture, forestry, and

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chicken farming (whose importance will take on greater meaning a little later).

It has basic services like a district school, doctor, one-man police station, nursing home, shops, taverns and hotel/motels. It is about 1¼ hours travelling time from Hobart.

The community is very well served by a volunteer emergency service group consisting of ambulance, State Emergency Service and fire brigade. These receive, quite deservedly, strong support from Council and the community.

The population is a mix of the old established families — sometimes referred to as the 'gate keepers', newer settlers generally attracted to the area by its beauty and lifestyle, and an element of alternative 'arty-crafty' folk.

The council is one of the smallest in Tasmania. It boasts a total administrative, technical and day labour workforce of fourteen and 'buys in' specialist services such as engineering and planning. It also runs the nursing home with a permanent part-time staff of thirty. The total operating budget is around \$28 million. *We are not big.*

So there we were, this small, isolated community 'plunged' into the world spotlight for all the wrong reasons, struggling to understand why this had happened. The tragic events of the 28th April 1996 left thirty-five dead, nineteen injured, countless others horrified, bewildered and emotionally scared for life, and a community totally devastated.

It is a fitting recognition of the professionalism and dedication of the volunteer and professional emergency teams that all nineteen of those injured survived. The media arrived 'en masse'. I can recall Mayor Neil Noye's first interview was held at the Council chambers at 1.00 a.m. on April 29th. That would prove to be the first of many.

The next few days were chaotic. The media, grief counsellors, Department of Community and Health Services staff, Police and State Emergency Services personnel were all new faces in the community. Communications and office facilities were hurriedly 'put together' and all this to the back drop of a community that moved in stunned silence ... frightened to speak, frightened to smile or laugh, frightened to live. It was as though someone had pressed the 'mute' button whilst the remote was pointed at Tasman.

Leadership and direction was essential and that role fell squarely on the shoulders of Council and in particular, Mayor Neil Noye. With guidance and assistance from State Emergency Services Officers and staff from Department of Community and Health Services and the Premiers Department, a local Community Recovery Committee was established under Neil's chairmanship.

The committee was made up of representatives from service clubs, clergy, council, Port Arthur Historic Site, police, general practitioners and Department of Premier and Cabinet. Its primary purpose was to develop community driven strategies to advance the recovery process and its meetings were open to the public. This provided an opportunity for anyone to bring forward issues, make comment or just listen.

The dissemination of accurate information was essential and a media liaison officer was seconded from the Government media centre to handle this important area and to manage the constant media requests. The demands on staff and elected members was enormous, particularly Neil. Hundreds of messages of condolence and offers of support arrived daily, and dealing with these required additional resources.

We had all known people who had been killed — school mates, friends, the couple who had worked with you on the local tourist association, the little girls

that your own child had been at school with only several days earlier. We had all been touched very deeply and very personally. There were many tears, periods of silence and quiet reflection during the days that ensued, but with support, by way of personnel and financial assistance from neighbouring Councils, the day-to-day wheels kept turning.

What soon became apparent was that the community would soon face a second disaster — a collapse of the local economy that is principally tourism driven. Understandably, people were staying away and cancellations were the norm. There was an urgent need to get the message out to Australia that, whilst this terrible tragedy had happened, the area was safe, was as scenic and as beautiful as ever and all the features, both natural and man-made, that attracted people to the area were still there.

This was helped when Neil Noye and Premier Rundle embarked on a hectic five-day visit of the major Australian cities and centres. It was an enormous task with constant media engagements, functions and schedules to be met. The message was reinforced time and time again, as was the heartfelt thanks to all of Australia for the wonderful and caring support that had flowed to our small community.

Back on the Peninsula the Community Recovery Committee were active in organising the Community Memorial Service, aimed at drawing the community together to share their grief and support for one and other. It was a moving and beautifully simple service held in the ruins of the convict church at the Port Arthur Historic Site.

This was followed several days later by a State Memorial Service at St David's Cathedral in Hobart and finally two weeks later and open Memorial Service at the Port Arthur Historic Site. There were times when you were tempted to say '... not another memorial service', but then you stood back and reflected that this tragedy, this cruel waste of life has hurt all of Australia, if not the world. People wanted to pay their respects and grieve in their own way and time. No one had the right to deny people that opportunity.

The Committee was also heavily involved in organising a Family Picnic and Music Fun Day on 25th May 1996 at the Port Arthur Historic Site. This may sound a little bizarre and insensitive to hold such an event within the historic site, only one month after the tragedy.

But it was a very important event for two reasons:

- it was the community, in the broadest sense, reclaiming the Historic Site as a place where people from all walks of life could come to enjoy the history and the quiet beauty, and to experience Port Arthur.
- it was seen as an opportunity for the community to enjoy itself, to say, 'yes, it is OK to laugh and to relax'. To my mind, this was a very important and significant event.

The Council response

May and June are particularly busy times in local government, with budgets, estimates, works programs, annual operating plans, Grants Commission hearings, just to name a few. Trying to integrate the recovery process of emergency management was simply too great a task, given the limited human resources available to Council. There were two options, as far as Council were concerned:

- direct me to concentrate totally on the recovery process and bring in a relieving general manager for an initial twelve months, or
- appoint a specialist community recovery and development coordinator.

I was tempted to try convincing the Council that the first option was the correct way to go, after all I had been there all of two-and-a-half years. Surely I knew the community by now ... 'I had been there from the beginning, I had been involved'.

As it turned out, more rational thinking did eventually hit me and it was recommended and accepted that the Community Recovery and Development Coordinator be appointed. I believe it was one of the most important decisions made in advancing the recovery process. I say that mainly because of the caliber of the appointee, Susan Parr.

At the time, Susan was the Director of Community Services with Hobart City Council and had worked in that field for fifteen years. Susan actually approached Tasman Council to see if there was any way that she, as an individual, may be able to help. After interviews, Susan started a twelve-month secondment from Hobart City Council. The position was funded by Department of Community and Health Services, there was no operating budget and the shortfall in salary was 'picked up' by Hobart City Council. Such was

the level of support that local government throughout the State was prepared to provide.

Before appointing Susan, I can recall expressing some reservations to Neil, not about Susan's obvious skills or professionalism, but how someone from a large organisation like Hobart City Council, with support staff, information technology systems and so on, would fit into this small work environment and deal with it. I wondered how it might impact upon her family given the demands of the position.

The reassurance came after another long telephone conversation with Susan's then boss, Gary Storch, who was General Manager of the Hobart City Council. After giving my reservations, he replied 'she'll roll up the sleeves and do the washing up when she has to'. That was good enough for us. Susan started duties on 23rd July 1996.

Remember the chicken farming? Shortly after she finished her time with us, Susan wrote:

As a member of the Hobart City Council Emergency Management Team, I had been involved in the preparation of the Recovery Plan for the City of Hobart and was fully aware of the key principle of community ownership of recovery. However, recovery was something nebulous and to be dealt with after we had done the heroic stuff of dealing with the immediate emergency of saving lives, property and feeding people. So with no experience in an event like this, a real determination and commitment to be of service, I set off for a year in the Tasman. The contrast between my Hobart Local Government experience and my introduction to the smallest municipality in Tasmania was delightfully demonstrated to me by the following situation:

As a farewell gesture, the former Lord Mayor of Hobart, Alderman Doone Kennedy invited me to a formal reception in the Town Hall, complete with red velvet upholstered furniture, plush carpets, antique furniture, chandeliers and the Lord Mayor bedecked in Lord Mayoral robes and chain of office.'

'Two days later I began work at Tasman and was busily trying to move into a 'make-do' office when at the end of the day, a knock at the door heralded the arrival of the Mayor of Tasman. Neil Noye was dressed in the gear he always wore when he was cleaning chicken sheds. The welcome was warm and pungent and marked the beginning of an excellent relationship with Neil, which I will always cherish.'

Nothing could more clearly demonstrate the difference in working environments.

Neil, Susan, myself and Michael Leonard, our Regional Economic Facilitator, soon formed a solid working relationship that helped us and the community through many difficult situations.

By this time, the Community Recovery Committee had 'lost the plot' a little, and were determined and convinced that they could solve all the pre-existing ills of the community — particularly unemployment, and ownership and control of the Port Arthur Historic Site. It had to be restructured and refocused and this wasn't any easy task.

Again in Susan's words:

'Their participation in the Recovery Committee was the means by which they were avoiding their pain and grief and trying to come to terms with the growing knowledge of their own sense of personal violation. I am highlighting these points because they are critical to understanding the complexity of the issues that were generated by this tragedy, particularly for those who were not injured, but who had to deal with the consequences of the acts of Martin Bryant.'

As we started to get a handle on things, Bryant pleaded *not guilty*.

This was an enormous 'brick wall'. People realised they may have to relive the horrors of that day, be called to give evidence and be cross-examined, perhaps in a very hostile way ... what a nightmare! Those principles I highlighted earlier (information, communication, leadership, co-ordination and media management) were all called into play. Fortunately, Bryant eventually changed his plea and this provided for some certainty in the planning process.

You may be surprised to know that to this point, the Federal Government had refused to provide any special financial assistance to Council or the community to aid the recovery process.

Yes, they had guaranteed \$2.5 million to the Port Arthur Historic Site to build a new visitors centre and a replacement cafe for the Broad Arrow, but the community had no access to any part of that money. What became more frustrating was that when specific submissions were presented under existing program 'boxes' on several occasions a reply came back from the relevant Federal Minister ... 'sorry, use part of the \$2.5 million the Prime Minister has already granted' ... a total lack of understanding at the Federal level. Eventually, we did have

success in gaining some Federal funding after a co-ordinated approach was developed between Council, Port Arthur Historic Site and community groups and assistance from Senator Paul Calvert. The funding secured provided for:

- continuation of the Community Recovery and Development Coordinator's position for 12 months.
- continuation of the Economic Facilitator's position, also for 12 months.
- new part-time position of Tourism Development and Marketing Officer for 12 months — this was particularly important given the massive downturn in the local tourism industry.
- New part-time position of Youth Development Officer for a 3-year period. Potential youth problems had been identified as a 'sleeping giant' that would emerge over the next few years.
- 'TASK' training package to provide training and upskilling in the tourism and service industry.

Bryant's sentencing took place on 22nd November 1996. I cannot emphasise how important it was to manage the media during that period. Strategies were prepared, protocols developed and I must say that, in the main, the media reacted responsibly and sensitively.

I mentioned earlier that Susan's skills and professionalism were never in question. They certainly came to the fore during this period — protecting Neil, deflecting requests and questions, preparing media releases in conjunction with Port Arthur Historic Site staff, scheduling controlled press conferences. I hate to think what it would have been like if that level of control and determination had not been there.

We then started to prepare for the next milestone — Christmas. This is a particularly difficult time for those experiencing their first Christmas without loved ones. We were fortunate in gaining the support of Alan Anderson, a Minister from Nowra, who is a specialist in grief loss. Alan had assisted the community immediately after the tragedy and his presence during the lead up to Christmas and the work he undertook was a great comfort to many.

It was around this time that former Australian test cricketer Keith Stackpole telephoned me to discuss the possibility of bringing the Australian One-day Team to the peninsula for a light hearted 'hit and giggle' match against a local side. The Australian team would be in Hobart

on 6th January 1997 to play Pakistan, and had at least one and possibly two free days. This was a great idea and just the thing for the community to focus on around Christmas.

The proposal was immediately floated with the Port Arthur Historic Site acting management, who warmly received it. Over the next few weeks Keith and I were in regular contact and a proposal was worked up and a formal presentation put to the Port Arthur Historic Site Board of Management to hold the event at the site on the cricket oval, arguably the oldest in Australia.

To our surprise there was a lukewarm reaction. Apparently some 'imported' staff were opposed to it and were not prepared to support the proposal. A day or so later I received a telephone call from one of the 'imported' staff advising me that the match would not be proceeding.

As you can probably imagine, those of us who had been working so hard to pull this together were absolutely amazed. Here was a great opportunity — a 'once in a life time' opportunity — to give the community something, to assist in the recovery process and it was being rejected. What do we do?

Next morning the headlines in the Mercury newspaper read *'Port Arthur snubs cricket stars'*. The following day the Mercury headlines read *'Backflip over All Stars match — Minister Groom intervenes and guarantees the All-Stars cricket match will go ahead'*. To this day, I have no idea who 'leaked' the Port Arthur Historic Site refusal to the media or briefed the Minister's advisors about the 'benefits' of the match.

We survived Christmas with much of it being taken up organising the Port Arthur Cricket Classic. The willingness of so many people to give up their time and assist with preparations during the Christmas break still astounds me.

The match went ahead. It was a great success and raised around \$30,000 for the Tasman Trust, a community trust established after the tragedy to assist with community development projects. The new structure of the Community Recovery Committee was more focused and working well. A community recovery plan was developed and endorsed by the council and the committee.

It focused on moving from recovery to development and whilst it has been in place for only seven months, it is proving very much to be the foundation on which the community will rebuild. The first anniversary was another major

milestone that had to be planned for and managed. What started out rather shakily turned out to be a wonderful event, a day when many people drew a line in the sand, discarded the baggage of personal suffering and pain of the previous twelve months and made a conscious decision to move forward.

Perhaps the day is best summed up in the words of Keith Moulton, father of Nanette Mikac and grandfather of Madeline and Alannah Mikac, who were all killed in the tragedy. He said:

'The anniversary commemoration got the monkeys off the backs of so many people. It brought people together again, for a short time, in recognition of not only shared grief and pain, but also the survival of a year of personal and community angst'.

Looking back over that twelve month period, I marvel at the support that came from the Australian community, the continuing selfless commitment shown by so many, including my

staff, the guidance and assistance provided by Department of Community and Health Services staff and State Emergency Services personnel, particularly during those first five to six weeks, and the strength and ongoing commitment shown by counselling personnel.

It was a fragile environment that could so easily have shattered and fallen apart. The community was fortunate in having two people that in my mind held it together: Mayor Neil Noye (now AM) — the grandfather and farmer, who rose to the occasion to show leadership and guide his community through the most difficult of periods, who made tremendous personal sacrifices and has only recently undergone by-pass surgery — and Susan Parr — the lady from the 'big smoke' who helped a small and devastated community, gave so much of herself and just kept going when others were burnt out or just incapable of handling the task. The community owes them both an enormous debt.

With the benefit of hindsight, we didn't always make the best decisions. What was important though was that decisions were made, based on the best information available at the time and in a consultative environment, and were put into action. There was no 'paralysis by analysis' — there was no time for that — the process just kept moving. Our community still has a long way to go. The tourism sector has been hurt very badly and with so many residents reliant on that industry for employment, the 'ripple effect' has been widely felt. There are many positive signs.

You can never plan to prevent an incident like the Port Arthur tragedy. It's a sad reflection on our society that we might believe we have to.

Can I once again reinforce those key principles that became the cornerstone of recovery: information, communication, leadership, co-ordination and media management.

They are vital.

Letter to the Editor

From Nick Carter

Dear Sir,

May I request space in your journal to comment on Nicholas Kanarev's article 'The Political Nature of Disasters—Part 2', published in the Summer 1997–98 edition.

Kanarev is drawing a long and rather inept bow when he makes the veiled suggestion that I might have faced a conflict of interest as a member of the 1983–84 Bushfire Review Committee. By that time, I was an established international consultant of some 5 years standing. Thus, my views and judgements were more influenced by this international experience than by past association with Federal Government institutions. Indeed, this overseas experience was a significant factor in my selection to the Bushfire Review Committee.

Moreover, Kanarev is being mischievously misleading when he refers to me as 'the administrative head of the Australian Counter Disaster College', as if I were some sort of dogsbody responsible for ordering the rations or dishing out paper clips. As I recall, I was appointed Director of the College, with clearly defined responsibility for all aspects of its functions.

Kanarev's snide manipulation of the facts reflects no credit on your otherwise excellently professional journal.

Yours sincerely
W Nick Carter