Chapter 7

Clarence Valley Council in New South Wales: A Successful Municipal Merger?

Ian Tiley

7.1 Introduction

Clarence Valley Council (CVC), located on the Northern Rivers of New South Wales, is the product of a 2004 NSW Government-imposed amalgamation of four general-purpose and two special-purpose county councils. CVC was created as an undivided area with one city and 43 towns and villages. In 2012-2013 it had an area of 10,440.2 square kilometres and a population of 51,346 persons (NSW Office of Local Government 2014, p 104).

There had been earlier council mergers in the Clarence Valley and, in the late 1990s, a failed voluntary amalgamation process. The writer, who has had more than 50 years’ experience in New South Wales local government, has been mayor to one former council, served on both county councils and, from 2005 to 2008, was the first mayor of CVC, is thus well-placed to provide an informed perspective of the merger and its economic and local democratic consequences.

Chapter 7 is divided into five main parts. Section 7.2 briefly describes the historic evolution of the CVC. Section 7.3 considers the economic consequences of the forced council amalgamation, while section 7.4 examines the local democratic impacts and responses to the merger. The comparative performance of the CVC against other Category Four New South Wales councils is considered in section 7.5. Chapter 7 ends in section 7.6 with some brief concluding remarks.

7.2 Genesis of the Clarence Valley Council

7.2.1 Before 2004 amalgamation

Local government has existed in the Clarence Valley since the proclamation of Grafton as a municipality in 1859 (Kass 2009, pp 63, 162). Thereafter, South Grafton, Maclean and Ulmarra municipalities were proclaimed and, by 1913, there were also five shire councils. Thus by the early 20th century
This is a preview. Not all pages are shown.
Given the ongoing fiscal matters confronting CVC, it is argued that the 2004 amalgamation and the commencement of the CVC entity did not bring about significant long-term improvement in the council’s financial soundness and sustainability. In its first few years, CVC took important decisions to endeavour to place the council on a sound financial footing. The assessment provided in section 7.3 of the fiscal consequences of the CVC amalgamation relates to the six financial years immediately following the merger. In that period the financial prospects of the council appeared sound and improving. However, in recent years the CVC financial position has deteriorated with reluctance by council to adequately address problem areas. Remediating this situation will require difficult decisions and effective leadership if the CVC is to achieve long-term financial sustainability.

To achieve the essential financial improvements will also require community acceptance and support. CVC should embrace genuine community engagement and provide ongoing, comprehensible, accurate information to its constituents, using all the modern means available if it is to make the changes necessary to ensure a financially sustainable future for the council and the community it serves.

References


Clarence Valley Council (2008), Valley Vision 2020: Clarence Valley Corporate Strategic Plan, pp 1-46.


PERSPECTIVES ON AUSTRALIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM


Grafton City Council (2003), Minutes of Council Meeting, Grafton City Council, p 70, 19 November 2003.


CLARENCE VALLEY COUNCIL IN NEW SOUTH WALES

