



Managing a Township

Going from the property sector to local government, Kerry Robinson understands the challenge and privilege of working in the city where he was raised.

Images courtesy of Blacktown City Council

Located in Western Sydney, Blacktown City is the biggest local government authority in New South Wales. In early July 2013, Kerry Robinson was appointed as general manager of Blacktown City Council. Kerry had more than 30 years of experience in the property industry, having worked in local government, private consultancy, and a range of private-sector development organisations.

Having grown up and gone to school in Doonside, Kerry has always had an affinity for Blacktown, and came into the role to bring corporate management, modern communication, and branding expertise to the council.

Kerry spoke with *The CEO Magazine* about his role, his experiences, and his hopes for the council's future.

The CEO Magazine: What led you to your current role as general manager of Blacktown City Council?

Kerry: I have a long family history in Blacktown. I went to school here, and council gave me a cadetship during my university town-planning course. So I started my working life here before moving on to a whole range of things including commercial property research, industrial land sales, and then working for a number of property developers, particularly Delfin Property Group, which was the largest subdivider of land in the country at that time, and then Lend Lease. For the past 13 years I worked at UrbanGrowth NSW.

A constant theme of this career path is that even while working for those commercial entities, a lot of my project work was within

Western Sydney and a majority was in Blacktown, so I have a long linkage with Blacktown. When I was contemplating this position, it wasn't necessarily that I wanted to be a local government general manager; it was more that I saw my history, the work that I had done, and my connection to the Blacktown area as an opportunity for me to make a positive contribution to the Blacktown community through this role.

What have been your greatest achievements as general manager?

Although it is early days—I started at council in August 2013—major projects are underway. We are working on a number of things that are internal rearrangements, and we have engaged the Plain English Foundation to run a writing training course to address some of the shortcomings. I think >



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we have a great opportunity to get our messaging across in a manner that is far better than we have been doing in the past.

Blacktown Council is by no means broken; it is the largest local government entity by population in New South Wales and, as of 1 January 2014, is the fourth largest in the country.

It has a sound financial position, although it has some challenges, as you can imagine. The council has certainly placed their faith in me, and it is a clear statement of intent. I am the seventeenth general manager or town clerk of this council, but the first to be appointed from outside the organisation. The council sees that I have a mix of understanding through my work for more than a decade in Landcom, the ability to work within government, and my commercial background, having delivered more than a billion and a half dollars worth of real estate development. So I bring a mix of skills to the role.

The councillors have asked me to review council structure, and I have taken that in the normal fashion, which is to benchmark us against best practice not only in Australia, but also in New Zealand, Canada, and the UK. I have consultants working on that, and they have presented their ideas to me and my executive team, which I, in turn, report as a new structure to the council.

We are about to start staff consultation on expanding our office hours. It's a simple thing, but if we are serious about wanting to provide better service to our customers, I believe that we need to be open far longer.

As a city council, how have you utilised your experience in the commercial sector to take a fresh look at running the council?

It's more about smaller areas with focus rather than the big picture. As I said earlier, at a big-picture



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- Kerry Robinson

level, this council has a sound position, with challenges. We had an operating deficit in the 2013 financial year of close to \$8 million, and there are debates within council that are going on as to how we address that. We have recommended to council that we increase rates so as to generate an extra \$10 million per annum, which can be applied to asset renewal and maintenance. Over a decade, this will wind back the current \$68 million deficit that we face in this area.

To apply my commercial skills, or commercial view of how to tackle things, I am very keen to bring together all of our design functions and create a centre of design excellence. While working for Lend Lease, I learned that the great synergy is to get a result of 1+1=3. That challenges our project management and project delivery model. In the new

structure, we will put more focus on project management skills and our project management performance, and that's coming from my experience of using external project managers in large projects to deliver outcomes.

A second example is that this council has carried out its own land projects and its own subdivision works for many years, and I see that there is an opportunity for council to generate more profit out of those works—not at the expense of anything else that we do, but simply by giving more focus to those land management and subdivision projects. In order to do that, I have established an expert panel to assist our staff with the preparation of a business plan as well as provide some additional skilling and mentoring to our staff in land subdivision and land development works. The >

aim of all of that is to have council generating a profit of about \$2 million a year from land projects that we can recycle into our major projects program.

This is about taking those commercial skills learned in government and in the private sector and pushing some of those things in a commercial sense in the businesses that we run, but also with an eye to continuing to provide customer service. Council needs to be commercial, but that doesn't mean it isn't a social service provider; it is a social service provider. As the leader of the organisation, I need to get that balance right.

I want to benchmark Blacktown City Council against other councils and be seen as one of the best. Consolidation of the council's strengths through initiatives such as a graduate program to attract and retain young staff will seek to promote the ongoing success and prosperity of the council.

How would you describe the organisation's culture and how you are planning on shaping it as you progress into the role?

I just finished a meeting where we were talking about all the issues around changing our opening hours, and I made the point that one of the reasons I am doing that is to demonstrate to our team that we need to renew our focus on providing service to customers. We need, all the time, to think about what service we're providing to the community, the way we operate in our playing fields, or the way we operate to service the development industry. It's important that we are providing the right type of service to our customers.

At Blacktown Council, there is a long history of facilitating development, and part of that comes from a clear understanding on both sides of politics that a great way to serve our community is to address the job imbalance that exists in Western Sydney. If



we are going to create new jobs, we need to have an eye to facilitating developments that employ those people, so we need to make sure that it's easy to do business with council; and we need to make sure that we have a very sharp focus on turning around development applications as quickly as we possibly can.

One of the things that the development industry said to me when I took up this role is that there are a couple of particular issues where our performance in serving the development industry hasn't improved. Drainage engineering is one particular example of this. Part of my response to that has been to direct a better practice review of certain engineering functions. I have formed a panel with Laurie Rose, AO, who was at one time the national president of the Urban Development Institute; Professor Dr Tony Wong, who is the chief executive officer of the Cooperative Research Centre for >

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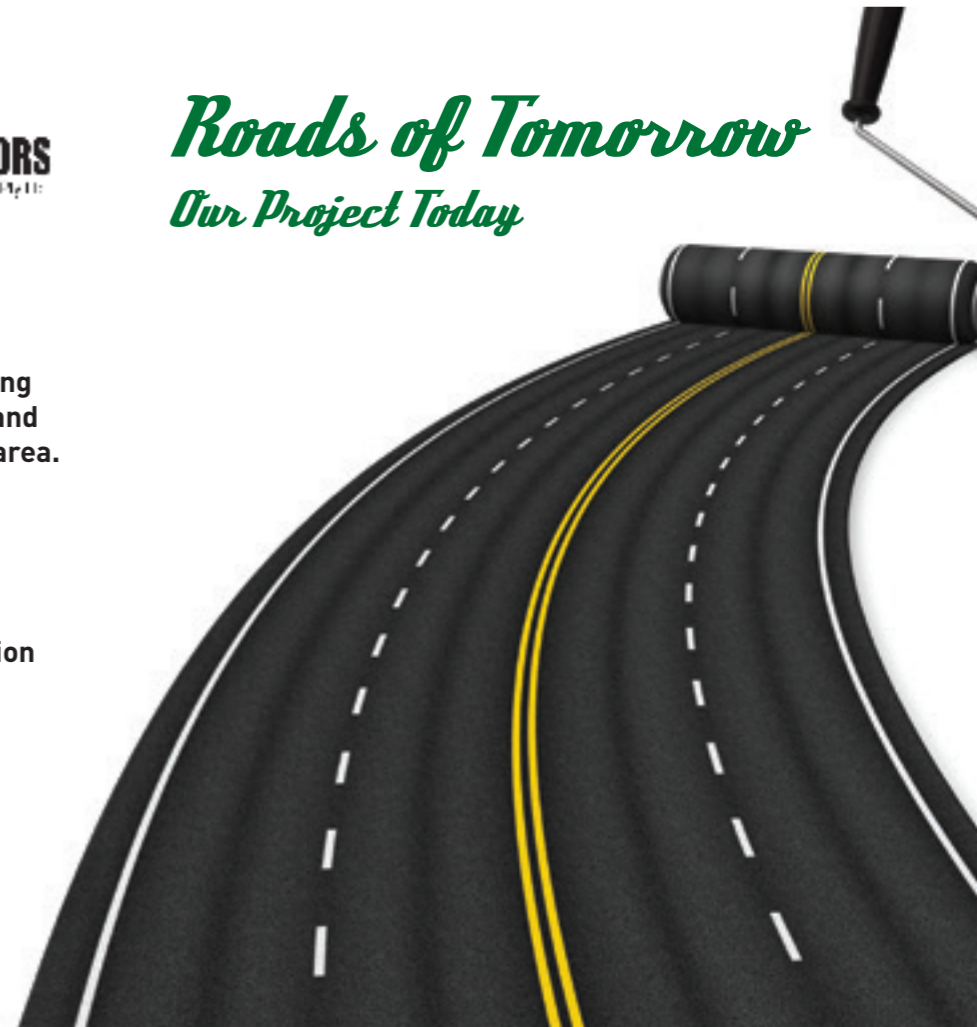
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Water Sensitive Cities; and Associate Professor Roberta Ryan, of the Centre for Excellence in Local Government. This panel is looking at our performance, what is best practice, and providing council with advice on how we can improve and get a better level of service to the development industry with the consequence of delivering jobs to our community.

How do you work with suppliers, subcontractors, and strategic partners to achieve success?

Council is a little constrained in the supply chain because the Local Government Act mandates that for any large procurement, we need to go to open tender. That being said, we do have a number of key suppliers that are very, very important to the way we continue to run our business. We use procurement panels from a number of places—Local Government NSW, along with the Western City Regional Organisation of Councils—to aid our procurement. As a public organisation using public funds, we need to be careful to deliver demonstrable value for money to our ratepayers. We do work with a number of suppliers over the long term and some of our supplier contracts are over the long term, but they are procured in a slightly different way to the way you might do in the commercial world where you have a stronger focus on building a long-term partnership with some of your suppliers.

What is your vision for Blacktown City Council?

There are a number of key projects that we need to deliver on. They are geared to quality of open space, quality of recreation and sporting activities, as well as building culture and building education and jobs within Blacktown. The current council has a very significant reform agenda to be achieved in the current term, so my job is to lead the organisation to deliver on what the council actually wants.

There is a liberal majority in power in council at the moment,

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which rules by support of an independent. That very fine balance of seven on one side, seven on the other side, and the independent, means that a lot of change is very, very vigorously debated in the chamber and the desire of the Liberal council at the moment is to affect a number of areas of change. Other than our outdoor staff, there is not an area of our operations that is not under very significant reform. We have, in the realm of planning, a new planning instrument for the whole of the city that has been exhibited and there are some challenges in that.

In 2014, Blacktown City had more than 320,000 residents. By 2040, the population will have grown to

500,000. There will be many thousands of new homes here in the years ahead. Council will position itself to unlock the many hectares of employment lands currently vacant and realise the potential in the city's existing business zones. Investment and jobs will follow if the council presents its carefully designed planning strategy in the most effective manner.

Council must be viewed by all as a competent and reliable deliverer of local services and facilities. It must also be widely known as a resourceful, creative leader and partner. Blacktown City must be, and be seen to be, a local government authority built on the skills and experience of its people. ●