

A Great Place to Be

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- Craig Niemann

Situated in the geographical centre of Victoria, the City of Greater Bendigo is building on its reputation as a vibrant and culturally enriched regional hub.

Images courtesy of City of Greater Bendigo

The City of Greater Bendigo looks after a population of just over 100,000 people, delivering services and facilities to enhance their lives. Craig Niemann has been CEO of the council for the past seven years and certainly knows what makes the area tick. His role is to lead the region to new heights, promoting and enhancing its liveability. *The CEO Magazine* sat down with Craig to discuss what he loves about the regional city, about recently completed works such as the Ulumbarra Theatre, and his vision for the future.

The CEO Magazine: You have worked in the local government sector for more than 25 years, which has included roles with the Borough of Eaglehawk and the Shire of East Loddon. How has this extensive experience shaped your style of leadership?

Craig: My style is a collaborative one, where I support staff to be the best they can be. I think it has also

developed into one of being very patient, caring, and community minded, in terms of why we exist as a local government and what we can do to help people live better-quality lives.

What is unique about Bendigo, and how would you sell it to the world as a great place to live, work, and play?

There's a gold-rush history to Bendigo which dates back to the 1850s. I think that was the beginning of the creation of the city. The architecture and design that followed was outstanding, and that remains a key feature of what we see today. Heritage buildings, wide main streets, parks in the middle of the city—they are all things that really add value to the way a city operates and are still in place today.

The heritage has been a really important part, and then that is combined with the new. For example, Bendigo Bank has built new headquarters among the heritage within the city, and that is

an outstanding outcome and a demonstration of the mix of old and new, and how it can work really well together. The Bendigo Bank exemplifies the relationship between community and business. They've taken the community banking model right around Australia, and I think that has helped to brand the place because people understand where Bendigo is now. That's been great.

Then we have taken it to another level with our arts and culture. That's one of our strengths, and we have invested in that area. It has helped us with our branding across Australia. People now have an understanding of what Bendigo is—a great place to live in and to visit.

We have a strong environment around us as well. We are a city in a forest, which is unique—the state and national parks surround the city. That is a natural barrier to growth, which means Bendigo will grow up and mature rather than sprawl out. I think that is a really important factor. >



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We have a great climate any time of the year and a really diverse economy. The GFC didn't really have much of an impact on Bendigo; it probably slowed the growth down a little bit, but certainly there have been some great stories of investment and growth since that time. It is an important factor that there is diversity in the economy. Our proximity to Melbourne, a 90-minute drive, has always been a major part of our success over more recent years. There has been a duplication of the highway and significantly improved rail services, which means we have 19 rail services each way travelling daily to Melbourne. That connection we have to a major capital city of Australia is really important.

In the time you have been at Bendigo, what have been the greatest challenges you have had to overcome?

I think having a vision and a direction, as well as a strong

strategy and goals, is really important. That has been a consistent approach of the council here—identifying a number of key projects that really need to be delivered on behalf of the community and then working our way through the delivery of those. It is always challenging when the council changes because you get a different set of ideas at the table. That sometimes alters the direction a little bit. I think the important part about that is to understand what that new direction might be or what the change might be, and then to jump in and adopt that and move forward in a positive and constructive way.



What I really value in local government is that people who work within it really love doing things for other people. They're community minded, and I've seen that grow over the years. It is not just a job but a real investment into the community that people are making. They value their work and they value the contribution that they could make.

What are the highlights of your time with the city council—perhaps a significant project or something you are really proud of?

From a project perspective, there has been a significant delivery of major projects. The redevelopment of the library and the upgrade of the Bendigo Art Gallery are two that stand out. Very recently, we opened the Ulumbarra Theatre, which is in the old Bendigo jail. You walk through the cells of the jail into the new 1,000-seat theatre. It is clearly a highlight of my time in Bendigo, and of that relationship

and cooperation between three levels of government. The project is a great mix of old and new, and the adaptive reuse of a former jail site. It is very much a community and regional asset because it will be used by the Bendigo Senior Secondary College and also by the community.



The theatre has also helped us recognise the Indigenous history of Bendigo. Ulumbarra means 'gather together', and we were able to celebrate the Indigenous history of Bendigo at the official opening. I think everyone was really proud of that moment. It's a fantastic outcome and one I am very proud of.

How do you collaborate with suppliers to ensure the success of projects such as the theatre?

We have clarity around what we want to have delivered, whether it is a service or a construction contract. We try to use regional providers of product and service as much as we possibly can because they add value to the economy. It is about understanding their needs as a supplier and our needs as an organisation—how we can cooperate to deliver an outcome that we can both be proud of.

Many of our capital projects are provided by businesses that are located within Bendigo or within regional Victoria, which is really important to us. It is a collaborative approach. We understand their needs, they understand ours, and it is about how we can make sure we deliver a quality product to our community. That is really important.

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- Craig Niemann

What is your vision for the future of Bendigo?

I think we've seen the city really mature in the past 20 years or so, and that has been a result of local government amalgamations and also a realisation that it is a contemporary regional city and no longer a country town. It is evolving and growing all the time. The vision is for it to be the most liveable regional city in Australia.

We have a really strong foundation for that in terms of the climate, proximity to Melbourne, the heritage and history that comes with who we are, the natural environment that surrounds Bendigo, the quality of services we have, and the branding through the Bendigo and Adelaide Bank that goes right across Australia. There's a whole host of things that means we are well on the way, I think, to be able to achieve that vision.

We see many opportunities for Bendigo. There is a new hospital being built for \$630 million to take health in this region to another level. While being very positive, there are pockets of Bendigo that are disadvantaged. We need to think about how we can improve their wellbeing, engagement in the workforce, and opportunity for living a better-quality life.

We will continue to look at ways by which we can care for our natural environment and our built assets—making sure those two work hand in hand and that development isn't at the expense of heritage or the environment. We will be building on the assets, facilities, and infrastructure that surround the people in the community to make sure that Bendigo grows together in a positive, structured, and sustained way. If we can get all those things right, then Bendigo will be a great place for many years to come.

I am really proud to be the CEO of Greater Bendigo. It's a great place and a great organisation. I am very fortunate to be in a really vibrant and progressive city. •

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It's about the good that money can bring and the difference a bank can make to its customers and their communities.

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Beyond this, the bank has returned more than \$130 million to Australian communities through its **Community Bank®** model and contributed to countless initiatives in partnership with community groups, state governments and local councils, like our own City of Greater Bendigo.

You may have heard us say that Bendigo Bank is bigger than a bank. It's an obligation we take seriously.

Dennis Bice explains the Bendigo's partnership with Australian communities.



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Bigger than a bank.

