



As featured in
The CEO Magazine
For more info visit
theceomagazine.com.au



Revitalising a City

Wollongong City Council is leaving behind its past and is focusing on new projects to reinvigorate its reputation in the Illawarra region of New South Wales.

Images by MonsterCo

When David Farmer started working for Wollongong City Council as general manager almost eight years ago, he was presented with one mighty challenge. The organisation was in the midst of a major ICAC inquiry into development issues. While David wasn't involved in any of the allegations, he was the one who had to take the organisation through the public hearing and deal with the after-effects. "The issues preceded my tenure, but the public inquiry was on my watch," David explains. "I had to handle that whole situation, which was quite extraordinary and perhaps the most substantial political scandal in New South Wales for a decade or so. Keeping the organisation together and the morale of the staff up, while trying to re-earn the trust of the community, was an intense and demanding process."

The elected council members were subsequently dismissed and administrators were appointed. While it was a difficult time for all involved, David worked tirelessly to slowly repair the council's reputation. "Every day, you had to go out there and rebuild that trust with the community. We have achieved a lot in that regard over the past eight years and we're seeing the results of this in our

biennial community survey. We did one straight after that ICAC inquiry in 2008 and we had a really low score in terms of community perception of our organisation and its performance. However, since then we have had three surveys in a row and each of those has had record high scores."

To get to this positive point, a number of strategies had to be implemented to help the Wollongong community move on from the crisis. A whole range of planning processes were updated to create transparency, and independent panels were formed to assist in the determinations of major development applications. David says the focus was on delivering for the community, and the council made a commitment to them that it would reinvest in their public assets.

"Local governments are funny creatures because they are high-asset-base organisations," David says. "Typically, our assets are about 10 times the value of our annual turnover. So a critical issue for the community is caring for and maintaining our assets—the roads, footpaths, public toilets, playgrounds, parks, and swimming pools. We must ensure they're safe and serviceable. Over generations, councils right across the country have taken their eye off that ball, and what we have done in the past

"A critical issue for the community is caring for and maintaining our assets—the roads, footpaths, public toilets, playgrounds, parks, and swimming pools."

- David Farmer

five or six years has been to really re-focus on re-investing in that space. We are making sure that we re-invest in those assets: repair and refurbish them. When we do community surveys, those issues are first and foremost on people's minds. That is what's most important to them, and that's why they're a priority for us."

Today, Wollongong City Council is in a good place after moving on from its tainted past. David's new focus is on five key organisational priorities, one of which is the city centre revitalisation. David says he wants to make the city centre strong, and a lot of work has already been done in terms of positioning it for growth.

"In the past 12 months or so, we have had \$750 million worth of development activity occur in the city centre, and the majority of it has created jobs in retail, office, and hospital facilities. Council has also done some significant work on what we call the public domain—the streets, footpaths, and city mall—and as a result of that we're now seeing another wave of residential development coming through. We think in the next three years our city centre population is going to almost double, and that offers us some exciting opportunities as these new residents will help support the increased commercial offering. >



“We’ve done a lot of work on softer things to activate the city centre. For example, we’ve updated our licensing regulations for outdoor dining for small restaurants and bars to make it easier for them to set up. This will increase the attractiveness of the city centre in the evening, and also encourage events in the city. So, as well as our work on hard construction works, we’ve also focused on improving our regulatory approach and on promotional opportunities. This will make the city a far more vibrant place than it was five or six years ago, and we’re already seeing the results of that.”

Wollongong City Council is also focusing on its tertiary sector, recognising that it is the best growth market for employment. “We have one of Australia’s most substantial regional universities, and we work very closely with it to maximise its contribution to the city.”

To help with the city centre revitalisation and other projects,

“If you already have a popular area and if you can improve it, make it more accessible and more attractive, then even more people will use it.”

- David Farmer



Wollongong City Council has developed strong links with various businesses and groups in the private and public sectors. It’s engaged with government, particularly state government, as well as with local and peak organisations such as Destination Wollongong, the Property Council of Australia, and the Illawarra Business Chamber.

David believes that when it comes to projects, in particular civic works, it can sometimes be of benefit to focus on areas that are already busy or that the community has a close connection to. He was the CEO of Cairns City Council from 2000 to 2007, and in that role he was fortunate enough

to work on the redevelopment of the Cairns Esplanade, which taught him an interesting lesson. “If you already have a popular area and if you can improve it, make it more accessible and more attractive, then even more people will use it,” he says. “Improve a winner and you will get a really successful outcome. We have done significant work on the Wollongong foreshore, what we call the ‘Blue Mile’, and that has been very successful. It’s one of the most loved parts of our city. So I think the lesson here is that if you can improve on something that is already successful, you often get a much better outcome than from trying to develop something from scratch.” •

DOES YOUR BUSINESS PRODUCE LARGE VOLUMES OF ORGANIC WASTE?

SOILCO provides diverse expertise in Organics Recycling.

Our collection and processing systems are suited to a range of applications including:

- GARDEN WASTE
- FOOD WASTE
- AGRICULTURAL RESIDUES

For information on managing your organic wastes in an environmentally sensitive and cost effective way contact SOILCO today.



P: 1300 254 443
E: Sales@SOILCO.com.au
W: www.SOILCO.com.au

