

## **The Friends and Municipal Councils**

Cooperation, communication and compromise.

The interaction of Friends groups with Council range from cosy and comfortable to difficult to outright toxic if discussions at the recent Benalla conference provide an accurate picture.

No matter how difficult the situation, and how frustrating the process, it is always important to work toward establishing and maintaining a good relationship.

The Friends of Warrnambool Botanic Gardens had a good start. They were established in 1989 as an initiative of the Premier Town Promotion Board inaugurated by Warrnambool City Council.

In 2018 a grandson of an early curator is Mayor of the city and shares their interest in the Gardens.

In the thirty years between the Friends have had a good relationship with Council, but it has always needed to be worked on. Remember the composition of Council changes periodically while these days the administration, the crucial link, is even more transitory.

This means that effective communication is essential. All councillors and senior officers are on the mailing list for the Friends Newsletter and relevant submissions. For significant events a print out is delivered, as electronic mail is easily ignored. One such event was a garden walk arranged for Council to familiarise them with one of their greatest assets. When relevant, councillors attend ordinary meetings, while the AGM attracts a wide audience and show cases the achievements of the year. It is an opportunity to remind the administration of the value of voluntary contributions, in kind assistance, fund raising, grants, preservation and promotion.

Communication is a two way process and friends too must be kept informed. They can be great lobbyists.

The Friends believe that one of their greatest achievements was the appointment of a curator in 2007. The position had previously been lost during the era of competitive tendering which merged sportsfields, gardens and parklands. They lobbied, sought partners, approached philanthropic foundations and attended Council meetings. Today the Curator is the Gardens greatest asset.

The Friends are an incorporated association, independent of Council and need to be recognised as such. While the Friends value the Curator and will back him to the hilt, it is not appropriate to see the Curator as the channel of communication. Keep it direct.

The first move the Friends made when planning the celebration of 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Gardens on the present site was to approach Council and seek a joint program. This was agreed and a councillor was appointed to the organising committee. This ensured good communication and cooperation.

In the case of WBG their heritage as a Guilfoyle designed garden is significant. It is difficult to put a dollar value on heritage and it can be so easily lost. The Friends act as educator, advocate, guardian and trusty friend.

Pat Varley for Friends of Warrnambool Botanic Gardens. Sept.2018