

WEEKLY COLUMN

Friday, 9 December 2016

Vale Barry Johnston OAM

I was deeply saddened to receive the news that my good friend and former local government colleague Barry Johnston OAM passed away peacefully on Wednesday evening.

Barry was a giant of local government, serving 42 years on the Ashford and Inverell Shire Councils, and leading his community for more than a decade.

To me he was and will always be 'Mr Inverell'.

The Inverell community has lost one of its true champions and I offer my sincerest condolences to Barry's daughter Dianne and family and friends.

Just before his retirement from local government at the September elections, I had the honour of offering a tribute to Barry on the floor of the NSW Parliament. You can find the Hansard of that tribute here: <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Hansard/Pages/HansardResult.aspx#/docid/HANSARD-1323879322-91817/link/100>

His impact on me personally as a mentor, but to his community will not be forgotten.

Hospitals with no doctor; we need emergency action

Northern media have taken up my campaign for answers and action over incidents where some of our Northern Tablelands hospitals are being left with no on-duty medical officers at times.

Two weeks ago I flagged my intention to get answers from Hunter New England Health about what I'm increasingly concerned are not just isolated incidents – you know, just a couple – but are in fact a symptom of a more pervasive problem where doctors are not available for emergency department duty at hospitals including Inverell and Glen Innes.

I am now waiting to meet with HNEH chief executive Michael DiRienzo after requesting an explanation of ongoing shortfalls in service. That meeting is set down for Friday 16 December but I see there have also been some details released from HNEH rural and regional executive director Susan Heyman, about the lack of locums to cover some shifts, although Ms Heyman seemed to suggest these were limited and uncommon, and arrangements are in place to rectify this.

What I would say right now though is, the locum system is costly, unreliable and not good enough and I don't believe it should be part of the medical management structure.

As well, I was concerned to see that Inverell Shire Councillor Paul King told local media he found no doctor on duty at the emergency department on Tuesday morning. And like me, and plenty of others in our community, he's asking whether this is just the tip of the iceberg – and if it is occurring more often than what becomes public knowledge.

I have said before this treatment of the community by HNEH is simply not acceptable and it is only through good luck that a major medical emergency hasn't occurred at these times so

I will continue to express my ongoing anger and frustration and ask for better service delivery.

Adequate hospital staff, proper medical backup and support is a minimal requirement and HNEH are not meeting that at this time. These hospitals service significant population centres and should be appropriately manned at all times.

It is only logical that at Inverell, where the hospital is due for a \$30m redevelopment, locals are questioning whether there will be enough staff when that happens.

Replacing the Xplorer train fleet earlier makes more financial sense

News this week that the State Government is looking to bring forward the replacement of the ageing XPT train fleet is good – but I reckon we need to fast-track the upgrade to our Xplorer fleet that services Armidale and Moree at the same time – especially in the light of a debacle over a broken-down train near Muswellbrook last Friday.

On its return journey last Friday afternoon the Xplorer train broke down near Muswellbrook and passengers – some of them school students from our region - had to wait around four hours for replacement bus transport.

Every passenger affected deserves an apology; it simply isn't good enough at any time, but given the stifling weather condition on Friday – having people sitting on a train with no air conditioning for that length of time was horrible.

But sadly, this is indicative of a larger problem. The Xplorer fleet is ageing and becoming less and less reliable.

When the train breaks down, spare parts can be hard to find, and I fear that buying a ticket on the Xplorer will soon become akin to buying a lottery ticket – you just don't know if you are going to be able to catch the train, or have to travel via coach instead.

It has got to the stage where the age of the fleet and break downs is having a significant impact on the reliability of the service and this must be addressed by the government.

A lack of reliability ultimately results in a reduction of patronage, which in turn only serves to provide an excuse to the Sydney bureaucrats to argue for our services to be reduced, because 'no one uses them anymore'.

We've seen this argument tried on us before in the past – and I'm not going to wear it and neither will our communities.

Recently, the NSW Government announced it would bring forward by two years the replacement of the 33-year-old XPT train fleet, which comprises 60 carriages servicing communities in the central west, southern highlands and north coast of the state.

The Xplorer fleet is less than half the size of the XPT, with 23 carriages BUT it makes far more sense to replace both fleets at the same time.

I am redoubling my efforts to have the Xplorer renewal brought forward – because adding 23 more carriages to the XPT replacement order will be cheaper than continually patching up an ageing Xplorer fleet and a larger order should see the capital cost per carriage reduced in any event.

A little bit of extra investment by government now will save millions in the long run.

First White Rock wind farm turbine blade arrives

What an historic day last Monday for Glen Innes and for the north, for the \$400 million White Rock wind farm project, and for the renewable energy industry generally!

The arrival of the first of what will be about 700 big long loads to come up the New England Highway from Newcastle presented an impressive sight – think, a giant winged keel or tail-flipping whale – and it was a day of celebration at Glen.

I was there too with about 400 others to greet the first convoy of the wind farm turbine blades as it made a spectacular entrance.

The first of what will be 210 turbine blades, measuring just shy of 60 metres and weighing 15 tonnes, sailed into town, and locals and school students, along with civic leaders and the White Rock developer Goldwind staff, watched it do a ceremonial drive-thru.

It was the start of what will be a six month journey for the White Rock wind turbine equipment – up to two convoys each week for every week through to May next year with loads of blades, tower sections, generators, cells and the turbine hub, being moved onto the wind farm, 20 kilometres west of Glen Innes.

John Titchen, the managing director of Goldwind, told us the project represents a real investment for the Glen Innes and Inverell area, in the vicinity of \$30-\$40 million is expected to be injected into the local economy during construction. Over 200 people have been involved during construction and a 10-15 local service team will be needed once the wind farm is operating.

The inaugural shipment took 11 hours from Newcastle and it was a pretty impressive load to watch manoeuvred through the ranges and up the highway.

The turbine blade is the first of what will be 210 to come up the highway over the coming months. These are the largest turbine blades to ever arrive in Australia and there's three to every tower, they have a diameter of 120 metres and the towers stand up to 50 storeys high. That's significant stuff for anyone.

White Rock hopes to be connected to the grid by mid-2017 - the concrete foundations for the first wind tower have already been laid and the road completed to the farm.

Work will now start on the installation of 70 turbines that will provide clean renewable energy to power approximately 75,000 homes, more than all the houses in the New England area.

Improving energy efficiency should include peer-to-peer trading

I had the honour of launching the Destination Uralla project, funded by the Murray-Darling Basin Regional Economic Diversification Program this week. It will work with local business to improve energy efficiency through targeted interventions, investigate the options for renewable energy generation across the shire, and promote and build the Uralla business precinct as a Z-NET tourism destination and model for other regional communities.

It provides funding for up to 20 businesses to obtain a free energy review undertaken by the Z-NET team coordinated by Steve Griffith and Peter Low which will show us just where savings can be identified for business operations like these.

Five local businesses, including a café, diner, brewery, bowling club and hair salon have already taken part in an energy monitoring experiment by the Z-NET team, and savings were highlighted involving draught proofing, insulation installation and upgrading lighting to energy efficient LED technology, right through to a business case for installing Solar PV panels.

As the Parliamentary Secretary for Renewable Energy, the forum demonstrated perfectly to me that we also need action to allow consumers with renewable energy systems to be able to trade between themselves to get even more savings on energy costs.

Peer-to-peer trading would allow consumers to get the full potential from their push to a renewable energy environment and better utilise existing energy infrastructure.

Allowing solar households to share energy with other households, rather than being forced to sell their excess solar back to the grid for a peppercorn rate, is “a no-brainer” as far as I’m concerned.

Peer-to-peer trading should be considered because we can be using the physical poles-and-wires infrastructure for more potential – because people trickling excess energy being generated back into the grid for some nominal fee is just a huge waste.

We can be actively trading energy; with people with more than they need trading it back to those who need more energy than they can generate which would also serve to spur more businesses and homes into placing solar PV panels on their roofs.

Peer-to-peer trading is a market driven incentive and there’s nothing stopping it, no infrastructure impediment anyway, all we need is for the federal regulator to change the rules to allow this to occur.

A grassroots response could get the regulations changed to allow more people to tap into localised generation trading.

Public support can put the wind up authorities to move with these new times.

It just makes sense, especially since the large feed-back tariff disappears now at a time when we’re seeing massive wind farm and other solar development across the northern tablelands and the north west of NSW and renewed interest from households and business in a new wave of PV solar and other energy savings.

New regional tourism fund a destination win

There’s good news with the announcement this week that the local tourism industry is set to benefit from a massive injection of \$13 million from the new Regional Tourism Fund.

Two programs for marketing and product development support will help meet part of the NSW Government’s strategy to re-energise tourism across Regional NSW.

The fund is available to Local Government, tourism and industry sector organisations as well as the six Destination Networks, with the product development program also available to tourism operators.

There’s a total of \$13 million available between 2016 and 2019, and the new Regional Tourism Fund provides increased investment of \$2.5 million into the regional visitor economy on a matched dollar-for-dollar basis.

There are grants to assist with infrastructure and accommodation projects and to deliver marketing campaigns aimed at driving overnight visitation, so the Regional Tourism Fund has the potential to support even more projects, stimulating tourism and creating more jobs.

Regional tourism contributed \$6.7 billion and employed 73,900 people across the State – and the New England and greater northern part of NSW gave a job to thousands of people and supported a small army of volunteers who helped drive visitor numbers to local areas.

The Northern Tablelands has been a great part of a big regional tourism growth over the past four years, with our landscape and built environment attractions and our major events, attracting more people.

Some of those established events, like music, cultural and sporting, bring in thousands of visitors every time they're on and the fact we're on a main north-south highway corridor drives even more motorists and travellers to our region.

Free diary helps seniors protect their rights

Free copies of a 2017 diary that can help our seniors navigate legal issues should be available from my offices from next Monday and it's obvious from initial enquiries this week they're in demand among seniors across the electorate.

The 2017 Legal Aid diary is a handy resource to give seniors access to the right information, services and support when and where they need it.

Each year, Legal Aid NSW produces a *Legal Topics for Older Persons Diary* packed with essential information for seniors about their rights and responsibilities. It explains everything from reverse mortgages to what gifts seniors can give without affecting their pension, and what they can do if adult children don't want to leave home.

Con artists often target our vulnerable and senior citizens and the diary has information on avoiding scams and browsing the internet safely so they're better armed with dealing with unscrupulous approaches.

It also explains new laws that impact on seniors and has a section for older motorists about road rules and safe driving, information about Seniors Card eligibility or even how to provide for pets in your will.

It's an invaluable resource for older people who sometimes struggle to know where to turn for advice on issues that are increasingly important at this stage of their lives.

You can pick up a copy from next week but they are also available online, via the order form at www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au/publications/order-a-publication.

Help shape our koala strategy across NSW

I'd encourage the community to help shape the direction of the NSW Government's state-wide koala strategy, which aims to secure and increase NSW koala numbers.

My government is embarking on a whole-of-government koala strategy and will spend \$10 million over five years to acquire vital koala habitat, following the release of the NSW Chief Scientist and Engineer Professor Mary O'Kane AC's *Report of the Independent Review into the Decline of Koala Populations in Key Areas of NSW*.

The independent review was commissioned in March and has made 11 recommendations, including one to develop an overarching strategy and another to identify koala habitat to target for conservation.

The next step is getting communities involved to help shape the plan to secure this iconic species for all future generations and help us reduce threats to koalas and improve research to ensure the survival of the species.

There's a three-month consultation program to come which will include regional community information sessions, stakeholder meetings and webinars, and people will also be able to access a web portal for information and to provide feedback.

I'll keep you posted on when those info sessions are on, and where.

Sportsground grant to fund new seating at Boomi

I've been able to deliver news of a \$5,000 grant to the Boomi Sportsground Reserve Trust which will now give up to 200 people somewhere comfortable to sit when they use the sportsground.

The new portable seating will be moved around the grounds for different groups and different sporting events that range from cricket to campdrafting and athletics to mud trials.

The grant will be used to produce two tiers of seating, each 10 metres in length, and it will be built by a local Warialda engineering firm.

They're hoping it will seat up to 200 people and I know the local schools who use it are especially excited because they haven't had anywhere to sit up until now, or at least anywhere safe to sit.

The new seating will also be available for use by a wide range of clubs and groups who use the Boomi Sportsground, including various horse and equine groups and other sports clubs.

Trust secretary/treasurer John Oates told me the funding would help them "get more than just bums on seats," because they're looking to provide better facilities for community groups while making the sportsground more user-friendly and also appeal to more groups who want to use it. That's a big plus for the entire community.

Today

Today I'm attending school presentation ceremonies at Warialda and Glen Innes Public Schools.

This afternoon I'll be hosting Christmas drinks in my new Moree Northern Tablelands electorate office, which will be officially opened by my federal colleague Mark Coulton. I'm looking forward to catching up with a number of locals and celebrating the festive season.

ADAM MARSHALL
Member for Northern Tablelands
Parliamentary Secretary for Northern NSW and Renewable Energy