

Opening Address

2009 Roads and Transport Congress

Acknowledgements :

Cr Col Meng Mayor of Mackay, Mayors and Shire Presidents, Councilors, and delegates

I also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on, the Yuibera Tribe. I respect their continuing culture and the contribution the Yuibera Tribe make to the life of this city and this region.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome delegates to Mackay for the tenth Australian Local Government Association Local Roads and Transport Congress.

In the 10 years since the first Roads Congress we have enjoyed a number of significant achievements such as the introduction and two extensions of the Roads to Recovery program, significant funding for community infrastructure, federal funding for asset management, urban rail projects, bike paths and rail level crossing upgrades, to mention just a few.

While we have much to celebrate, much remains to be done as we move forward into the second decade of the twenty first century.

One thing we have learned since meeting in Moree, is that it is not enough just to identify problems. It is up to us to develop solutions, argue the case and provide evidence that we – local government – understand the nation's transport challenges and that we are part of those solutions.

John Anderson, the former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport, was with us at the first Congress in Moree and is credited with initiating and being the driving force behind the Roads to Recovery Program. He will give us a retrospective of where we have come from, what we have achieved and give his views on the future of transport in Australia especially in relation to local government.

John is the first in a lineup of speakers including representatives from the Federal Government, Minister Pallas from Victoria, two separate chairs of

Parliamentary Committees, President of the NZ Local Government Association, Federal, state and local government representatives and speakers from the transport industry. These speakers will complement a number of interactive panel sessions which will allow us to distill some of the specific issues facing local government transport in both urban and rural areas.

As in the past, we have invited the Federal Government and Opposition to present their policies directly and to hear from local government. This year we have also invited the Greens because of the key role they have in the Senate.

Unfortunately the Honorable Anthony Albanese, Minister for Infrastructure, Transport Regional Development and Local Government is unable to attend and that is disappointing.

However I am pleased to welcome Catherine King MP, Chair of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government to the National Local Roads and Transport Congress to represent the Minister and deliver a speech on his behalf.

The Greens have also been unable to send a representative.

I am pleased to say that Warren Truss the leader of the Nationals and Opposition spokesman on transport will be addressing us tomorrow.

Since the first Congress in Moree much has changed in the policy and political landscape. In the last 18 months since the Congress in Shepparton we have experienced the Global Financial Crisis, the Government's response and the impact on the Budget bottom line

It is against this background of change that we have chosen the theme for this Congress to be "Road to the Future".

Over the last two years the Rudd Government has shown a significantly different approach to transport. It has shown a strong interest in infrastructure, especially transport infrastructure and has developed a National Transport Plan.

The National Transport Plan sets a new direction for Federal Government involvement with, and planning for, transport and transport infrastructure.

The plan focuses on how we will cope with the expected more than doubling of the freight task by 2020.

The Rudd Government has shown a strong interest in placing the Federal Government more directly into the planning and the provision of infrastructure. It has established Infrastructure Australia and the Major Cities Unit to assist it taking a more direct and involved role.

The Government has made it clear that rail has an increasingly important role to play to meet the growth in the freight task. However for the foreseeable future road transport will continue to be the dominant freight mode. Most commentators see road and rail as complementary. One of the roles for road transport is the link to the source or final destination over the final or first mile and hence the importance of local roads

Another very important, but unheralded, decision, agreed by COAG, was to press ahead with reform of the heavy vehicle charging to develop mass-distance-location charging for heavy vehicles. That decision, combined with the hints coming from the Henry Tax Review that there is a compelling case for road user charging, suggest that there may be some fundamental changes in how we go about funding roads, including local roads in Australia, being considered by the Government. It will be interesting to hear from the President of the New Zealand Local Government Association on developments, both good and bad, in this area in New Zealand which has a habit of being ahead of Australia in these types of micro economic reforms.

A further significant development is the High Court decision in *Pape v Commissioner of Taxation* which brings into question the constitutional validity of the federal government providing funding directly to local government through programs such as the Roads to Recovery.

In this volatile policy environment we need to be in a position to influence the Government's thinking and to be ready to respond as policies are developed.

While the policy landscape has changed since Moree especially in the last few years, our needs have not. The importance of local transport links and the need for them to be adequately resourced remain. Too often, decision-makers forget that every journey, whether it is freight to markets, kids to school,

patients to hospitals or exports to ports, begins and ends on a local road. That is why we need to keep reminding Canberra and all other stakeholders our local transport links are an important integral component of the transport system.

Transport is an issue which unites the city and the country council alike. While the issue is common the approach to issues of access and mobility differs between urban and rural areas.

We all know transport is critically important to the well being of every Australian, and with freight and passenger transport on track to double between 2003 and 2020 and project population increases, it is now more important than ever that Australia gets the transport agenda right and that local government needs are on that agenda.

We need to have a view about the importance of local roads; the transport needs of framers and miners; urban congestion; the needs for passengers across the country , in short the transport needs of our constituents. We also need to demonstrate our interest in making our freight corridors particularly to export oriented infrastructure such as ports efficient and effective

As owners and managers of the local roads network we have a special need to secure the funding and manage the asset in the nation's interest. We have commenced the challenge of improving our own asset management. We must get more and more efficient.

At this stage I would like to thank the Australian Government for its recent announcement of the Local Government Reform Fund which will provide financial assistance to accelerate the asset management work that has been commenced by many of your state and territory associations.

In the past the ALGA Board considered that it needed a published strategy to guide its relationship with the Federal Government. It is an approach that worked and has led to the development of a strong and robust relationship with the Federal Government.

It also has been successful and profitable for local government. Major achievements flowing from the lobbying effort by ALGA on behalf of local government are worthwhile mentioning in detail include:

- Roads to Recovery extended to 2014 at an increased rate of \$350 million per year worth \$1.75 billion;
- Federal involvement in the funding of urban rail projects;
- \$40 million for bike paths;
- \$150 million for railway level crossing upgrading
- \$1 billion Regional and Community Infrastructure Program;
- \$25 million Local Government Reform fund;
- Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government;
- Recognition of the needs of local “last and first mile” in road transport reforms including a local government targeted communication strategy by the National Transport Commission;
- Regional airports security funding: \$42.9 million over four years;
- Subsidies for weekly flights to remote regions: \$44.7 million over four years; and
- \$3 million for a Remote Aviation Infrastructure Fund

The current Local Roads and Transport Strategy has served local government well but is now becoming dated and needs to be refreshed.

The ALGA Board has taken a strong decision that it is time to update our existing strategy to recognise and reflect today’s policy and political environment. The Board has set as the primary objective for this Congress the development and agreement of a framework for a new Strategy.

The agreed framework in the form of a Congress Communiqué will be used by the Board to develop a strategy that will be launched at the National General Assembly in June 2010.

To help us we help us we have drawn together speakers from a range of transport areas important to local government. Their knowledge and insights will help us in our deliberations. Over the two days of this Congress, delegates

will hear from more than 30 speakers about the challenges facing local government transport in Australia and suggest possible approaches.

The Program for this Congress has been structured so that delegates have the option to attend sessions of particular interest as well as plenary sessions that are of interest to all.

Delegates also have the option to attend the popular, and I understand fully subscribed Media Workshops by Crispin Hull.

We have allowed one and half hours for discussion from the floor on the framework and the communiqué.

To assist delegates we have prepared an agenda paper that raises questions under six broad headings of:

- Local road funding and management;
- Urban transport;
- Mobility and access for regional Australians;
- Freight management;
- Safety; and
- Long term financial sustainability of local government.

The agenda paper has been sent to all registered delegates and is designed to raise awareness about issues facing local government transport. The paper is not intended to be work shopped and every question debated and answered over the course of the Congress.

Previous Congresses have been very successful at shaping policy. For example the Newcastle Congress was instrumental in putting urban transport policy on the table during the election campaign and locking Labor into Roads to Recovery.

In the communiqué that was agreed in Shepparton we emphasised that in the taking forward of the transport agenda for Australia in coming years local government is a vital part of the solution. We need to emphasise that we are

committed in working with the other levels of government on transport, transport planning and infrastructure.

But not on any terms.

While not wishing to preempt the final communiqué I do want to say that from my perspective there are some fundamentals that are not negotiable:

- The current level of funding to support local roads through Financial Assistance Grants Identified for Roads and Roads to Recovery, are critical and must be continued at current levels or higher;
- Removing both constitutional and policy uncertainty in the funding for local roads
- Local government must also be included in any new funding mechanisms seek to allocate funding according to road use. If heavy vehicles are going to be charged for using roads and if funding is going to be provided to the owners of the roads they use, then that has to include local government;
- A commitment by the all sides of Federal politics to urban public transport;
- Proper recognition of the access and mobility needs of Australians in rural and regional Australia ;
- A balance between the needs of freight an community amenity; and
- A safe road system.

Delegates I want you to listen to speakers over the next two days, question them, and think about the issues in the Agenda paper that we have circulated and be ready to join the discussion.

We will circulate a draft communiqué which will form the framework for our new Roads and Transport Strategy tomorrow to assist delegates during the discussion on Tuesday afternoon.

It will be up to us to impress upon our national political leaders the importance of roads and transport for local communities and that local government stands

ready to work with the Australian Government to deliver on the expectations of our communities.

Thank you. I look forward to meeting with you and discussing the issues during the course of the next two days.

Now I welcome Catherine King MP, Chair of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government to deliver her address