

“Walk a mile in my shoes” – a unique approach to encouraging better understanding and support for UAM from CEO/ General Manager perspective

Garry Storch

INTRODUCTION

Question: How do you prolong a Council meeting?

Answer: Raise any issue about dogs.

Love them or hate them, animals and especially dogs in the life of local government are a source of great debate, endless legislation, policy and community arguments. It seems everyone has a view and is very comfortable arguing it for as long as it takes. Much easier to argue than a multi-million dollar project or a town planning issue, and decidedly more passionate.

So what is the reality between the boardroom drama of a Council debate; policy discussion in the cool confines of the executive office; and the coal face work of our staff, the urban management professionals? These are the people on the ground among the pooches, smelling the ...er... roses and grappling with the enforcement of legislation or policy in the face of an irate owner, who swears to innocence and to the innocence of his or her four legged ‘child’.

The opportunity to spend some time in the pooch mobile, talk to the officers and meet members of the community and their pooches in their environment, was an excellent way to test the reality of policy and strategy. What appears perfectly straightforward in the Council Chamber or the office, is not always so on the ground.

We get a lot right but with a bit more thought things could be so much better.

I am going to concentrate on dogs in this presentation. The other high profile partner in urban animal management, the cat, is a very tricky subject which I am happy to leave to the real experts. My stance is supported by the research I have done and I quote from a number of highly credentialled sources which reveal:

- ‘Women and cats will do as they please and men and dogs should relax and get used to the idea’ – *Robert A Heinlein*
- ‘In order to keep a true perspective of one’s importance everyone should have a dog that will worship him and a cat that will ignore him’ – *Dereke Bruce*
- ‘Then there is the cat’s creed or credo: no matter what you have done wrong, always try to make it look like the dog did it’ – *Unknown*

Finally, there is the attitudinal difference between dogs and cats:

- The dog thinks: He feeds me, cares for me, gives me shelter – he must be God; but
- The cat thinks: He feeds me, cares for me, gives me shelter – I must be God.

So, I had best leave the felines alone.

MY EXPERIENCES

So who am I to be talking to such an august group of animal management professionals.

I am just an ordinary bloke. As a baby boomer and a country boy I enjoyed the freedom of growing up without too many hassles. This included the expectation or indeed the right, to own a pet or pets. Over the years I have enjoyed the company of dogs, cats, birds and fish, but dogs have always been my favourite pet.

This relationship stretches back to a wonderful old dog named Banjo who actually belonged to my grandfather but was the extended family dog. This was in the 1950’s at Dubbo in central western NSW. Banjo had complete freedom to roam the length and breadth of Dubbo. I am not sure he would have coped with the fences, leashes and the dog free zones of today’s urban environment.

We then got our own dog, a feisty little foxie called Trixie who was somewhat less of a wanderer than Banjo. Trixie was confined to the yard by fences at least until I got home from school and took her out to play with all the neighbourhood kids and dogs (and none of us were on leashes). As is the case with many children, I bequeathed the responsibility for the ongoing care of Trixie to my parents as I grew up, discovered the opposite sex and cars, left home and made my own way in life.

Then the cycle started again with dog number three, a black long haired retriever named ‘Poochie’ and dog number four, a black barb sheep dog and red setter cross...not the brightest tool in the shed, coming into our home with daughters one and two. These canine members of the family were fostered out to friends as we continued to move around with my work.

Our final dog ‘Honey’, a kelpie cross, arrived at our home in Darwin with our third daughter as a gift from neighbours...neighbours are very good like that. She lived with us for fifteen years, including relocation to Hobart...not a great experience for a born and bred Territory dog arriving in Hobart in mid winter..“What’s all this cold white stuff on the grass?” “Why is my water frozen over?”

To quote a gentleman by the name of Michael Harrington ‘You can’t always tell what a dog’s thinking by the look on its face’ but I reckon on this occasion I was close...I got the strong impression Honey thought I was a bloody idiot for bringing her to Hobart. After that initial climatic shock she lived out her life in Hobart ...I like to think happily.

So where does that put me by way of qualifications to be talking to you? As a dog owner, I class myself as pretty normal. I have changed with the times. In the early days I was not overly worried about roaming dogs and worrying about where dogs ‘did it’.

Now I have a more conscious concern about these issues and the respective rights of dog owners, their dogs, and the rights of non-dog owners.

On moving to Caloundra my wife and I made a conscious decision, despite having enjoyed the company of dogs for many years, to restrict ourselves to a Thai fighting fish in a bowl on the kitchen bench...much less stressful in our modern society. We look at examples such as our dear neighbours who have a delightful Jack Russell called 'Daisy' who barks constantly at the slightest movement, as Jack Russells do. Funnily enough this does not worry us, but causes them great distress in trying to keep Daisy quiet. The final clinching argument in deciding not to go back to being dog owners, was the sight of grim faced people on our regular morning walks grasping doggy doo bags and sticks to recover their 'family' member's droppings. In our minds, not an enthralling 'must do' task before breakfast.

From a work perspective, as a local government officer, dog problems did not really cross my radar in NSW in the 60's and 70's, with the possible exception of Queanbeyan where the dog ranger, John Rosewarne would relay some interesting dog tales when we crossed in the corridors.

Things changed when I moved to Darwin in 1982 and took up my first role as CEO. 'Fantastic place, the last frontier where men were real men and dogs were real dogs...where those real dogs thought poodles were members of a weird religious cult' – *Rita Rudner*. Darwin, as would befit its image was virtually devoid of fences, certainly not of the type that could keep a real dog in. I still marvel at the courage of the likes of Eddie Bow and David Sachs in tackling the dogs and their owners...both of whom were equally capable of snarling and biting when least expected. To insist on registration or restrain them from running all over the place or from enjoying the occasional chomp on an unsuspecting passer by. Knowing Eddie and David I am sure it was courage, although the less courageous among us may say foolhardiness.

Needless to say it was a very quick introduction to the love/hate relationship between man, his dog and the Council dog ranger. I do recall at one stage we called in a lady from Mt Isa, a guru in dog management to provide some insight into new ways of managing the problem in urban environments. The lady, whose name escapes me, was one of the early practitioners of modern animal management techniques and left us with some positive initiatives to pursue. On moving to Hobart dog issues faded into the background – obviously too cold for them to come out of their dog houses, something 'Honey' could relate to.

So on to Caloundra. Dogs are much more of an issue in this City. Why is this so? I believe there are two main reasons.

The first relates to its demographic and geographic mix. In the hinterland where we have mix of village urban and rural residential living interspersed with rural farms, there is a clash between the lifestyle of the farmer with working dogs, the rural residential dwelling dog owner and the rural residential non dog owner.

Farmers argue the need to register their working dogs and complain of wandering dogs killing stock. The dog owning rural resident complains about having to restrict the wandering habits and barking of their dogs...after all, that's why they moved to the country; and the non-dog owner complains about barking and wandering dogs...after all they moved to the country to get away from these problems. Then, along the coastal strip where there is an almost total urbanisation, there exists a clash of lifestyle desires between dog owners and non-dog owners. These clashes centre around recreation areas, including beaches, barking and wandering dogs and dog faeces.

The second reason why dogs are an issue in Caloundra City relates to the changes in community views. As CEO I have witnessed changing views as to what is, or is not, acceptable behaviour and the explosion of the rights, or perceived rights of individuals, to do many things that in the past would not be deemed as the 'norm' in society. The clash of individual rights and those of the wider community is a major issue for governments at all levels and indeed for communities themselves. People are better educated and more aware of their rights...they are more ready, willing and able to challenge authority and do so with increasing regularity.

Legend has it that a dog ranger at Caloundra of some years ago used to control the dog problem with a then very effective local law, Local Law No.303. Neither the Council nor the community would accept Local Law No.303 today, if indeed the legend was true.

This new community awareness has its benefits and its drawbacks. The change in community views is very evident in two major areas of local government responsibility and activity, town planning and local law enforcement.

I have said for many years if you are looking for a career in local government that is stress free become either a librarian or a parks and gardens worker. Definitely don't become a town planner dealing with development applications, or a local laws enforcement officer, dealing particularly with dogs.

I suppose it takes all types but in my next life I would opt to come back as a happy and contented gardener pottering around in our wonderful parks and gardens...smelling the roses.

CALOUNDRA CITY COUNCIL ISSUES

So what are some of the dog management issues addressed by Council over the past 12 months? A quick perusal of the Council agendas reveals the following as examples:

- A review of Local Laws that have designated dog free or dog access zones on the beaches and coastal reserves along the length of the coastal strip. When and where they are allowed and when and where they are not allowed.

Sounds perfectly reasonable but is much more complex to administer and enforce than just drawing lines on maps. By Councillors trying to address competing community needs within their individual divisions the system has been complicated.

There are a series of dog free zones, dog accessible zones where dogs have to be either on leash or can be off leash and zones that allow dogs access at certain times of the day only. You need to be a Rhodes scholar with a GPS system at times to know just which zone you are in. Even the dogs get confused. Signage needs to be clear and rather prolific at beach accesses on both the beach side and landward side otherwise the ability to enforce the restrictions in the Local Laws becomes a very difficult assignment. Our officers are slowly rationalising this situation, hopefully to arrive at a workable and sustainable solution. A blanket decision to either ban dogs from all beaches, which happens in some areas such as Warringah Shire on Sydney’s northern beaches, or at least to have fewer conflicting zones abutting each other, would help resolve the problem.

- A review of Local Laws that have set a level of penalty for certain offences at \$375. This penalty was originally agreed to by Council several years ago when it adopted a suite of Local Laws as part of a major review of all Local Laws. It was argued at the time that this level of penalty was consistent with other legislation and court experiences and with other Councils’ Local Laws.

Sounds perfectly reasonable but not so easy to live with politically when the penalties began to bite. In the cool light of day the amount seemed too high, especially when stories of confusion as to what was allowed where and when came in to cloud the issue. It gave no pleasure to our local laws officers, the councillors or the community dog owners. The penalty was subsequently reduced to \$150.

- A report on operational procedures to return straying dogs to their owners.

Sounds perfectly reasonable but not so simple when the Privacy Laws come into play and councillors gained an awareness of some of the incidents that had brought the procedures into play in the first place. Although Council does not normally get involved in operational matters, some community lobbying of a councillor led to a report to Council being called for. The administrative procedures were reviewed by the officers in the light of the customer service outcome being sought by councillors without impinging on the privacy and security issues outlined by our officers and a good result was achieved.

- A report on establishing and maintaining an off leash dog exercise area.

Sounds perfectly reasonable but more complex than just identifying a block of dirt and turning Rover loose. What size should it be, what facilities should be provided, should it be fenced, where should it be located? The end result was not in the view of our local laws officers, an ideal outcome. Their view was primarily that the area of land on a busy main road was too small and was not well located. Despite this the local councillor carried the day with his colleagues and the exercise area has been established. Its success or otherwise is yet to be determined. It is certainly fenced and well laid out with a variety of facilities. Whether the size and location prove to be a problem remains to be seen.

Our councillors generally have a healthy respect for the expertise of our Regulatory Services Unit and each of the matters has had input from key local laws officers using their coalface experience to allow Council the opportunity to make reasoned and well presented responses. The advice is not always accepted without question, as is instanced by several of the examples above. No one claims this is Utopia City Council. In most cases though reasonable outcomes have been reached and where further improvements can be made we will seek to do this.

A ‘WALK IN MY SHOES’ EXPERIENCE

So how does one experience this ‘coalface’ learning. Simple ...go to the coalface...walk in their shoes.

I have taken the opportunity over the years to try and keep in touch with the services the various Councils deliver on the ground. Currently at Caloundra I have two main initiatives. Firstly I have ‘paper bag’ lunches with staff either in ad hoc groups or in work groups at remote locations. I do this generally twice per fortnight. Secondly I work on the job for a day or part of a day with groups of staff...a walk in their shoes...on a regular basis. The shoes, and in some cases boots, I have been walking in over the past 12 or 18 months include road gangs, parks and gardens gangs, water gangs, sewerage gangs, customer service and call centre staff, librarians and local laws officers dealing with such laws as parking, illegal dumping, abandoned vehicles and of course dogs.

I would like to thank Shane Scriggins, Brian Randi, Garry Bain, Peter Bottrell and Alex Popovich for their time and patience in showing me what they do and in answering my numerous questions...I learnt a great deal.

So what have I learnt from walking in the shoes of our local laws officers both generally and specifically in relation to dogs?

In terms of the community:

- The vast majority of the community want to do the right thing. The response of people to our animal management programs is perceived to have improved over the years due to our efforts at education and a visible presence in well frequented areas.
- The great ‘pork pie’ telling ability of the average Aussie when they have been sprung with dog off leash or out of the yard... ‘It’s never happened before’, ‘Someone left the gate open’, ‘I have never seen that dog before in my life’ (sounds like Bill Clinton...I have never had sex with that woman). No one ever says...yes, my dog is a real bugger...he will bite anyone given half a chance.
- The lack of knowledge of the law by the average Aussie. This is exacerbated when the rules are different either within local areas or across local government boundaries eg. dogs are allowed on some beaches and not on others or times may differ. People pay little regard to local government boundaries and expect the rules to be the same everywhere.

- To encourage people to abide by Local Laws they often need to know why the law is in place and what is in it for them, what benefit will come to them and the community through the Local Law.
- Some people will always try their luck and hope there are no officers around to catch them when they ignore a law. It is the same mentality as speeding and hoping there are no speed cameras or police radar around. They have an aversion to authority.
- Some people are more protective of their dogs than they would ever have been with their children. I came across some advice to dog owners through my research that they could well ponder on:
- “Don’t accept your dogs admiration as conclusive evidence that you are wonderful” – *Ann Landers*;
- “When a man’s best friend is his dog, that dog has a problem” – *Edward Abbey*.

In terms of our laws and policies:

- They need to be framed to support an agreed overall strategic direction. A clear and unambiguous strategic direction still needs to be resolved by Caloundra City Council. This would give a focus for our laws and policies, which may or may not need to be amended.
- The local laws officers would appreciate a clear strategic direction from Council on an approach to urban animal management. It would make it easier for local laws officers to implement them.
- Our Local Laws and policies are on the whole reasonably clear and implementable by our officers. They allow some flexibility in implementation. Issues for example, determining ‘under effective control’ require consistent interpretation.
- There are lots of stakeholders out there for whom there may be unintended consequences if our policies and Local Laws are not carefully considered and drafted. Input from a local law officer is crucial given their depth of knowledge of the community and stakeholders in relation to this issue.
- Regulation is not effective without education and provision of information to both dog owners and the general public. This needs to be appropriately funded.
- Dog registration should not be considered as the only source of funding for dog control...it is only part of the picture. Funding needs to be considered in the same way that funding for other recreation activity is considered.

In terms of equipment and infrastructure

- There is not enough benefit being derived from technology. For example easy to use, comprehensive and accurate communication and information equipment and data bases are needed to ensure easy access to up-to-date information in the field.

- Signage is inadequate. In numerous cases it was dilapidated, illegible, poorly located or non-existent. This was particularly evident in local parks. One very proactive suggestion from the coalface was to imprint signage on concrete walking paths.
- Appropriate transport is required whether it is purpose fitted utes or vans or, as was highlighted to me by Brian Randi, a quad bike for patrolling beaches for dogs. Brian pointed out that for an officer to sight a wandering dog on a beach from any distance away in many cases presents a lost cause. The ability of the officer to cover the distance to the dog and or owner, who are inevitably walking away rather than towards the officer, before the dog or its owner disappears, is almost non existent...save perhaps where the officer is a budding iron man.

In terms of our local laws officers

- Skill is an essential requirement in handling people well to defuse potentially aggressive situations. People react in many different ways when confronted by authority, from outright aggression, to embarrassment, to contriteness. The officer has to be ready and able to handle all these responses.
- The personality and the knowledge base of a local law officer are critical. They need to have a good all round education and knowledge base of issues sometimes outside their specific areas of responsibility;
- Officers must like people and animals.
- They also must have very well developed people skills, be friendly yet firm and able to judge where some flexibility is required. To quote Brian Randi... ‘Local Law offences are not a hanging offence...it is not a murder which has been committed’.
- The officers must have a strong knowledge of the law and to convey it in laymen’s terms...not in terms of ‘being pursuant to section, subsection and clause of a particular Local Law or some higher legislation.’ People need to understand what it is they have done or are alleged to have done;
- Officers must not be officious or threatening.
- Officers need some certainty of support from their management so that are not seen to be boofheads when trying to implement laws and/or policies.
- Finally local laws officers have a crucial customer service role to play for their Council. How they go about their business is a reflection of how many people judge the performance of their Council.

I must say all of the above personal traits were in strong evidence among our officers, which was very pleasing.

We are working on the equipment and infrastructure issues and made some significant advances in the 2003/4 budget.

I will be addressing the development of a strategic plan for urban animal management with our Governance and Strategy Division in consultation with our local laws officers.

As to the community, education supported by policing rather than the reverse is the answer to raising awareness of the law but more importantly the reason for the law and the outcome it is seeking to achieve.

CALL TO ACTION

What I will take into the organisation as a result of walking in the shoes of our local laws officers?

- We will develop a strategic direction for urban animal management and plan to implement the required actions.
- We will promote education as the primary policing tool with enforcement the back up for the recalcitrant.
- We will equip, within the constraints of our resources, our local laws officers to do the job to the best of their ability.
- We will investigate the potential for common signage and laws with our Sunshine Coast neighbours.
- We will develop a best-fit profile for local laws officers and recruit on that profile.
- We will provide our officers with continual opportunities to be made aware of new or changed laws and refresher courses, where some laws are infrequently used.
- We will provide our officers with continual opportunities to learn and refresh skills in customer service and handling difficult people.
- We will reinforce with our officers their valuable customer service and public relations role.
- We will ensure the knowledge and skills of our local laws officers are used when developing policy and Local Laws to ensure we understand what will and will not work on the ground.
- We will encourage local laws officers to think laterally and find win win solutions, which do not compromise their integrity or fairness and equity in applying the law.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Garry Storch
Chief Executive Officer
Caloundra City Council
PO Box 117
Caloundra QLD 4551

Ph: 07 5420 8977

Email: ceo@caloundra.qld.gov.au

Garry has been the Chief Executive Officer at Caloundra City Council since February 1997. He has spent 38 years in Local Government with 8 Councils in 3 States. He has been employed for 26 years in senior executive positions, including 15 years as the Chief Executive Officer of two Capital City Councils, Darwin from 1982 to 1991 and Hobart from 1991 to 1997.

Garry has gained extensive experience in leading organisations through the change process, managing the political interface, strategic and corporate planning, major capital projects, community consultation, local and regional economic initiatives and intergovernment relations. He has been a director of companies established by both Hobart City Council and Caloundra City Council to plan and deliver services and develop and manage facilities as stand alone businesses.

He has chaired and been a member of many intergovernment statutory committees and working parties and has undertaken overseas study tours to the United Kingdom, Europe, United States of America, Canada, China, Indonesia and New Zealand.

Garry's academic qualifications include a Master of Public Administration and an Associate Diploma in Local Government Administration. He is a graduate of the Australian Institute of Management Inter-University Advanced Management Program and is an active participant in the Institute of Municipal Management Continuing Professional Development Program.

He is a Fellow of Local Government Managers Australia an Associate of the International City/County Management Association.

In 2000 he was the recipient of awards as Local Government Manager of the Year for Queensland and the Australia Institute of Management Professional Manager of the Year for the Sunshine Coast region in Queensland.