

The local government response to Port Arthur: a personal experience

by Neil Noye, Mayor, Tasman Council

Port Arthur falls within the Municipal boundary of the Tasman Council. On 28 April 1996 the community found itself thrust into the international spotlight as a result of the shootings at Port Arthur.

The Tasman municipality contains many areas of tourist interest, and is heavily depended on tourist trade for its economic livelihood. The Council was faced with a range of problems following the tragedy at Port Arthur, including shock at the numbers of people killed, impact on the economic infrastructure as a direct result of the loss of tourist earnings, and how to handle the issue of 'community recovery', a process that was recognised as being complex and protracted. The Council and key community members were able to recognise the importance of the tasks before them, and put in place structures that ensured that the adverse effects of the tragedy were minimised as much as possible, and that the Tasman community could look to the future with confidence and security.

Sunday 28th April

I was fencing with my son on my property, which is 7 kilometres from Port Arthur. I saw one ambulance go up the road and, shortly after, another. I wasn't too worried at the time as we have two ambulances in our volunteer group. When I saw a police car follow, I made contact with our local nursing home which has two emergency beds. At that point I was told that someone was running amok at Port Arthur with a gun. They were not sure of any other details.

I then tried to contact Port Arthur, but couldn't get in because the lines were jammed. I managed to contact houses just out of Port Arthur, and was told that there were up to twenty people dead in one area — the media were still saying three or four.

I then contacted the Council General Manager and went down to the Council Chambers at Nubeena, fourteen kilometres from Port Arthur. There we opened the telephone lines with the Police Task Force at Taranna. At around 4 p.m. the Police contacted me and

This paper was presented at the Port Arthur Seminar, 11–12 March 1997, Melbourne. Readers should bear in mind that it is Neil's personal experience related one year ago.

Neil's involvement with Local Government extends over 28 years, including nine years as Mayor. He was also the local SES Co-ordinator for seventeen years, retiring in 1996. The Council of nine people serves a relatively small community of 2,200 permanent residents.

requested Council plans of the Seascap Cottage. We got those out, and took them to the Police Headquarters where I introduced myself and made myself known. I advised them that we would keep the telephone lines open from the Council Chambers for anything they needed. It was about 6.00 p.m. by the time I left Taranna and returned to the Council office.

We remained there that night, and gave our first media interview after midnight. The media wasn't supposed to have got through because of the road block. The interview went well but it was pretty unexpected. At this point the Police were in charge of the whole situation, and I was of the view that we were there to assist them wherever possible.

At around 2 a.m. (Monday) the Police contacted me and wanted a bulldozer supplied to Seascap to block the entrance, and possibly provide protection for any subsequent Police action. We made arrangements for that.

At 8 a.m. we had the Council Chambers open. The General Manager and myself were there full time answering media calls from around Australia and the world. We were really the only two running it. The telephone lines were then jammed until nearly midnight.

It was 'full-on' for the first week, until we organised a media officer to assist. As we did not have a media officer on council staff, initially one, then another, was provided by the Premier's Department. The rest of the Council staff were traumatised and were not at work. The General Manager and I kept the office running. All Council business

was put on hold for perhaps three weeks to a month whilst we concentrated on the matters at hand.

Within the first week, we issued all Councillors with a fax machine so that we could quickly distribute information to them. Any piece of news or information that came through was therefore quickly sent to all councillors.

Formation of the Community Recovery Task Force

On the Tuesday evening following the shooting, we formed a Community Recovery Task Force, with fourteen on the Committee. Anyone in the community could come to the task force meetings and could vote on any issue.

The role of the task force was to inform the community as to what action the Council was proposing. Those that were in some way affected by the tragedy needed to be given something to do. The task force therefore formed a number of sub-committees: the Memorial Committee, the Trust Fund Committee, and the Entertainment Committee.

The Trust Fund Committee was formed over and above the state-level Port Arthur Appeal Committee. We found that where people wanted to be involved, we gave them a committee job — where they weren't satisfied, we gave them two committees to be involved with!

We also established a community newsletter, distributed twice a week. This covered every household in the area and contained details as to what we were doing, and asking for their input. It was probably the most beneficial thing that we did for the community. They wanted news, and the information was critical. More than once I got messages on my answering machine, and when I rang back to see what they wanted, the person would say that they didn't need me now, and that the newsletter had given them everything that they wanted to know. We felt that if there was anyone traumatised, it was important to get them involved with Council or one of the committees, and we could use the newsletter to do this.

We received a tremendous amount of advice from the Department of Community and Health Services, the State Emergency Service and the Premier's Department, but we had decided that we were going to do our recovery from inside. We were happy to accept help from outside, but the main effort and direction had to come from us.

Politicians were kept away — we wouldn't have a bar to do with politicians! They were ringing up left, right and centre, but we asked them to stay out of the way — just let us get on to do what we do ... 'We'll let you know when its time to come in.'

The first of the real milestones in the recovery process was the local community Memorial Service for those who had been killed. This was held at Port Arthur on Friday 3 May 1996, and was important in keeping the community together and ensuring that people were involved in the recovery process.

One very important aspect of the council involvement was the tremendous part played by the General Manager and the accountant. They put in extremely long hours each day, all week, and they didn't once give in. We gave the General Manager a fortnight off for the time he had put in, but during this he kept coming into the office every day to ensure that things were going properly. There was no asking for overtime, or only working to fixed hours. Many nights we were there till well after midnight — as long as it took to do what we had to do.

Visit by the Prime Minister to the Port Arthur site

At one point the Premier of Tasmania wanted to get in touch with me. My line was jammed, so he rang the next door neighbour and asked them to get in contact with me.

This was because the Prime Minister, John Howard, was coming to Port Arthur, and the Premier wanted me to meet with him at 8.00 am. I said that I couldn't as I had to be in Hobart that same morning to do the reading at the State Memorial Service at St David's Cathedral. The Premier said not to worry about that and that he would look after things.

So following the meeting with the Prime Minister, I flew directly to Hobart by helicopter, and was there in time to read at the State Service. It was the first time that I had seen my cattle, and particularly my cows calving in three weeks — and that was from a helicopter!

Delegation visit to other Australian states

A delegation comprising myself, the Premier and the Chairman of the Board of the Port Arthur Historic Site was formed. We visited each of the Eastern Australian States over the course of a week, and thanked the people for what they had done for us. This was a particularly memorable experience.

We met with members of the Victoria Police Special Operations Group who had assisted at Seascope Cottage. They were very pleased that we had taken our time to go and thank them for what they had done for us.

We then went to Ballarat and visited children who had lost both their mother and father. We met them at a lunch hosted by the Ballarat Shire. We did a number of major interviews in Victoria, before going to Canberra where we met with school children who presented a cheque for money that they had raised.

We continued with interviews in Canberra, and attended a dinner at the British High Commission. We then flew to Sydney and continued with the extremely long days of media interviews and visits. From Sydney it was on to Brisbane, where patients at a hospital for terminally ill children presented us with a cheque for Port Arthur.

By this stage, the issue of the debate over gun control was starting to come in and the media didn't want to talk so much about Port Arthur, but rather about this issue. After dinner on each of the nights we were away, we would meet and plan our strategy of what we would say the next day.

We returned to Melbourne after Brisbane, and from there went to Adelaide. There we continued the interviews with a range of media sources, before finally returning to Hobart.

The whole trip was extremely beneficial. The people were hungry for news, and we visited wherever possible the Tasmania House in each State, and spoke with the staff there, as well as the media generally. Our main aim was to thank the people of Australia for what they had done, because they had been marvellous.

Economic impact of the event on the municipality

We recognised as a Council that the shootings would have a profound effect on the economy of the area. Port Arthur itself was closed down for three weeks, but some of the businesses did not suffer quite as badly as the others because they received the additional business from the

media and government departments who were now operating in the area.

We could see this, and contacted the Premier's Department and Tasmanian Development and Resources (TDR) to get them into the district and circulating around. Port Arthur started to recover after that initial three-week period. People come back in different ways. It wasn't only tourism — the people of Tasmania really got behind it and that was excellent for Port Arthur itself. That was coming back nicely.

But at the fringes — the caravan parks, holiday homes and other accommodation — they were really hurting and this was the case until the end of 1996.

TDR were slow. They had promised interest assisted loans and restructure of existing loans, but until I contacted the Premier before Christmas, things had been slowing down. This was probably due to the restructuring that the TDR has recently gone through. After I contacted the Premier, the loan assistance started to come through.

Overall we have had a tremendous amount of assistance from the Government and from various departments. The Prime Minister also allocated \$2.5 million specifically for the Port Arthur Historic Site. A lot of people thought that the assistance from the Federal Government was for us, the community. But it wasn't. It was given to the Historic Site to rebuild the visitors' centre and to upgrade the car park. The demolition and rebuilding of the Broad Arrow Cafe was another issue.

We also received assistance from Sorell Council, our next door neighbours. They allocated \$10,000. In addition, a number of other costs were picked up by the State Government.

But as a council we were meeting a number of unforeseen expenses from our own resources. Until the end of June, we had recorded an additional \$56,000 lost in terms of telephone costs, salaries etc. and this was becoming a real burden on ratepayers. We were starting to get a bit 'uptight' about it. We contacted the Federal Government, and they said we had to deal through the local Premier, which we of course had also been doing. The State Government eventually came through with \$50,000.

We have also had to increase rates, with some of the increase due to Port Arthur. However, we realised that everyone in the community was hurting, and we endeavoured to keep any increases down to a minimum.

Personal visits to members of the community

On the Tuesday following the shooting, I visited all the local people who had lost loved ones. I knew eight of the people who were killed and I knew the perpetrator — I had met him twice. We had previously met when he had come to my property and wanted to buy calves off me for a property that he owned at Copping, north of the Tasman Peninsula.

Funerals of the deceased

As Mayor, I attended a number of funerals of those killed, both in Tasmania and interstate. These were very traumatic experiences. Local Government was responsible for meeting the cost of my attendance at these, but when I was talking to the Lord Mayor of Hobart in passing one day, she offered to meet the cost of the interstate air fares from her own sources. This was particularly helpful.

Other financial costs

I receive an annual \$7,000 Mayor's Allowance. I have not claimed any additional costs as a result of Port Arthur, and have walked away from my business for months at a time.

I have told the municipality that I will not claim any out-of-pocket expenses unless the State or Federal Government compensated the council. I couldn't ask my ratepayers to 'carry' Port Arthur any more than they were, which will eventually be hundreds of thousands of dollars — significant in our small community.

Significant events from the early recovery process

We were told a number of things that had arisen as a result of the Dunblane shootings, particularly in relation to the troughs and peaks that we would experience during the recovery process.

I initially thought that we would be strong enough to get through, but what they indicated in relation to this was true. Some of the local community wanted to go to the preliminary court hearings of the gunman. I tried to talk them out of going. They insisted on going, but afterwards came back and told me that it didn't improve them much at all. For some it was an extremely traumatic experience.

Another issue was that some residents wanted to take control of much of the recovery process.

During meetings of the task force, there was some opposition to people

from the gallery offering their views directly to the task force, and being allowed to vote.

There were quite a number of people in the task force and in the gallery who were under extreme pressure. They were not thinking rationally at the time, but in time they started to get their feet on the ground, and realised that the whole community needed to be involved with the task force during the recovery process.

This agreement of the community to any action also extended to the media. The *Witness* TV program approached us and wanted to come and interview members of the community. But they wouldn't do it unless the local people agreed.

The task force voted on this proposal, and I accepted a vote from the public gallery too. I wasn't personally in favour of the *Witness* reporters coming, but I was in favour of them getting the view of the community that they didn't want them. As it turned out, the interviews were well conducted.

The future

We think now that the community is slowly starting to recover, but the process will go on for at least another twelve months. Some of the people who have lost loved ones are starting to get their feet back on the ground and feel positive.

As a Council we are looking to the future, and trying to build up the municipality. We have a lot of new enquiries coming in for accommodation, and the establishment of new businesses. Out of the tragedy of Port Arthur, we have received a tremendous amount of publicity, and we want to look at the positive aspects of this

The Recovery Task Force has now been made a formal committee of Council, and we will confirm from a list of nominees a committee of twelve community members, to meet monthly. The committee will also formally establish a number of sub-committees such as the Special Events Committee, the Memorial Committee, and the Community Radio Committee.

The idea of a community radio station will address the real problem that we have in the local area of poor communications, which was a significant issue operationally during the Port Arthur incident. Mobile telephones don't currently work in the area, but we are told that this is being addressed. The initiative of the radio station preceded

the shootings, but this has now been given more impetus and importance.

The community is looking at the establishment of a suitable memorial to mark the event. We have invited comments in newspapers throughout Australia, asking what people consider would be a suitable memorial. About 72 per cent of the respondents suggest that we should use part of the Broad Arrow Cafe or its grounds as the focus point of the memorial.

I am also involved with the Port Arthur Appeals Committee, which is headed by a Queens Counsel as chairman. At present we have approximately \$3.3 million. This is taking an enormous amount of my time, particularly in responding to media articles that suggest that there may not be enough money, or that no funds are available for the head stones of the victims, for example. Generally however, the media have given me an armchair ride, and have been very understanding, both nationally and internationally.

The Port Arthur Historic Site

There is still a lot of work also to be done in relation to the staff at the Port Arthur Historic Site. They are still hurting. The community and staff at the site need to be drawn closer together, and the management of the site and the community also have to come together.

I've worked well with the management of the site, but many people feel that they have been left out. It's been a bit fragmented at times, and there have been problems, but we are slowly overcoming them. It's all part of being a small community. This was also one of our biggest assets, in that everyone generally knows everyone else.

Conclusion

I would like to thank the many and varied organisations that have assisted the Tasman Community, particularly Tasmania Police and the State Emergency Service, and the Department of Community and Health Services which includes the Tasmania Ambulance Service. Also to the staff at the Royal Hobart Hospital, particularly the nursing staff, who may not have received the level of recognition that they rightly deserve.

I am acutely aware that in thanking people that it you leave just one group off, they get offended. This is not the intention, and the Tasman community owes a tremendous debt of thanks to all the people of Australia for their support and help.