

Local Agenda

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The official magazine of the Local Government Association
of NSW and Shires Association of NSW



Reclaiming the Streets

PLUS...

- > *Bridges – Assets Or Liabilities*
- > *East Meets West In Downtown Sydney*
- > *The Way That West Will Win*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| <p>04 President's Message
Bruce Miller, President,
Shires Association of NSW</p> <p>05 President's Message
Genia McCaffery, President, Local
Government Association of NSW</p> <p>06 In the News
Plague of Potholes to cost UK tens of
millions; Righting California's ship of
state; Hunter's \$330m council pothole;
Latteland lepers get a paw in the door;
Fast approval for public housing draws
criticism</p> <p>10 Cover Story
Reclaiming the Streets</p> <p>13 Macquarie 2010
The first in a series of features
covering the Macquarie Bicentenary
commemorations</p> <p>14 Inside LGSA
Planning Award win highlights
importance of NRM</p> <p>15 Comment
Constitutional Recognition</p> <p>16 Feature
Bridges – assets or liabilities?</p> <p>18 Out & About
Wiley Park: carols in the park; Bondi:
Photography Awards; Bankstown: bus
to beach service; Randwick: supporting
helicopter rescue service; Matraville:
Christmas decoration competition;</p> | <p>20 Trendsetters
Blue Mountains City Council moves
into top gear</p> <p>22 Awards Watch
What's Happened</p> <p>23 Conference Watch
What's Happened & What's Coming</p> <p>24 Profile
The way that West will win – interview
with Juvenile Justice Minister, Graham
West</p> <p>26 Local Government Super
Are green buildings good for your
super?</p> <p>28 Council in Profile
Mosman Council – open all hours</p> <p>30 Feature
Sydney no longer a vicious cycle</p> <p>31 Innovations in Planning
LGA Conference delivers smart
solutions - 2009 Local Government</p> <p>32 Feature
East Meets West In Down Town
Sydney</p> <p>34 Feature
Diversion not collision – creating
opportunities for our youth</p> | <p>Gladesville: new creek boardwalk;
Manly: opening of the Keirle Park
Sporting & Community Pavillion</p> |
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DIVERSION *not collision*

creating
opportunities
for our youth



By Lisa Kinahan

Increasingly it seems there are few aspects of our lives that Local Government is not involved in. Gone were the days when Local Government simply picked up our bins and fixed up local roads. These days Local Government is expected to be involved in almost all aspects of community life.

One of the areas catching the attention of many councils across the state is that of our younger section of society – the easily bored and sometimes disruptive youths. Here we explore a great diversionary initiative that is taking off around the state. “No workshop, No jumpshot” is the mantra for the highly acclaimed Midnight Basketball program.

With its roots in the US, the program was a 1990s initiative to curb inner-city crime by keeping urban youth off the streets and engaging them with alternative to drugs and crime. The program was brought to Australia by a group of enlightened alumni from the Benevolent Society’s Sydney Leadership Program in 2006 who saw the need for a similar program here.

Midnight Basketball is now a national program that helps often marginalised youth identify and embrace positive opportunities. Dinner, compulsory lifeskills workshops and tournament basketball games are run in stadiums on Saturday nights from 7.30pm till midnight, providing a safe and motivating environment. Saturday nights are the highest risk period of the week for teenagers, and says Chief Executive of Midnight Basketball Tess White, ‘not only do we offer them a safe and stimulating option on a Saturday night but by combining sport and education they are actually taking something positive away with them.’

The workshops are a key component of the evening and cover issues such as self-esteem and confidence, decision making and problem solving, impulse and anger control, substance, emotional and physical abuse, financial literacy amongst a raft of other issues. Adds Tess White, “we regularly see young people blossom with the confidence

they have build through their involvement with the Midnight Basketball program.”

Not only that but when the police start commenting that a participant waved at them in the street or there are good reports coming back from employers, we know we are making a difference and breaking down barriers within communities to help support the local young.”

And it's this community support that is so crucial to making the whole thing happen. Midnight Basketball provides a very supportive but largely hands off approach to each of the programs. The process tends to begin with a local auspicing partner, most commonly this partner is Local Government as they are usually in a unique position to be the 'hub' for the other community partners. The community then puts together a Community Committee with a variety of roles both volunteer and paid that ensure the program runs smoothly and is integrated into all aspects of the community.

Tess White is quite emphatic about the importance of this. “Its absolutely key that each community committee is a diverse group of people. This ensures we not only have specialists who deal with youth issues but also local business who provide work experience and jobs, service

organisations like Rotary who provide excellent mentoring and support, local educators and facilitators for workshops, sporting groups to teach skills and find pathways into local sporting clubs, and many more.“

The committee is usually comprised of the usual committee roles, as well as some uniquely different ones such as volunteer recruitment manager, community fundraising manager, personnel manager, logistics manager and a youth worker. In each community there is a generally also a Commonwealth Bank representative – usually a local branch manager.

It's this corporate partnering that has given Midnight Basketball the financial stability to roll the program out nationally and provide each program with a \$10,000 contribution towards each tournament budget for two tournaments per year for two years.

Adds Tess White, “we have been incredibly lucky to have had Commonwealth Bank as supporters of the program right from the beginning. They took a bit of a punt on us but it has paid off in spades as the program is going from strength to strength and we are seeing such good results in the communities where Midnight Basketball has been introduced.” ■



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