

25 Years—A Snapshot

Origins

IROC was developed from the Illawarra Regional Organisation (Region 11) which evolved in 1975 and operated until 1979. Graham Sansom had worked as Administrative and Research Officer from July 1975 for the even earlier grouping of Illawarra Councils, which commenced in November 1974 and operated until 1979.

In the 1st Annual Report of the formally constituted Illawarra Region of Councils (IROC) in 1985 the Chairman, Alderman Arthur Campbell, noted that

“IROC was formed after a number of meetings during 1984 on the 1st February 1985 on the following resolution: That a Region of Councils be set up consisting of the five Councils in the Illawarra being Kiama Municipal Council, Shellharbour Municipal Council, Shoalhaven City Council, Wingecarribee Shire Council and Wollongong City Council.”

He went on to note that it began its operation with a spirit of cooperation which had continued to strengthen over the year as member Councils had the opportunity to work more closely together towards the achievement of common goals. He continued

“it is a decade of national unemployment crisis and economic recession, combined with severely scaled down government incentives towards regional economic growth and development, which influences have been sorely felt in the Illawarra.”

His words resonate with some familiarity across the wider region of the Southern Councils Group (SCG) as the organisation enters its 26th year of operations.

The issues on which IROC was actively lobbying also strike a chord. They included transport, regional planning, provision of community services, regional employment programs, and environmental issues.

Significant Areas of Achievement

Now operating as Southern Councils Group, the organization has a proud record.

- SCG has maintained a sense of collaboration and spirit of co-operation which has acted as an enabler despite diverse political, geographical, socio-economic, Council size, etc differences for over 25 years. This is no small feat.
- SCG manages joint programs and projects efficiently for its member Councils - \$25m worth since 2003. It makes savings for member Councils by managing joint consultancy contracts, and delivering regional services as diverse as community information provision, brokered Respite Care, natural resource management workshops and training, small business efficiency mentoring, and even regulatory control functions of member Councils such as noxious weed management.
- SCG has an enviable record of success in regional lobbying and has helped attract significant additional funds and initiatives to the region for the past 25 years including over \$135m of previously uncommitted funds attracted to the Princes Highway since 2003 and also encompassed many issues affecting the management and operation of member councils.
- It enables peer support, information exchange, professional development and helps avoid duplication of effort across the staff of the seven Councils.
- It has a strong reputation as a first point-of-contact for state, federal and other regional organisations, and acts as conduit for information to and from these. SCG has also had international exposure, for example as the first regional organization to initiate a visit from the Japanese LG Association established in Australia and in 2008 SCG acted as host to a prestigious Federal Parliamentary deputation from Vietnam.
- Has been recognized by numerous Awards over the years, including a national Highly Commended Award for Innovation in Local Government and a Winner of the National Award for Economic Development Excellence. Staff have also been recognized by their peer associations on numerous occasions.

Better Regional Transport Services, Infrastructure, & Land-use Planning

A Stronger Regional Economy

SC Rail Line Electrification to Kiama Campaign

Notification of the agreement by the State Government for electrification of the South Coast Railway Line to Kiama was made to IROC in 1991.

Princes Highway Campaigns

Over \$135M of previously uncommitted funding attracted to the Highway since 2003. The result of work across the regions with partner organisations, including:

- PHocus Campaign from 2003 to 2009 – The Weekend of Prayers, “Disappointing” and “Frustrating” postcard campaigns, Posters & Bumper Bar stickers campaign.
- Preparation of major supporting reports and submissions based on the economic arguments and comparisons with similar roads.
- Mayoral representations and deputations, “Let’s talk About It” Website, “Lights on For Safety” Campaign.

Integrated Transport Planning

A Transport Coordination Officer was appointed to resource T-team activity across northern councils and preparation of regional strategies integrating transport and urban design including Action for Transport, Moving Together, and Shoalhaven Integrated Transport Strategy undertaken and updated.

Significant liaison and work since formation with SEATS, PHocus, T-Team, Healthy Cities, & Transport Agencies.

Escarpment Crossings Studies

Resulted in the case being made for the Caloola Pass project, later supported the upgrades of Picton and Appin Roads and Trunk Rod 92 and led to the joint development of the St Mary’s –Port Kembla Feasibility Study with MACROC and WSROC.

Urban Stormwater Program

A 3 year Stormwater Extension Officer was appointed in 2002 and worked with all Councils across SE NSW to build capacity and prepare urban stormwater management plans.

20/20 Vision Statement

Developed in 1996, this project provided statements on future directions for all areas of regional activity and growth accompanied by graphic representation on regional maps

Urban Planning and Transport Forums 1991 and 2002.

Community Wind Farm Concept Study

Prepared for SCG in 2009 and being further investigated with Green Jobs Illawarra.

Submissions and Representations

In addition to the numerous transport infrastructure ones submissions, reports and representations have been prepared on infrastructure and planning issues as diverse as Crown Rezoning & Development Control matters, Turf farming, Offshore sand mining, and Coastal Planning Guidelines.

The Illawarra Escarpments Walking Track (IEWT)

This ambitious proposal was mapped and developed to implementation stage with work proceeding in some council areas from 1985 on, worked with the Great Eastern Centenary Walking Track proposal, but not able to proceed in other areas as tighter catchment management and Park restrictions were introduced.

Tourist Drive Strategy and First Regional Grant

A \$1/2M signposting strategy was developed and constructed in 1995 and then underpinned with the development of brochures and advertising.

First Regional Promotional Website

The first regional website was developed in the late 90s as a promotional tool, using the 12 regional tourist drives to “guide” visitors around attractions and destinations.

First Regional Calendar of Events

An interactive website was developed to allow residents and communities to promote their activities on-line, discontinued several years later when local radio took up this on-line initiative.

NSW Coastline Cycleway Project—Pilot Project for NSW

IROC piloted an RTA-funded study in 1994 which picked up earlier work in 1992 in the region with Professor Elias Duek-Cohen. This pilot study led on to development of the NSW Coastline Cycleway plan with potential for health, environmental and economic outcomes.

Agricultural Diversification Strategy

A very comprehensive strategy was prepared for the South Coast & Highlands in 2003 which identified the value and significance of the agricultural lands to the economy, environment, aesthetics and culture of the region. The Strategy guided changes to planning instruments and economic, tourism and land use strategies.

Business Treading Lightly

The \$2 million Urban Sustainability grant-funded BTL has successfully built a significant cohort of regional businesses (over 207 business facilities with a combined employee base of over 10,000) that are actively engaged in reducing waste; reducing water and energy consumption; and engaging their staff, customers and suppliers in a cohesive effort to be more sustainable, and reduce costs.

Economic Developers Practitioners Group.

This first operated during 1994 & 5 and has been maintained by the Organisation again since 2000. It has proven invaluable in interaction with State and Federal regional Economic Development initiatives such as the IRDB, IREDO, the ACCs, the Keep Australia Working Committee, and the RDAs.

Submissions and Representations

Numerous reports submitted on such issues as the Textile Clothing & Footwear & Labour Adjustment Package, Steel Industry Plan, Tourism Development Discussion Papers, the case for relocation of selected government offices in the Illawarra.

University of Wollongong, TAFE & Training Organisations

Significant liaison and work undertaken jointly since formation with organizations tasked with skills development in the region.

The Area Assistance Scheme (now the Community Builders Program).

IROC and SCG have maintained a continuing interest, lobbying for its establishment, participating in regional Committees, contributing to periodic reviews and seeking more State commitment to this important program.

HACC Program

IROC undertook several studies of the Aged and Disability sectors which underpinned funding to the sector.

Community Transport

IROC undertook two major studies of the Community Transport needs of the Illawarra in 1986 and 1997 which supported ongoing development funding to this sector; and prepared a Transport Directory and piloted a brokerage model in Shellharbour in 1996.

Caravan Parks Study and Forums

From 1985 IROC raised profile of needs of long-term residents of caravan park communities both in the region and nationally.

Carer Programs since 1997

From a single Program Officer at inception SCG now auspices 9 Programs funded by 2 federal and one State agency to deliver services and support to carers and [provision of information to the Aged and Disability Sectors. It manages the Meadows Respite Cottages, mental health respite programs, and was selected for the national launch of the Carelink Centres which it continues to run.

Arts -Cultural mapping and service delivery

IROC prepared the Merrigong Reports on the cultural significance of the Escarpment in 1998 and detailed artist design briefs for 4 significant sites; prepared the Regional Museums Strategy in 1997 and worked on promotional material for them, has managed the Youth Arts & Skills festivals since 1992 (now called Artstart), developed the regional Arts Centre Feasibility Study, undertook a regional cultural mapping scan with CCDNSW and supported the regional Cultural Partnerships Group from its inception in 1996 following a Cultural Development Seminar held in Wollongong. It undertook the LGSA Regional Distinctiveness project with elected representatives and is investigating further coordination activity and funding.

Healthy Living Activity

Participant in the preparation of the Health and Physical Activity Guidelines for Local Government, and the Illawarra Physical Activity Network. Initiatives with Healthy Cities Illawarra, e.g. The Healthy Food Outlets Project – and production of the Good Eating Guidelines.

The Good Sports Program

First region in NSW to take up working with this now successful NSW drug and alcohol program initiated in Victoria.

Illawarra Academy of Sport

IROC had 2 delegates to the Institute in 1985, from 1988 commenced endorsing community representative nominations to the Board tri-annually and receives the Academy Report annually.

Submissions and Representations

Numerous advocacy across issues such as Emergency Services, hospital closures, library funding, indigenous service needs.

Hazardous Waste Management Strategy & Implementation 1991

Environmental Management Strategies

IROC prepared the early management strategies for the Coast, the Escarpments and Lake Illawarra in the 80s which under-pinned later regional strategies. The first Regional Environment Strategy was prepared for IROC by Wollongong University in 1996.

The Regional Identity Project

Identified Signature Trees of the Illawarra in 1996-7 and worked with Councils and agencies to see a policy commitment to their selection as plantings in suitable high visibility locations

Remnant Vegetation Database

Established in 1999 and located with IROC as a resource library of vegetation endemic to a variety of regionally specific habitats, to guide re-vegetation selection.

Coastcare Program 1996 to 2002

Management of the program across the south coast including the much loved Summer Activities programs.

Regional Air Quality Management Plan 1999

IDNWA

Managed noxious weed control and education across Wollongong, Shellharbour and Kiama Councils areas since 1993 and been recognized with receipt by the staff of the Buerckner and Stephenson Awards.

South Coast Regional Bitou Bush Program

Rollout of the program over a 5 year period from 2000.

Regional Weed Action Program

Coordinated development of the 5 year program and grant application in 2010 with ongoing management commenced.

Bega Valley Fireweed Committee

SCG member councils contributed \$35K to research activities of the Committee.

Sea Spurge Eradication Program

\$250K federally funded during 2009-10, with receipt of a Highly Commended in the LGSA 2010 Environment Awards

Marine Birds Project 2009-10.

Land Management Programs

IROC and SCG have maintained active partnerships with emergent land management organizations from Landcare and Bushcare, IS-ERO, to the current SRCMA.

Small Farms Network

Established in 2003 the SFN now provides information and support to over 700 small landholdings across the region, has run numerous additional projects including the \$332K sustainable land practices grant in 2008 and has received a number of Awards including a National Sustainability Award in 2009.

Better Coordinated Government

Coordination and joint delivery of local government services

This has included establishment of the IDNWA, the Waste Board, the Weeds Action Program, and investigation of regional options for resource recovery & Alternative Waste Technology

Joint policy development

On matters as diverse as HR management, film industry management practices, sea-level rise responses and new requirements affecting our member Councils operationally.

Joint contracting and purchasing

Including of specialist consultancies, products such as pipes and culverts, and services such as IT management.

Joint Campaigns

Have included development of submissions and input to legislation and inquiries on diverse issues impacting on local government including:

- Introduction of the caravan parks levy
- Waste Levy
- Planning issues
- Companion Animals
- Section 94 Contributions
- Water Reforms
- Rate-pegging, cost-shifting, and asset management.

The General Managers Committee was established in 1997 to guide work on operational matters, and an Organisational Development Committee operated for several years in the early 00s looking at common Corporate Development Challenges.

Regional “Extranet”

SCG pioneered the use of an intranet facility across its member Councils in 2004 and was showcased nationally for this initiative. Recently adopted by a number of other ROCs, SCG is about to redesign and upgrade this facility for better information sharing between our Councils and the Committees

Liaison with Regional State Agencies

SCG has acted as a “point of contact” for State & Federal agencies and represented local government on many inter-agency committees. SCG welcomed the formation of the Premiers Department Regional Co-ordination Program and has maintained close affiliation with it since its inception.

LGSA, ALGA, LGMA, & NSW ROCs Network

SCG works closely with the LGSA to avoid duplication, referring matters of interest and supporting specific activities of both the LGSA and the ALGA. Member Councils and the GMs have been active in the LGMA, while the combined NSW ROC’s Group has been of benefit in support, shared ideas and problem solving.

Minister for the Illawarra and Regional State & Federal Members of Parliament

SCG Board has maintained a standing Parliamentary session on its Meeting agenda for liaising with the Regional MP’s. Flow of information and support with the Members’ offices has been constant, and consistently acknowledged by SCG for the value it brings the organisation and the region. The appointment of a Minister for the Illawara was a welcomed response to frequent representations for this voice within State Cabinet and the Minister’s Office has proven a helpful and powerful additional resource.

SCG Statement of Intent on Climate Change

SCG delegates agreed on the need to display leadership, develop community resilience and plan for environmental and economic sustainability in response to climate change at their May 2009 Business Meeting



The Future

The SCG Mission Statement encapsulates the desire of the organisation to continue growing its effectiveness for its member Councils.

“Doing it better by working together”

A strong sense of collaborating to ensure excellence in probity, accessibility, accountability, and increased service delivery in a diminishing budgetary environment while transitioning to LG 10 year planning will underpin the work of SCG.