Leadership vital to resist go slow reform wreckers

COUNCILLOR LYNNE CRAIGIE PRESIDENT WALGA

All going to plan, this week could see the start of a new shift in building community confidence in Councils. Legislation to better educate Councillors; reduce red tape; and have greater transparency around gifts could be passed by State Parliament by the end of the week. It is the first phase in a wider review of the Local Government Act which will ultimately be the biggest revision of the legislation for almost 25 years. After the current proposed amendments are passed the second more expansive phase will look to modernise the Local Government sector in WA. Among these proposals will be the ability for Councils to create beneficial enterprises to meet gaps in services unmet by the private sector but required by the community. Such legislative capacity is critical to enabling Local Governments to operate quasi-commercial services without the legal and financial risks present under the current system. The process is an opportunity for genuine reform and improvement for the sector that has been welcomed and engaged by Local Governments across the State. Indeed the consultation process on the second phase has involved more than 100 community forums, including 19 with more than 500 Council representatives, and the input of a Ministerial reference group comprising government and industry groups. In developing the legislation, the State Government will have reviewed more than 3000 submissions from the public and sector.

The result is a real chance to deliver meaningful reform of the process and requirements that hinder Local Governments from serving their communities. They are changes wanted by the majority of Councils but this current enthusiasm needs to be maintained and supported by the State Government. One of the key changes by the end of this week should be clear requirements on Councillor training and an induction process for prospective Elected Members. Critical to be operational before the next Council elections in October, candidate induction will require prospective Councillors to first complete an online module. It will provide people planning to stand for Council with a genuine insight as to the workload and accountabilities required to effectively serve the community. It is admirable that the State Government has initiated such reform but ideally training requirements should come with funding support to not add costs to ratepayers. Previously the State Government enabled WALGA to deliver 214 heavily subsidised courses to almost 2000 attendees across the regions under the Country Local Government Fund. Developing a similar funding program makes sense for the sector and the community. But so too does ensuring that the reform of the Local Government Act is finally gaining traction. Invariably there will be the reform wreckers who will want to delay the process by more debate and analysis - the State Government will need to hold its nerve. It would be a tragedy for Councils and the community if, having come this far, minority interests are allowed to delay important and progressive reform.