

OPINION

DORSET COUNCIL GM TIM WATSON

Embrace future not past on rail trail issue

HAVING been involved in the development and delivery of the North East rail trail project from inception, to date I have refrained from engaging publicly with those opposed to the project. To do so is pointless, as the arguments proffered against the project are emotive-based and consistently ignore the irrefutable evidence that rail trails deliver significant economic benefit to regional communities and do not adversely impact upon adjoining agricultural enterprises.

As in the case of so many proposals put forward in Tasmania, there is an instinctive response from elements within our community to automatically oppose something they don't understand or outright oppose it because they struggle to accept and adapt to change. The spoiling tactics employed are predictable: create fear, attack and vilify the proponent, express outrage and indignation that the proponent would dare put forward a proposal without extensive public consultation, and appeal to emotional attachment to the past by playing the heritage card - in this case a heritage railway.

There is, however, a far more important underlying issue at stake. The real issue isn't the merit or otherwise of the rail trail, it's

about change, fear of change and letting go of the past. This is particularly relevant in the context of the contraction of the forestry and manufacturing sectors of the Northern economy, whereby the most fundamental issue facing the North is the need to accept and adapt quickly to these structural changes. If we don't adapt quickly and embrace new economic opportunities, our economy is at risk of further decline and without jobs you don't have families and without families you don't have vibrant communities.

Right across the North we have already endured a significant economic shock with large job losses in manufacturing and the forestry industry and it is inevitable that there is further pain to come with the closure of one or both of the smelters at Bell Bay within the next decade. In this context, putting our energies into resisting change is not an option, our energies as a community have to be in how we respond to the changes that have already occurred and being ready for further economic disruption that we know will inevitably come.

The planned state and federal spending on large infrastructure projects is excellent news for the construction sector of the Northern economy, however, the private

sector is the engine room of our economy. It is imperative that we attract new business investment to address the structural changes that have occurred in relation to the loss of value adding jobs right throughout the North. Business confidence which is predicated on perception is integral to attracting business investment, and it is critical that we develop and promote an environment that is business friendly and open to investment. Surprisingly simple local initiatives like freezing council fees and charges, waiving council fees for business developments, fast tracking development applications, rate remissions for new small businesses and business expansions, funding programs for facade improvements, encouraging on street dining and so on are but a few examples that fuel a perception of a business-friendly community. This results in business confidence, new business investment and from there momentum inevitably builds.

The reputation of the north as a place to invest will depend on our capacity as a community to accept, embrace and adapt to change. The past is the past and by all means we should celebrate it where appropriate, but we should not allow the past to constrain our future.