



BUSINESS BEAT

A helping hand for disputes



BUSINESS disputes are — unfortunately — common and take place over a range of issues.

For small business owners/operators, disputes can have a major impact on how they run their business, draining them of time, energy and money.

Our economy was built on the back of small businesses and almost five million Australians are employed by small businesses. That accounts for 44 per cent of the country's total employment.

In Victoria there are more than 560,000 small businesses — and about 16,000 of those are based in the Geelong region across a range of industries.

It's most likely that at some stage of their existence they've been involved in a dispute with another business over goods or services.

Disputes can occur with suppliers, landlords, builders,

neighbours, banks or financial institutions, or with other businesses.

Smart business operators always look for effective, low-impact ways to resolve disputes that save time and money and minimise damage to important relationships.

Organising mediation is normally the first step in the process to resolving disputes.

The Victorian Small Business Commissioner regularly holds mediation sessions in the offices of the Geelong Chamber of Commerce bringing the parties involved in a dispute together in an attempt to resolve their problems.

The Victorian Small Business Commissioner (VSBC) is a statutory office and was the first of its kind in Australia when established by the State Government in 2003.

One of the primary roles of the VSBC is to assist small and medium businesses in resolving disputes quickly — and at little or no cost.

If you've got an issue that can be agreed to and sorted out between parties, then using the VSBC service offers a cost-effective and far less litigious al-



ternative than going directly to the more formal legal processes associated with the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT).

Last November Judy O'Connell was appointed as the new Victorian Small Business Commissioner for a three-year term.

Before this role, Ms O'Connell was assistant commissioner, Small Business, for the Australian Tax Office and has been a long-time advocate for small business.

Recently I chaired a meeting of the Small Business Ministerial Council in Melbourne where we heard from Small

of disputes were mediated successfully.

From July 1 this year the VSBC will be in charge of administering the new voluntary Victorian Fair Payment Code that aims to promote good payment practices.

Businesses are encouraged to become signatories to the Code and undertake to pay small businesses on time, communicate clearly with small business suppliers, undertake to resolve disputes quickly and encourage fair payment practices.

We are privileged to have Ms O'Connell in Geelong as keynote speaker at the chamber's 126th annual meeting tomorrow night.

It will be a great opportunity for our members — many of whom are small business operators — to hear directly from the person at the top about how the VSBC is there to support them to create a fairer and more competitive environment for small business.

Bernadette Uzelac is the Geelong Chamber of Commerce chief executive officer. Twitter: @Geelong Chamber

Business Minister, Philip Dalidakis and also had a presentation from Ms O'Connell about her role.

In 2015-16, the VSBC received 1912 applications from businesses for dispute resolution and performed almost 600 mediation sessions.

From that, over 80 per cent