

City fix needs more time



**Bernadette
UZELAC**

NEXT month marks a year since the Victorian Government sensationally dismissed the entire City of Greater Geelong Council following a commission of inquiry in response to concerns about workplace culture and governance.

In April, 2016, Yehudi Blacher was appointed interim administrator then replaced in May by Kathy Alexander, Peter Dorling and Laurinda Gardner to run the city until the next election this October.

A great deal of work to address the commission of inquiry recommendations has been done in the nine months since the appointment of the administrators. But there is still much to do and too little time in which to do it.

At a State Government level, minister Natalie Hutchins instigated a Geelong Citizen's Jury, which consulted extensively with the community and business leaders late last year to ensure we got the

future model of governance right.

The administrators also embarked on one of the most ambitious and far reaching community consultation processes yet undertaken in Geelong with the Our Future project, the foundation for the city's vision for the next 30 years.

The project is a bold, no-holds-barred approach to guiding decision making and investment and articulating the city's potential.

The Geelong Chamber of Commerce represents the views of its members — about 97 per cent of them businesses with fewer than 10 employees — which collectively employ more than a third of Geelong's workforce.

Each year the chamber, in partnership with Deakin Business School, surveys local business trends, and consistently the greatest barrier to growth relates to perceptions of poor local government leadership, policy or support.

If we are to ensure our small businesses grow and more jobs are created, stability and confidence in local leadership is essential.

The latest REMPLAN data



HUGE TASK: CoGG administrators Laurinda Gardner, Peter Dorling and Kathy Alexander.

indicates that Geelong's gross regional product is below other comparable council areas and the council has a key role in attracting investment and providing the right conditions for business to flourish.

The long list of matters identified by the commission of inquiry requires time to effec-

tively address. The work by the administrators and State Government has been comprehensive and swift. However, a mere 18 months to achieve such deep-seated change is unrealistic and not in the best interests of the community.

While returning to a democratically elected council is

what all want, allowing the administrators a realistic timeframe is essential to ensuring our next council has the best foundation from which to build.

The administrators have not even been afforded the opportunity that most councils have of a four-year term in which to not only run the city

but also make changes that would ordinarily take many years to complete.

To align the city with other council elections, the rate-payers of Geelong will be back at the ballot box in 2020.

Allowing the administrators to complete the work that they were employed to do and holding off a general election until 2020 is sensible and will result in significant cost savings.

They should be given every opportunity and the support they need to get the job done — impossible under an unrealistic timeframe.

By going to a general election in October 2017, the incoming council will be disadvantaged from the outset.

Starting a new term of council without having this work completed will only serve as a massive distraction to our new councillors.

It makes good sense for the administrators to be afforded the opportunity to hand over the baton to our future council with the job done.

Bernadette Uzelac is Geelong Chamber of Commerce chief executive officer. Follow the Chamber on Twitter @GeelongChamber