Welcome Address – National Small Town Reinvention Conference Delegates

Before we begin, I'd like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we gather today, the Bidjara people, and pay my respects to Elders past and present.

I also extend that respect to any First Nations people joining us today.

It's a privilege to come together here on Bidjara Country to share stories, ideas and inspiration about building strong, vibrant and resilient communities.

On behalf of Blackall-Tambo Regional Council, our Mayor, Councillors, staff and community, it is my absolute pleasure to welcome you to Blackall.

To all of our community builders, change-makers, dreamers, doers, volunteers, economic developers, local government representatives and champions of rural communities who have travelled from across Australia and New Zealand, welcome to our little dot on the map.

And what a privilege it is to have you here.

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge and sincerely thank Peter Kenyon and the incredible team from Bank of I.D.E.A.S. For those of us fortunate enough to have attended this conference since its inception, we know this is far more than a conference.

It is a gathering of possibility.

A place where bold ideas meet practical action.

A place where small towns realise they are not alone in facing challenges, but more importantly, not alone in creating solutions.

Quite honestly, after more than twenty years working in community and local government, this is hands down the best conference I have ever attended. Every year I come away energized, inspired and armed with pages of notes and a head full of ideas that I cannot wait to put into action.

So Peter, thank you for bringing this remarkable network together and for choosing Blackall as a place where stories can be shared, ideas exchanged, and small-town magic celebrated.

And speaking of small-town magic…

If there is one thing I hope you take away from your time here, it's that our communities are proof that population does not determine potential.

In rural and remote Australia, we're often measured by numbers.

Population numbers.

Visitor numbers.

Workforce numbers.

But the real strength of a community has never been measured by how many people live there.

It's measured by how many people care.

And in Blackall-Tambo, we are fortunate to have a great many people who care deeply.

Like many small towns, we have faced our share of challenges.

Droughts.

Floods.

Distance.

Changing demographics.

Volunteer fatigue.

The ongoing struggle of attracting and retaining people.

Challenges that many of you in this room understand all too well.

But over the past few years, something remarkable has been happening across our region.

There has been a real resurgence of energy.

A renewed belief in what's possible.

A shift towards investing not just in roads and buildings, but in people, culture, creativity and community connection.

As a Council, we've deliberately strengthened our commitment to community development because we recognise that vibrant communities don't happen by accident.

They happen when people are empowered to lead, create, contribute and belong.

We've backed this commitment with initiatives such as our Community Grants Program, helping grass-roots organisations bring their ideas to life.

Our Shop Front Renewal Program has supported local businesses to enhance the visual appeal and vibrancy of our main streets, creating spaces that people are proud to visit and invest in.

We've worked alongside volunteers and community groups, not to do things for them, but to help enable and support them to do what they do best.

Because in small towns, volunteers are more than volunteers.

They are our event coordinators, coaches, committee members, fundraisers, mentors, gardeners, cooks, decorators and cheerleaders.

They are often the social fabric that holds communities together.

And while volunteer numbers are shrinking across many regions, our challenge and our opportunity is finding new ways to support those people so they can continue doing the work that matters.

We've also embraced and focused on our Culture to help project us forward.

Because culture is more than art.

It's identity.

It's storytelling.

It's belonging.

It's pride of place.

This year we delivered the inaugural Outback Circus Carnivale, celebrating Blackall's unique place in Australian circus history and proving that regional communities can create extraordinary experiences that attract visitors, build community pride and generate economic benefit.

It's just one example of how we're finding innovative ways to celebrate what makes us different, rather than trying to be something we're not.

And perhaps one of the most exciting projects on our horizon is the Blackall Cultural Precinct.

A transformative community development project made possible through the extraordinary generosity and vision of the late local philanthropist Mr Owen Stockwell OAM.

This project reflects something powerful: what can happen when local people invest in local futures.

It demonstrates that community revitalisation is not simply about infrastructure.

It's about aspiration.

It's about creating places where people want to gather, learn, connect and celebrate.

Places that tell our stories and inspire new ones.

What excites me most, however, is not any single project.

It's the momentum.

The growing confidence within our community that says, "Why not us?"

Why can't a small outback town host a major conference?

Why can't we celebrate a circus heritage?

Why can't we invest in culture?

Why can't we reimagine our future?

That confidence is contagious.

And as you spend time here today, I hope you'll see that reinvention doesn't happen because communities have unlimited resources.

It happens because communities choose optimism over apathy.

Action over excuses.

Possibility over limitation.

The people in this room understand that better than anyone.

You are the people helping your towns imagine new futures.

You are the people creating opportunities where others see obstacles.

You are the people making sure small towns continue to pulse with life, purpose and possibility.

And for that, thank you.

Today, we are delighted to share a small piece of the Blackall-Tambo pie with you.

We hope you'll enjoy our hospitality, connect with our people, hear our stories, and perhaps discover an idea that you can take home and adapt in your own community.

But most importantly, we hope you leave reminded of something we all know to be true:

Small towns don't survive because they're lucky.

They thrive because people care enough to make them thrive.

The future of regional communities will not be built by governments alone, or councils alone, or funding programs alone.

It will be built by people.

By partnerships.

By local champions.

And by gatherings just like this one.

Ladies and gentlemen, our first local showcase story is one that perfectly captures the spirit of small-town reinvention.

A little over a decade ago, like so many rural communities across Australia, Blackall found itself in the grip of a relentless drought.

It was a difficult time. Businesses were doing it tough, shopfronts were closing, windows sat empty, and perhaps most concerning of all, community morale was beginning to wear thin.

But where some saw decline, two local women saw opportunity.

Rather than focusing on what Blackall didn't have, they chose to celebrate what it did.

They recognised that every community has a story to tell, and that sometimes all it takes is a spark of positivity to remind people why they love where they live.

Armed with determination, creativity and a deep love for their town, Lisa Alexander and Sarah Pearson launched a simple social media campaign with a powerful message: #betterinblackall.

What began as a grassroots effort to boost community pride quickly gained momentum. The campaign struck a chord not only with locals, but with people far beyond our region. It became a movement that encouraged people to share stories, celebrate local achievements, champion local businesses and reimagine what was possible for our town.

The hashtag may have started online, but its impact was felt right across the community.

The campaign grew wings and, as they say, the rest is history.

Today, #betterinblackall is recognised as an outstanding example of community-led place activation and local pride in action.

Please join me in welcoming two passionate community champions, the founders of the #betterinblackall movement, Lisa Alexander and Sarah Pearson, as they share the story of how a simple idea helped inspire a town and reminded us all why it's better in Blackall.

Please make them feel very welcome. 👏

Thank you Lisa and Sarah.

What an incredible reminder that some of the most powerful community transformations don't begin with million-dollar budgets or grand master plans.

Sometimes they begin with a simple idea.

A belief in place.

A willingness to champion the positives.

And a determination to write a different story.

The legacy of #betterinblackall continues to influence how we talk about our community today, and we're incredibly grateful to Lisa and Sarah for helping spark that movement.

Our next story takes us just down the road to our neighbours in Tambo.

If you've spent any time travelling regional Australia, chances are you've heard of the Tambo Teddy. What many people don't realise, however, is that behind every iconic teddy bear is an even more remarkable story of community resilience, innovation and reinvention.

Like many rural towns, Tambo has faced its share of challenges over the years. Yet rather than being defined by those challenges, a group of passionate local women saw opportunity. They took a product synonymous with our pastoral heritage, added creativity, determination and a healthy dose of country ingenuity, and built something truly extraordinary.

Today, Tambo Teddies are recognised right across Australia and beyond. They've become ambassadors for regional Queensland, a symbol of resilience, and a shining example of how small towns can create big ideas that stand the test of time.

Their story is one of spirit, longevity and the ability to continually reinvent while staying true to who they are.

Unfortunately, Alison and the team can't be with us in person today. They're currently making their way to the big smoke of Sydney after being nominated for a prestigious award, which is a wonderful recognition of their decades of dedication and success.

While we're disappointed not to have them here, they were keen to share a snapshot of their journey with you all.

So please sit back, and enjoy the remarkable story of one of regional Australia's most iconic reinvention success stories.

The story of Tambo Teddies.

(Video plays.) 🧸👏

As we continue our journey through some of the stories that have shaped and strengthened our region, it's only fitting that we hear from the very place we're gathered in today.

When people first arrive at the Blackall Woolscour, they're often struck by the scale of it.

The towering timber structure.

The machinery.

The smell of lanolin still lingering in the air.

The sense that this place has stories etched into every beam, every board and every shearing stand.

It's more than a building.

It's a living reminder of who we are and where we've come from.

But the Blackall Woolscour story is not just about wool.

It's not just about history.

It's also a story of small-town determination to save it.

A story of what happens when a community refuses to let an important piece of its heritage disappear.

Like many historic buildings across regional Australia, there was a time when the future of the Woolscour was uncertain. The easy option would have been to let time take its course.

Instead, a passionate band of volunteers, community leaders and local champions rallied together with a shared vision: to preserve this remarkable piece of Australian history for future generations.

They recognised that this wasn't simply about saving an old building.

It was about protecting a story.

A story of hard work, resilience and the generations of shearers, wool classers, station workers and families who helped build our region.

Today, thanks to that commitment, the Blackall Woolscour stands proudly as one of the last remaining operational steam-powered wool washing plants in Australia and one of our region's most significant heritage and tourism attractions.

It is proof that community passion can save treasures that might otherwise be lost.

And perhaps that's why it's such an appropriate venue for the National Small Town Reinvention Conference. Because this building itself is a reinvention story. A story of survival. A story of people who believed something valuable was worth fighting for.

To share that story with us today, it is my great pleasure to introduce a passionate community builder, heritage advocate and President of the Blackall Historical Woolscour Association.

Please join me in welcoming Julee Rooney as she shares the remarkable story of the Blackall Woolscour.

Please make her feel very welcome.

(Applause) 👏🐑🏛️

Ladies and gentlemen, We've heard how a grassroots social media campaign helped a community rediscover its pride and tell a new story through #betterinblackall.

We've been inspired by the remarkable story of Tambo Teddies, a story of resilience, innovation and country ingenuity that continues to capture hearts across Australia and beyond.

Our final local showcase brings together two initiatives that, while different in nature, share a common thread: communities daring to think beyond today and invest in tomorrow.

It gives me great pleasure to invite to the stage someone who is not only a passionate advocate for our region, but also a tireless champion for the future of rural and remote communities.

Councillor Boyd Johnstone is a dear friend, a proud local, a passionate small-town thinker, and someone who genuinely believes that communities thrive when people come together around a shared vision.

Today, Boyd will provide an insight into one of the most exciting projects on the horizon for our region, the Blackall Cultural Precinct. A transformative project that will celebrate our stories, strengthen community connection, foster creativity and help shape the next chapter of Blackall's future.

But that's not all.

Boyd will also share the story of the Barcoo Community Village Inc. "Leave a Lasting Legacy" Initiative, a project with a particularly special connection to this gathering.

Because the seed for this idea was planted at one of these very conferences.

It is a perfect example of why the National Small Town Reinvention Conference is so important. An idea shared, a conversation had, a spark of inspiration captured… and before long, that idea takes root and grows into something that creates a lasting impact in a community.

It's proof that when community builders come together, good ideas don't stay in conference rooms. They travel home, they evolve, and they become action.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming Councillor Boyd Johnstone to the stage.

(Applause) 👏

Before we break for afternoon smoko, I'd just like to thank you all for being here and for the work you do to keep your own communities thriving.

We hope you've enjoyed hearing a few of our local stories and perhaps picked up an idea or two to take home with you.

I'd also like to sincerely thank the wonderful volunteers of the Blackall Historical Woolscour Association, who have kindly prepared this afternoon's refreshments. So please grab a cuppa, enjoy a bite to eat, have a chat, make a new connection, and give our volunteers a big thank you for their hospitality.

Enjoy your smoko & safe travels abroad! ☕🍰👏🐑