This is the authors’ final peer reviewed version of the item published as:

Vandenberg, Andrew 2007-07-13, Jury on trial at Surf Coast, Geelong advertiser, pp. 19.

Available from Deakin Research Online:
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Deliberative democracy comes to the Surfcoast
Andrew Vandenberg

Over two weekends at the end of July, the Surfcoast Shire will open a new chapter in the history of Australian local democracy when it panels a jury of citizens to hear expert evidence about road and drainage issues in Airey’s Inlet. The council wants to ensure consultation with the community works properly after a series of disputes between ratepayers and the council in nearby Fairhaven, over maintaining unlit dirt roads among holiday-makers’ and retirees’ houses in a bush setting or alternatively developing standard urban services with asphalt roads, curbs, gutters, drains, and street lights.

Obviously, these issues are typical of the minor concerns of local governments everywhere. Local councils have long been something of a testing ground for those who aspire to a career in state or federal parliament. Local citizens pay little attention to the council, unless there are proposals to build an especially tall building or to close a swimming pool. Or the council becomes embroiled in corruption scandals. For the most part, local councillors are left to learn the arts of alliance-formation, debate, intrigue, and compromise in relative obscurity.

At the same time, the necessarily local nature of road and drainage issues have direct links into several global problems. The drought, for example, has meant postal deliveries, garbage trucks, and ambulances could navigate dirt roads through the back blocks of the Shire without too much trouble over the last ten or so years, but the return of more regular rain will increase corrugation and pose risks of bogged vehicles and flooding. On the other hand, global warming is likely to make drought more common but also pose new risks of storm surges from the rising seas of Bass Strait, so the Shire needs to think closely about spending on expensive urban services for towns along the Great Ocean Road.

The local nature of the issues also link directly into problems of dilapidated democracy and a passive citizenry in all industrially advanced countries. The Shire has employed community planning and development officers and also paid for consultants to advise on how to make sure consultation with the community works well. One of these consultants, Professor Baogang He from Deakin University, has extensively researched deliberative democracy at the village level in China and during preliminary discussions he helped solve a difficult problem of how to select the jury. Random selection of the jury members could ensure that the panel represents traders, tourism promoters, householders, and shire service providers at the same as it achieves a gender balance and a reasonable spread of ages.

A duly panelled jury will soon assemble to listen to expert witnesses called to address specific questions, the formulation of which were finalised by a Shire Council meeting on 17th July. The jury of four local citizens, two Shire employees, one councillor, and three deliberative democracy consultants will listen to the expert witnesses, put questions to them, debate the complex issues among themselves, and finally recommend the Shire take a particular course of action.

No other local council in Australia has experimented with citizen juries and many people will be interested to follow developments with this experiment. Will this
relatively calm process of deliberation on complex issues spell the end of local
politicking as a testing ground for aspiring politicians? Probably not, and rightly so.
The Shire still poses the questions for the jury and retains final responsibility for
whatever decision is taken. Will it engage a greater number of more active citizens in
issues that are necessarily local but also part of global issues of climate change, along
with national and state issues of urban development versus ecological sustainability?
Let’s hope so!

Dr Andrew Vandenberg
School of International and Political Studies
Deakin University