

Saturday forum

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Citizens can become monitors

On the eve of the release of the Kelty Report, Gunns managing director GREG LeSTRANGE proposes a citizens forum to monitor the Tamar Valley pulp mill's performance.



ONE of the uncomfortable ironies I see as managing director of Gunns in 2011 is the claim by mill opponents that Gunns is unaccountable.

Gunns, as a 135-year-old Tasmanian company, may have once been seen to have carried too much weight, but from where I sit the times have certainly changed.

Gunns is more accountable to the community in which it operates than in any time in its long history and probably more than any other company in Tasmania.

As a public company, we must report publicly our audited financial performance, and disclose publicly and continuously any material changes to our business operations.

The pulp mill project will bring with it a raft of new environmental monitoring and reporting requirements, and our permits require that our compliance be audited by an independent auditor and overseen by an independent expert group.

In a country with a free press characterised by pluralist debate, it seems that every utterance I make in the public arena generates online comment, most of

it challenging Gunns' right to build a pulp mill.

I am comfortable with all of that, I expected it when I took on this job, and I want a commitment to openness and a willingness to engage to be one of the marks of my time at Gunns.

And this very public accountability is why I say to those people in Launceston and the Tamar Valley, those people who want to be assured that the potential this project offers can be realised without sacrificing the safety or integrity of our environment, please consider the whole picture of the Bell Bay pulp mill proposal before making up your minds.

Stay with Gunns on this journey, and I promise you that the Tasmanian community will be able to get both the economic benefits promised and feel comfortable with the safety and environmental diligence of the mill.

I am confident of this because, as well as the world-class design of this project, it is the people of the Tamar Valley who will be holding

Gunns accountable just as much as any regulator, corporate or environmental.

I want this pulp mill to be the best in the world; on an operational, economic and environmental basis. I believe the project we have designed meets that claim and I want local people, in particular, to believe it too.

But not because I said so, I want them to believe it because they made up their own minds based on information from many sources, and from people they trust.

To ensure that local accountability, I am proposing to initiate and financially support an independent "citizens forum". A watchdog group with representatives from the three pillars of sustainability: community, environment and economy, to oversee the performance of the project at arms length from the company.

To make good my intent to make this mill the best in the world, and best includes a social licence — I need the help of environment groups, local wine growers, tourist operators, local businesses, local welfare agencies and host communities.

I need them to join us at the table, to work with us to make this as good a project as it can possibly be for Tasmania, and build into the project the social capital a modern Tasmanian infrastructure project should have.

It is through a respected, transparent and accountable, project monitoring group that I believe we can break through the current toxic climate of distrust and move forward with less of the

friction that has characterised this project to date.

That is the vision of a modern company, and that is the vision I have for Gunns in 2011.

Much of the detail of this vision comes from the very people who continue to publicly attack the integrity of the project.

I heard that it was no longer acceptable to take woodchips from natural forest sources. I have said that we will exit natural forest logging.

I heard that the mill must be 100 per cent plantation timber sourced, and that it should be certified under the Forest Stewardship Council process. Our customers were also telling us that. Certified, 100 per cent plantation timber is now our plan.

I heard that a far greater level of community engagement was needed from Gunns. We are and will continue to engage in the conversations, difficult and easy, needed to make this a project that understands and responds to its social context.

It is easy to find problems but a lot harder to find solutions. Addressing these challenges to implement the positive changes to our business over the past 12 months has taken vision and self-reflection to achieve. We are up for more of that but it is important that those parties, that have been so vocal in their calls for change, recognise progress and take part in this journey of vision and reflection with us. Accountability cuts all ways.

I would hope in time that many people will agree that the pulp mill project is a sound project, and

presents an opportunity for economic stimulus that Tasmania can't afford to reject because they don't like Gunns.

The opportunity for the project is here now — it won't be in six months time. All I ask is that people consider the project on its merits, not on what they might think of Gunns' past performance.

Launceston and the Tamar Valley is a very diverse community. You come from all walks of life, vote from all parts of the political spectrum.

You have views that arise from each of your personal circumstances and you have many different views on the pros and cons of the pulp mill project.

You are concerned about the project's safety, the jobs it will create, its implications for the Tamar Valley environment and for the enduring impact it will have on our regional economy.

I hear that, I have responded to that and will keep responding. Now tell me about your hopes for the future and we will use the impetus of such a major project to give back to the community in which it co-exists.

I think Tasmania is a state that is mature enough to have a resource project that brings jobs and opportunities, that caters for an uncertain future and protects the environment.

To achieve this, the type of change that Gunns is embracing has to be acknowledged and supported in the communities in which we operate.