CMCA Presentation Brisbane 16th May

 Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen (and distinguished guests if any) My name is Mary Brown and I am currently Deputy Mayor of Hinchinbrook Shire Council and was previously President of the Chamber of Commerce for 8 years. Hinchinbrook Shire is situated approximately 115km north of Townsville and is a predominately rural community with several towns and townships spread across the shire - Ingham being the largest town. The current population of the shire is approximately 11130 residents.

This special part of the world has spectacular natural attractions where one can experience within one hour's drive of the shire boundaries, the longest single drop waterfall in Australia - that being Wallaman Falls, spectacular world heritage listed rainforest, a multitude of diverse geographic natural features, right through to stunning beaches and the magnificent Hinchinbrook Channel.

The economy of Hinchinbrook Shire has traditionally had a very strong reliance on agriculture and most particularly sugar cane production.  Being a high rainfall region, situated on a coastal plain, cyclones or flooding can have a significant impact on the economy of the shire. Like many rural communities, our shire has experienced a population decline over the last 3 -4 decades, which has also seen a significant change in the demographic of the community.  
This decline has been the impetus for economic diversification in the Hinchinbrook Shire, where the focus has been on developing other industries that can sustain the economy and hopefully rebuild the demographic mix.  
Given our diverse natural attractions and relaxed lifestyle and connection via the national highway, tourism was one of the obvious choices for diversity.

The process commenced in earnest in 2006 when the council of the day engaged Robert Prestipino to undertake an assessment and consultation process which resulted in the document named "Our Town Our Future".  
This process and the report produced resulted in the successful funding to establish Tyto Precinct, Stage 1 ( wetlands, VIC) and subsequently Stage 2 ( library, regional gallery, conference centre and restrauant), which was designed to be the central hub and catalyst of a future tourism industry

In 2014 HSC in collaboration with Hinchinbrook Chamber of Commerce, made the decision to undertake a 6 month, self contained only, RV trial (April to October) at the TYTO precinct where a dump point already existed.  Initially this trial, which had a 15 unit site capacity, was free and maximum of 48 hour stay.  After review of the trial data, in the second year a decision was made to charge $10 per night per RV and visitation numbers did not reduce.

Initially the decision to trial was very controversial, especially with five traditional caravan parks in the shire.  Much discussions with the van park owners and local sentiment was not overly supportive, as it was felt this decision would disadvantage the local rate paying businesses and give special treatment to these travellers, who it was perceived were not going to contribute to the economy of the community.  
 The trial used VIC staff to managing the site, each RV who wanted to stay had to register at VIC and it was requested they provide data relating to their spend, so that HSC could quantify the economic impact back into the community, as a result of the trial.

The surprising result of this trial was the value per day/unit spend back into the economy and the diversity of that spend.  ($125 per day per unit for their RV site stay - purchases included fuel, food, pharmacy, retail, services and generally spend throughout the entire community). Also it was shown many then recorded they extended their stay in other areas of the shire.  Also AND most significantly, over 88% of these visitors stated they never would have stopped in Hinchinbrook if it was not for the free site.  The significance of this meant that we could assure our community that we were not negatively impacting the van parks, because these guests categorically stated they were never intending to stop anyway and only chose to because of the RV site.

So this was NEW business for our shire.  In the first year, within two weeks of the trial ceasing , local retailers were asking what had happened as they noticeable saw a decline in trade.

In 2015 CMCA negotiated to lease an unused parcel of land across the highway from Tyto precinct, to establish a 50 unit CMCA member only RV site as part of a membership drive for the club. CMCA caretakers would be positioned on site on a rotational basis. A dump point, fencing, small shed where members could gather for socialising and landscaping was invested into the site. Dependant on weather, the site is open from May to October each year. In the first year of operation (2016) the site reported economic benefit to the community of $10k to $12k per week, when site visitation was at it's peak (July and August).

As a result of the increased visitation to the shire, HSC has now adapted the opening hours of the shire library and regional gallery (which are situated in the Tyto precinct) to operate 7 days per week. During that period, council also schedules events and activities to engage with the visitors to the sites, as well as locals.   
In 2016 one of the local beach progress associations approached council to trial the establishment of a second RV site at Forrest Beach, on the site of an unused caravan park, owned by council. This trial commenced for two months of 2016, with good results and is again operational from April 2017 for another trial period.

A local rural pub with extra spare land, also established a free camping site as part of value adding to their business in 2015. All necessary council approvals were gained, with the owner being very proactive in the online promotion and marketing. This previously struggling business subsequently saw the development of the RV side of the business positively impact the sustainability of this property.  
Whilst it's not all perfect and we still have challenges with rogue non self contained visitation, however we continue to work through these issues, are looking to grow market share and importantly the traditional van parks continue to see good visitation, with several of these parks recently undertaking facility upgrades and also provide more social and entertainment services to their guests.

Council has now developed and rolled out a branding and marketing campaign, "The Hinchinbrook Way" which showcases the business and tourism aspects of the shire, as a way to continue to attract tourism, investment and "sea change" and family lifestyle markets.  Council will continue to focus on tourism product development with local operators and encouraging investors to consider establishing in our shire.  We acknowledge that the drive market will continue to be the most significant tourism sector for our shire for some considerable time to come and will continue to work to grow this market.  If you are looking for a sea change in the north, our council is open to support new opportunities....Anyone interested come speak to me at the end of the forum. Thank you.