

“What does a thriving and resilient community mean and why is it so important?”

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It is an honour to speak today, at such an important event. I acknowledge all of the citizens and leaders in the room --- and the presence of so many of you who have been the midwives and hard working contributors to this plan - who make this community what it is, and are so obviously committed to its thriving future.

We are meeting to talk about the Northern Economic Plan - ‘Looking North’ – but economic plans worth their salt, are about so much more than their economic value. Economic plans should be the servants of a good society, not its masters. And that is where this plan aims, and we need to go.

I’ve been asked to talk to you about what a thriving community looks like, and why a strong community and strong relationships within that community matter.

Lets start with why it matters.

And just in case you think this discussion is only relevant to society ‘out there’, it is worth being aware that living in a thriving community affects each of us personally, right where it matters most: that is, how long we live, and how much we enjoy it. It also matters to us as taxpayers.

The research case in favour of strong, thriving, resilient communities is getting stronger and stronger.

The world's longest study of human development being conducted by Harvard University began in 1938 with over 700 Bostonian teenage men – half Harvard Graduates, and half from the poorest parts of Boston. 75 years on, and now with children and women in the study, there are three big lessons:

1. Social connections matter more than any other factor – more than work, socio-economic status, or health factors like your cholesterol count. As the study's current leader puts it: 'Loneliness kills.' (Waldinger, 2015). 'People who are more socially connected to community, to family, to friends, are happier, they're physically healthier, and they live longer than people who are less well connected.' The experience of loneliness is toxic and we pay a big price for it in terms of personal wellbeing – as well as a society in terms of health costs, early death, and loss of productivity.
2. The second big lesson it's that not just the number of friends you have, and being in a committed relationship: it's the quality of your close relationships that matters. And topping them up when things change is important. So if you lose your friends when you lose your job, it is very important to find another way to social connection.
3. Thirdly, strong social connections don't just protect our bodies, they protect our brains. Being in a strong set of relationships where you really feel you can count on others in a time of need, predicts a sharper memory for longer. (And just in case you need some reassurance, those relationships can include bickering and disagreement – it's the 'counting on' that matters, not

the 'never arguing'.)

These findings are especially interesting when we reflect on research findings about some of the workers at Mitsubishi when they lost their jobs. The loss of 'the binding social relationships' they had through their jobs – relationships of significance not only for themselves but for their whole families in some cases – brought on depression and poor health. For men in particular, researchers conclude 'a shattering of stable and affirming communal connections after retrenchment' reflected men's especially strong social connection through work and some '[M]en face particular obstacles in maintaining existing relations and navigating new ones after changes in employment'. Depression post-retrenchment for some Mitsubishi workers (Verity and Jolley, 2008, p 338) particularly reflected the long job tenure of vehicle industry workers – more than half of their study respondents had worked at Mitsubishi for more than 21 years.

The Harvard findings are backed up by other studies that examine the factors that are associated with living a long time, happily. Researcher Dan Buettner has travelled the globe in recent decades to analyse what things keep people – and whole communities - alive the longest, with high levels of wellbeing. He discovered a series of communities which share a set of characteristics which he calls the world's 'Blue Zones' - that is, the places in the world where higher percentages of people enjoy remarkably long, full lives (Buettner, 2009).

Apart from eating well, moving naturally (not in a gym!) and drinking some wine, the most important factors are all about living in a strong, thriving community, that is: having a tribe of some kind, giving priority to relationships and social and community connections, and sharing a

purpose – through a family, a rose society, a workplace, a union, a choir, or a women’s or men’s group - can all adds years to life – and to the quality of life.

Research out of the field of positive psychology accords with these studies, showing a similar set of factors that underpin wellbeing, resilience and recovery from difficult experiences. These include, once again, strong relationships, engagement in community and activity, and meaning-making in the context of strong communities - along with other factors like positive emotion, a sense of accomplishment (Centre for Wellbeing and Resilience, SAHMRI).

Our own Wellbeing and Resilience Centre within the SAHMRI is pursuing these issues – including in the north here, and is committed to lead, measure, build, embed and evaluate resilience projects across the state so we can increase resilience and wellbeing in different groups of people, at different ages. It is great to see this work extended and built on through the Premier’s announcement today. It is especially important to take the teachable characteristics of resilient thinking into our pre-schools, schools, all our care environments, workplaces, and to older citizens.

It is never too late to change our habits of thinking and to learn better ways of dealing with the inevitable challenges that each of us reliably face as we go through life – whether they come when we lose a job, a marriage, our health, or the health of a friend or family member. Resilience skills can protect against mental illness and assist recovery, and they can help us make transitions and take risks.

So the research case for investing in thriving communities is strong. What are their key ingredients?

Having employment opportunities and pathways to a useful occupation are vital – whether in paid employment, or through volunteering, or cultural or artistic activity.

So the focus of the package we have heard about today is appropriately on jobs and combating unemployment. We know that a job is a vital element of wellbeing for most of our lives – a key to an income, relationships, independence and autonomy. Very high proportions of Australians – more than three-quarters – find that their work gives them meaning and social connection (Pocock 2009, 2015).

People in employment are generally happier and have better physical and mental health than those without work. They are often better connected socially.

However, recent research adds a couple of caveats to this proposition: it is not just any job that delivers good outcomes. Job quality is incredibly important: research tells us that people in insecure work, unpredictable schedules, with low pay, no voice and a bad boss, have worse mental health and wellbeing outcomes, than people who are unemployed (Butterworth et al., 2009).

Being a home care worker, and having a predictable, stable round of home visits, a good manager, decent pay, and quality skills makes for much better quality relationships and care, and much better outcomes for workers. The Disability Hub funded today has real potential to create an education and employment intermediary that builds both job and disability service outcomes.

The second caveat about having a job is a caution against working too much: people who work too much are at risk of serious health

consequences. Research published in *The Lancet* last year pulled together analysis of over 600,000 participants including Australians. It showed that those who regularly work more than 55 hours a week have a 33% greater risk of stroke than if those who put in normal hours (35-40) and a 13% higher risk of developing coronary heart disease. (Those working between 41-48 hours had 10% higher risk of stroke and those working 49-54 hours had 27% higher risk.) (Kivimäki 2015).

Workers with the highest levels of wellbeing have jobs that create social connection, meaning and use skills – and they have quality jobs and don't work too much.

We know from research conducted amongst workers at Mitsubishi after their retrenchment that many felt they had lost much more than a pay packet when they lost their jobs: they lost what social scientists call a 'warm circle' of social connection through their jobs.

We live in a world where work is increasingly a place where a community of social relationships is partly made: a place that can help create social connection, and sustain wellbeing and resilience. It can help protect from the effects of family violence, divorce or providing high level care to someone at home.

Many women now join men in making community through their jobs, and this is one of the major changes in our society from the 1950s when the car industry was first built in our state.

But building strong communities requires more than work: it is a necessary but not sufficient condition for long, satisfying lives.

We need strong households and good social infrastructure that facilitates human connection and exchange – libraries, parks, community centres, preschools, schools, universities and vocational institutions.

We need urban planning that facilitates easy movement between work, home and community facilities, particularly transport and internet infrastructure.

Research about healthy community fabric-making also points to the co-location of work, housing and community facilities, or at least their close connection through public transport or short commutes.

Many of the measures in this plan go directly to build these features: jobs, social support, a stronger education system, and improved community infrastructure.

Existing evidence tells us that communities that thrive despite major industrial transformation have several features:

- their governments have taken early action to smooth the transition to new job and industry types
- they have directly stimulated new employment by spending state money
- they have acted locally, on local advice
- they have invested heavily in education of all kinds
- they have anticipated and inoculated as much as possible against the social isolation that can accompany retrenchment
- they have turned their eye to urban planning, housing and urban, social and cultural infrastructure
- they have understood that transitions are made by whole households and by the men, women and children in them.

The shared vision for Northern Adelaide that so many of you have contributed to, has many of these characteristics.

Most importantly it is based on local people who live and work here in the North, and local government and industry. Past research about adaption to industry transformation points again and again to regional responses, rooted in the perspectives of local people. If that is a criterion for success, then this plan has a good chance of it.

South Australia has survived many challenges and is stronger for surmounting those challenges – whether, social, economic or environmental.

Making our way requires action on many fronts. The work of the people in this room and beyond, gives us every chance of success – with the prospect of making strong, thriving communities even stronger, so that the men, women and children in them live long, productive, satisfying lives.

Thankyou

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