



Official Opening of the Sandgate Courthouse

Thursday 24 April 2008 at 9:30 am

Sandgate Courthouse

84 Keogh Street, Sandgate

Judge Marshall Irwin
Chief Magistrate

Acknowledgments

I would like to formally acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered this morning. I also acknowledge their enduring culture and wisdom. Thank you Uncle Joe for your welcome to country and the smoking ceremony.

I also acknowledge The Honourable Kerry Shine MP, Attorney-General and Minister for Justice and Minister Assisting the Premier in Western Queensland; Ms Vicki Darling MP, Member for Sandgate, Deputy Chief Magistrate Brian Hine, our Sandgate Magistrate Michael Quinn and his immediate predecessor Magistrate Pam Dowse who is now the Brisbane Childrens Court Magistrate, Ms Julie Grantham Acting Director-General of the Department of Justice, Mr Peter McKay Acting Deputy Director-General, Mr Paul Marschke the Court Administrator, the Sandgate Registrar Mr Graham Pitt, and all of you our distinguished guests.

This time last year, we would have been standing amongst stark steel framework on a grey concrete slab.

Much of the former courthouse which had served the community since 1965 had been removed by then, so our staff were effectively performing all their normal duties in half the space and court was being held in the old file storage room.

Despite these challenges, they never missed a beat and I would like to add my thanks to all concerned. You have every reason to be proud of your efforts in ensuring a smooth transition to this new courthouse.

Sandgate can now lay claim to one of the most modern courthouses in Queensland – one that the people of this area can be proud of.

Last month, the Northside Chronicle quoted my learned colleague Michael Quinn as saying how privileged he felt to take up his appointment in such a wonderful new building – he made particular comment on its modern facilities and technology.

On the flip side of the coin, I believe Sandgate is equally fortunate to have Michael as magistrate. He has an exemplary record of service to the Queensland justice system, including 30-odd years as a solicitor specialising in criminal law.

He is also a former vice president of the Queensland Law Society and former president of the Criminal Law Association of Queensland. In 2003, Michael was awarded the Centenary Medal for services to the law in this state.

I am pleased that he is with us today. It is also wonderful that his immediate predecessor Magistrate Dowse is able to take time out of her busy schedule to join us. Not only was she the highly regarded magistrate here for many years but she also had to preside here during the construction phase. She took up her new appointment before she could enjoy the fruits of this new court. Pam is one of a number of well respected current magistrates who has called the Sandgate Court home. Magistrate Gribbin who retires from Beenleigh in two weeks, Magistrate Austin of Richlands and Magistrate Chilcott of Redcliffe all served here. Magistrate Chilcott was the registrar for 17 years and regrets that his court commitments prevent him from attending today.

I also take this opportunity to acknowledge the current local registrar, Graham Pitt who brings extensive knowledge and experience to this role and also to his service as an acting magistrate from time to time.

We have already heard mention of Beverley Bloxham and her elegant artwork and, as the Member for Sandgate said, those designs are very much in keeping with life on the bay. I thank her and everyone involved in the design and construction of this courthouse.

Even more importantly, Beverley's artwork helps to humanise our courts. This is very much in line with contemporary thinking.

In the past, there may have been a tendency to build our courthouses like forbidding fortresses with limited space and facilities for court users, including victims of crime, witnesses, police, lawyers, justices of the peace, court volunteers and other members of the community. They were also quite oppressive for court staff.

While security is still important, we also need to recognise the expanding role of our courts in the modern justice system. These days they offer a range of innovative programs and sentencing options, in parallel with other important justice services such as mediation and dispute resolution.

Some of our court participants, including people charged with offences are very vulnerable and deeply distressed – they come to court nervous, confused and overawed. Therefore it helps to soften and normalise their surroundings as much as possible and to take the angst out of what may otherwise be an extremely stressful experience.

Our staff also do an excellent job in helping them through the process, we also now have facilities such as vulnerable witness rooms and the ability for witnesses to give evidence away from the courtroom by video-link and closed circuit television. As a result our Magistrates Courts are now seen as an accessible and vital part of the communities that they serve – as courts of innovation that reach out to those communities.

One thing that has not changed is the key role played by our Magistrates Courts as the front line of justice administration.

Last financial year in Queensland, they dealt with more than 356,000 criminal charges – some 96 percent of the state total – as well as 59,000 civil claims. We were the busiest criminal jurisdiction in Australia.

Of those, Sandgate alone dealt with about 2,500 people on more than 5,200 criminal charges and nearly 200 civil claims – so, as you can see, your local magistrate and staff are certainly earning their keep.

It is a far cry from the days – when I am told – there was time to play a game of ping pong in the back of the court room.

We now have a courthouse befitting of the efforts of our magistrate and staff, and the needs of the Sandgate community.

On behalf of the magistracy, I extend my thanks to the minister and government for making this possible.