

## **Chairman's Report**

### **AGM 20 October 2020**

The 2019-2020 year has been an extraordinary one with COVID-19 dominating the last 7 months and presenting our Business community (our country) and our Association with extreme challenges.

In the shadow of COVID-19 it can be difficult to recall other events, however reflecting on the past year I can report the team have been very busy.

Our first big event was supporting the Council's inaugural lighting festival – Elektra. Bizlink supported this by undertaking some beautification projects in the town. We funded and installed 10 LED Flagtrax positioned at town entrance points, purchased new promotional flags, held a "light up your business" campaign and lit up the laneway from the main street to the Countdown Supermarket precinct.

Also, in October, Bizlink held a successful Social Media training workshop with Likuid Media, supported the Taranaki Garden Spectacular Festival and contributed some funding towards the sound mirrors/whisper dishes that were installed in King Edward Park in July 2020.

In November and December, the team delivered one-on-one training to business owners who were new to learning about using social media for business development. The team also organized the annual Hawera Christmas Parade and Street Festival, prepared for AmeriCarna and completed maintenance of the town Christmas tree.

The Hawera Christmas Parade and Street Festival 'Recycled Christmas' was held on Saturday 12 December 2019. A 10 percent increase in EFTPOS sales (compared to the same day the year before), was good evidence of another successful event.

Bizlink contributed \$5,000 towards putting a mural on both sides of the Subway Railway Bridge, which was completed in February 2020. The mural was a Council/Hawera Community Board project, which the Executive felt was important to support, given that the bridge is essentially the entry point into Hawera, and the first impression visitors get of our town.

Our first big event in 2020 which Bizlink supported was the annual AmeriCARna Street Festival in February. AmeriCarna turned out to be the last big event for several months so it was fantastic that we managed to get people exploring shops via a scavenger hunt, fashion parade and main-street window dressing competition (compared and judged by Ken and Anna of MORE FM).

COVID-19 and Level 4 lockdown hit New Zealand in March 2020 which subsequently led to the cancellation of planned ANZAC commemorative activities, Easter, Comic Book Day and our biennial Bizlink Business Awards. A lot of effort went into planning these events, so it was disappointing that we were unable to hold them. However, the team responded very quickly to the new 'normal' and delivered a series of virtual workshops (with local accountants, the Ministry of Social Development, Venture Taranaki and other business support providers) to help our small-to-medium business owners navigate through the uncertainty of Level 3 and 4 lockdowns. Our monthly Business after Five Networking events also moved to a virtual meeting format and we virtually delivered several social media training sessions for businesses needing development in that area.

During this period, we tried very hard to share information and give as much support as we could to our business community, while also working under the same challenging conditions. As they say, 'necessity is the mother of all invention' and the COVID lockdowns prompted an acceleration of digital development, both of Bizlink and many of our businesses.

Prior to 'lockdown' the Team had been working on a "Think Hawera" marketing initiative. After lockdown and in conjunction with Venture Taranaki, the STDC, Taranaki Chamber of Commerce and regional business associations, we were able to take what we had done to date and incorporate it into a wider regional 'Go Local' marketing campaign.

We launched our localised version of the 'Go Local' regional marketing campaign at our Hawera Winter Festival on Friday 31 July. As part of the campaign, and in an effort to encourage people to shop local, Bizlink put \$12,000 of prizes into scratch-and-win tickets that were distributed to shoppers spending over \$10 in local businesses. Over 200 businesses donated an additional 750 (approx.) prizes to the campaign. The team also arranged billboards, window and car stickers, guerrilla sidewalk chalk and social media digital banners. The Winter Festival and the Scratch-and-Win/Go Local Campaign came at just the right time. Residents were ready for something to do, businesses were excited to celebrate making it through the Level 3 and 4 lockdowns, the weather was fantastic, and the Winter Festival was a great success. We are looking at making the Winter Festival an annual event.

Also, in June and July we supported the STDC Business Development Manager to build a digital business directory, which will give our members the ability to have an online presence. Work on this project continued through August and September as we helped to develop the look of the site, canvassed business interest and started collating information. We also built a base of professional images which will be able to be used for promotions/marketing. We are looking forward to seeing the online directory launched early next month (November 2020).

A beautification project we have been working on over the course of the year to help improve vibrancy in the CBD is a large-scale mural for the Hawera Town Square. We successfully sought funding from Creative Communities and Te Hawera Community Board to go towards the mural and have worked with artist Lotte Hawley, who is set to start the work at the end of this month.

Along with other key stakeholders (STDC, WITT, VTT, Massey Ventures) we have started the groundwork/planning to establish a new Innovation Hub/Co-working space in the Town's CBD. Progressing this project to completion will be one of Bizlink's key priorities over the next 12 months.

In August 2020 the team joined forces with Startup Taranaki to bring this year's entrepreneur Startup Weekend event to Hawera. The team have been busy recruiting volunteers, mentors, judges, marketing and organising the event. This is the first time the event will be held outside New Plymouth which is bit of a coup in itself. Startup Weekend Taranaki will be held from 13 to 15 November 2020 and the team continue working on this event until then.

During the year the Association also advocated for our members making formal submissions to the Taranaki Regional Council (opposing the large increase in rate for South Taranaki residents for the Yarrows Stadium rebuild), South Taranaki District Council (on their Annual Plan, which saw a zero% rate increase) and Hannah's (seeking not to close their store).

It was very gratifying to receive a generous \$350 donation from the Hawera Assembly of God Church, in recognition of all the hard work Bizlink does in our Community. While we certainly don't expect gestures like this, it is nice to be thanked on occasion, particularly considering the Executive team are all volunteers.

As such, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Executive for the commitment and positive way they have all contributed to the success of the Association over the last 12 months. I would especially like to thank our outgoing Secretary, Alison Smith, for all her hard work. While the last 12 months have been challenging, they have also been very rewarding and that is thanks to the way everyone has worked so well together.

Finally, I must thank our two part-time Coordinators, Nikki and Petra. As well as the major projects and activities outlined above, they published our monthly Bizlink Newsletters, maintained our website and two facebook pages, put flags up on our Flag Trax, dealt with numerous customer enquiries at the office, liaised with the Saturday and Thursday market day stallholders, organised our popular monthly Bizlink BA5 Networking events (thank you to the many businesses that have hosted an event and to the sponsor (NZME) of the business card draw) and much more. Nikki and Petra do an amazing job putting the Executive's plans into practice while balancing the wide range of needs and expectations of our members. They are truly committed to the progress of our business community and our town.

In conclusion I hope you can see that the Bizlink team have had a very productive year. I cannot overemphasise the effect COVID-19 had and will continue to have for some time on our business community. The road ahead will not be easy, however, with a focussed Executive, providing clear direction and work programmes, and highly motivated Co-ordinators, Bizlink is well placed to continue supporting the long-term economic recovery and welfare of our members.