It has changed the everyday quality of life enjoyed by Townsville’s residents and families.

Being elected Mayor of Townsville for a second consecutive term last year was a great honour and I’m determined to work hard on behalf of the community to secure the city’s future.

In closing, I look forward to sharing the best of Townsville with members of the Institute of Public Works Engineering Australasia Queensland in October when Townsville hosts the annual State Conference.

Townsville City Council is proud to support this very important gathering.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RECOGNISING WOMEN IN ENGINEERING

Seren McKenzie  
IPWEAQ Vice President

#BeBoldForChange. That’s the theme of this year’s International Women’s Day. I must admit, I wasn’t sure how to be #BeBoldForChange, so I had to do some research on the IWD website to understand the theme. And I was surprised by the figures quoted – did you know, the World Economic Forum predicts the gender gap won’t close entirely until 2186? It’s a long time away from now but when you think about it, it’s not really that surprising taken into a global context.

Then I took a look at the numbers of women in engineering in Australia - something a bit closer to home and more relevant to us in the public works engineering sector. A number of sources confirmed that women account for less than 13% of the engineering workforce. This did surprise me as I thought we had a lot of younger females coming into the sector.

A colleague of mine had moved out of local government into consulting for a period and upon her recent return to a council position, once again found herself being the only woman at various meetings she attended. While I certainly do understand this being the only female manager at my council (and often, only one or one of a few females at engineering workshops or training), I do enjoy a great deal of support from my colleagues and I’m not therefore treated any differently to my male counterparts.

The number of university graduates in the engineering field remains low at about 17% nationally. Our universities are beginning to recognise this and are working hard to encourage females into engineering courses. The University of Queensland reported at the end of 2016 that their recent graduation class included a record high of 26% women. The University of NSW has also introduced a program featuring female engineers at work in an attempt to help change the way women perceive engineering.

And therein lays the problem. The perception of what engineers do means that people expect an engineer to be male. Sorry guys, but that is the common perception that female engineers
must live with. For example, last year a resident rang Council wanting to speak to an engineer about an issue. When the officer told the resident I had been on site and he would transfer the call to me, the resident’s response was to reaffirm that he wanted to speak to an engineer, and since I was a woman, I couldn’t be an engineer. We had a laugh about it; that’s all we can do. Another request from a resident was to meet with a male engineer. Unfortunately we didn’t have any male engineers available that day, so a couple of female engineers went to meet with him. This is still typical for female engineers and the only way to change that is to entice more females into the industry and that is a role for IPWEAQ going forward.

However, if this is the perception of young female engineers entering the workforce (and students and graduates), it is critical that we are able to show them that we are a progressive welcoming group of professionals who recognise the importance of having women in engineering. It’s important we encourage colleagues, male and female, to celebrate their successes, to nominate each other for awards and to ensure we provide and promote a culture that welcomes all engineers. IPWEAQ has numerous engineering awards each year, for projects and people. One of those is the Woman in Engineering award and although I sometimes question why we need to ‘pick out’ a female in the field, I remember the gender imbalance and the statistics ie only 2% of female engineers over age 40 in the sector, and I understand why we need to acknowledge and reward women who have excelled in engineering in public works. According to UQ, young female engineering students are looking for strong female role models when setting out on their engineering careers. A part of this is achieved through celebrating the success of women through means such as engineering awards, as well as women staying in the engineering and progressing to senior positions.

We all have a role to play in ensuring our sector is a welcoming place for all. Diversity brings new ideas, innovation and improvement and will only make us stronger and that makes the communities we serve stronger. Let’s all #BeBoldForChange.