
Community Update

Reference: 101; 102; 103/6
Report Author: Interim Administrator

The *Bushfire Response and Recovery Review 2021: Council Response* has been completed and will be addressed in this meeting. The responses prepared by Leanne Barnes, staff and external agencies provide a solid action plan for Council to work on the 44 recommendations from the Review. The community can be assured that past failures will not be repeated.

I would like to thank Leanne Barnes for her work in undertaking and coordinating the responses for the Review and the contribution of the following staff: Carmel Foster, Director Corporate Strategy and Resourcing; Marissa Racomelara, Strategic Governance; Greg Bray, Manager Open Space Recreation & Building Maintenance & Infrastructure Service; Peter Smith, Manager Design, Construction and Maintenance & Infrastructure Services; John Crawford, Chief Information Officer; Cath Brennan, Coordinator Community Development; David Sommers, Coordinator Media and Communications; Amanda Lawrence, Risk Management Officer; Barry Arthur, Manager Environment & Sustainability; Damien Jenkins, Acting Chief Financial Officer; Corinne Buxton, Community Recovery Officer; and former staff Richard Mooney; Rachel Forte; Kylie Stefaniuk; and Peter Day.

This has been a collaborative cross-organisational project that reinforces the commitment that Council has towards its 'community-first' approach and also teams working together to improve the service that Council provides, both internally and externally.

The contribution and support from the following agencies is valued and most appreciated: Heidi Stratford & the NSW Resilience team Jeremy Hillman, Trevor Cox and Mark Conlon; Kim Hill Recovery Support Officer NRRRA; Paul Lloyd and Trish Malone Regional Emergency Management Officers NSW Police; Chief Inspectors Jason Horne and John Klepczarek LEOCONS; Southern Highlands Foundation Shelley Boyce and the Executive committee; Staff from Wollondilly Shire Council CEO Ben Taylor and team particularly Ally Dench; Dick Adams Regional Recovery Coordinator; RFS Martin Surrey; and SES Warren Turner.

There appears to me to be more redacted information on Council's publicly available documents, including Business Papers, than I have experienced in the past. While it is clear that Council has statutory obligations under relevant Privacy Acts, in my view, public authorities need to be more transparent in their operations.

Muzzling of information that is, or may be of, public interest does nothing to restore confidence and it is for this reason I have worked to make Wingecarribee Shire Council more open, honest and transparent. But this works two ways.

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Accordingly, I have asked the General Manager to review what is on the Council's website particularly in relation to Development Applications online. While for varying reasons some matters should be treated as private and confidential, Council staff should be not be treated as intermediaries or umpires and neighbours should take more responsibility by 'talking over the back fence'.

The General Manager and I attended the Illawarra Business Awards held in Wollongong on Friday 19 November. The Awards are conducted by Business Illawarra which of course also covers Wingecarribee Shire area.

Small business has been very vocal about the failures of this Council and on this agenda is a response to the Small Business Commissioner's scathing report.

As a Council we are doing our best to reconnect with the small business community. The Shire was represented at the Awards by Mrs Oldbucks Pantry, based in Berrima and Highlands Sand & Soil, based in Braemar. Warrigal was the winner of *Outstanding Community Organisation and Excellence in Workplace Culture* and operates several facilities in the Southern Highlands. PepperGreen, based in Berrima, was the wine partner and category sponsor.

We look forward to encouraging greater participation in the Awards in 2022.

My marathon village and township outreach visits are nearing completion. I thank those who have attended for their open and respectful dialogue. The General Manager has indicated that as part of the Council's Community Strategic Plan and budgets, she will also do a roadshow with Council's Directors and relevant staff in the new year. Residents can also look forward to staff having location meetings when projects are being consulted – such as local park improvements and road upgrades.

I was asked more than once at my meetings why I was not supported by the Senior and Executive staff – well the answer is clear – we have different roles and responsibilities and hopefully from now on resident information meetings dominated by politicians is a practice of the past – even though in the past few days it has been necessary for me to write to a suspended Councillor about attendance and interjection at what was an operational meeting.

When I have completed the community visits, a brief precis of each meeting will be put on the Council website to outline matters of importance raised, which I think will be of benefit to many. One matter I have already actioned is in relation to Buxton, where I have asked for a detailed report to be submitted to the first available Council meeting updating the community on the alleged illegal dumping adjacent to the Bargo State Forest and the now reported private reconstruction of a public road. These are matters that have gone on for too long and need to be addressed.

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Last Wednesday night I attended the 2021 Australian Highlands Wine Show Awards at Centennial Vineyards. The Show was open to all Australian wines made from grapes sourced from vineyards above 500m in altitude and attracted over 120 entries.

Congratulations to our own vineyards for your awards:

1. *Best Sparking Wine in Show* – Centennial Vineyards NV Limited Release Blanc de blanc
2. *Best Dessert Wine in Show* – Tertini 2019 Noble
3. *Best Pinot Noir in Show* – Cherry Tree Hill 2019 'Hayden' Reserve Pinot Noir.

Well done to the organisers, judges and wineries who participated.

While noting awards, it is appropriate to also recognise Harbison Homes Burradoo for receiving the *2021 Excellence in Aged Care Award* for the design of Harbison Dementia Living. The Southern Highlands community is fortunate to have the presence of such an organisation in the Shire and while I am aware the General Manager has visited both their sites, I am looking forward to doing so early in the new year.

It was also pleasing to represent Council at the opening of the new facilities for the Moss Vale Football Club at the Church Street Oval last Friday evening. The Club now has first class change and clubhouse facilities and while the works were substantially funded by the Council and a Federal Government grant, the fact that the Club raised in excess of \$140,000 is to be applauded.

When I chaired the first meeting of Council under Administration in March, I commented that in my view the presentation of the newly refurbished Council Chamber left a lot to be desired and in short, I thought it adversarial with a real 'them and us' atmosphere. Robes, chains and privilege are not what real community government is all about.

I was told that the raised podium was in fact necessary as new levels had been created by the Civic Centre improvements and for accessibility. This was incorrect.

To remove the podium and modify the existing function, I am told will cost in the order of \$40,000 which includes IT costs of \$13,000. While this is a lot it could be seen as money well spent. Not only would the expenditure remove the perceived 'grandness' it will allow for the room to become multi-purpose for training, receptions, ceremonies and the like.

Things are changing at your Council with respect, consistency, trust and transparency at the forefront. While I see alterations to the Chambers as important, they are not completely necessary and others may have a differing view. In the circumstances, I invite residents and ratepayers to write to me if they take a contrary view, otherwise instructions will be given on 31 December 2021 for works to be undertaken in readiness for the Meetings of Council in 2022.

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Finally, it was wonderful last night to be in Bowral for the turning on of the Christmas lights by Isla McAlary and Mackenzie Perry from Robertson Public School. Tomorrow I will join Will Archer and Ari Knowles from Exeter Public School at Moss Vale and Brittany Wray from St Paul's Primary School at Mittagong on Friday.

Council's Christmas celebrations are being organised in consultation with local Chambers of Commerce and Village communities and are deliberately focussed on community celebration rather than lights, tinsel and banners. Apart from a major display at Corbett Gardens with the *Festival of Lights* I am told this is what the community wanted and a full debrief will be presented to the February 2022 Council Meeting.

Viv May PSM

Interim Administrator