



Community Update

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

As foreshadowed at the April Council meeting, I have now written to the Minister for Local Government requesting an extension to my appointment of three months. If approved, this will take me through to the September Local Government elections and my letter, which is attached to this Minute, outlines my reasoning. In short, in my view Wingecarribee Shire Council has failed its community and needs a fresh start at the September 2021 elections that focuses on the fundamentals of sound local government, not perceived entitlement, ego and personality. This will ensure that Wingecarribee Shire Council will be an effective and well-respected Council into the future.

Re-advertising for the position of General Manager closed on Monday 10 May 2021 and attracted 20 additional responses. The General Manager Selection Panel (which includes two community representatives) will now consider all applications with interviews commencing as soon as possible.

At my first meeting at the Council I gave notice that an independent desktop review of the Council's financial position, resourcing strategy, maintenance of basic infrastructure, depreciation schedules and capacity to deliver projects identified in the Community Strategic Plan would be undertaken. In addition, a governance, human resources and statutory obligations audit would also be commissioned.

These reports have now been received and are publicly tabled and will be attached to the Minutes. While no concerns are flagged in relation to Council's general financial position, both reports highlight governance short comings and recommendations that must be addressed. I have requested a response to all recommendations in the reports to the first available meetings to the Council while noting that the latter report is more complex.

The finance report confirmed my concerns that Councillor briefings, workshops and advisory committees may have, on some occasions, taken informal decisions that have been acted on by the staff. The use of such is of course totally unacceptable and unlawful and could be said to be de facto Council meetings. The decision was taken to open such gatherings to the public at the last meeting.

The consultant's report relating to development issues is still being prepared by virtue of the large number of residents who have approached Council for an independent hearing.

It is my firm view that while the report is being delayed this is an important action in the restoration of public confidence in the Council. The consultant has already raised with me concerns in relation to the view of some applicants and objectors that they



feel they need to engage professional advisors to navigate the complexity of the Council's planning and DA processes. This is unfortunate and will be addressed, however, what is of particular concern is the use of former employees of the Council. I propose to write to the Office of Local Government suggesting that the *Model Contract for the Employment of Senior Staff* be amended to prohibit the alleged influence of such action and I have asked the Acting General Manager to urgently prepare an amendment to Council's Code of Conduct to also address the issue.

My visits to individual towns and villages across the Shire continue and I would like to thank the many residents and groups to whom I have spoken for their candour. It has been a demanding but rewarding experience and I am sure most will agree that it is just impossible for me to address every issue that has been raised. There are common themes of transparency, communication and the fact that Council had "stopped listening". Additionally, the maintenance of both asphalt and gravel roads (some of which are not maintained), verge maintenance, lack of leadership on the part of Council and for community groups costs of simply having gatherings in Council assets and the complexity not only of such events but the hiring of halls. Through me at this stage the staff are listening and responding and while all will not like some answers, many of the matters will be addressed through reports to Council.

Another matter of concern particularly to the outlying villages was the Council's response to the tragic 2019/2020 fires that had a significant and devastating impact on the Shire. Clearly there were mistakes made on the part of Council and it is important that the lessons learnt be publicly aired and I have asked the staff for a "warts and all" report on the Council's response to the fires and recovery action. The report is to be presented to Council and is to be prepared in consultation with the RFS and Resilience NSW and I believe will have substantial recommendations.

Associated with the above, I recently initiated a review of the State and Federal funding that Council has received to support community recovery in response to the 2019/20 Bushfires. While my review is yet to be finalised, I am concerned about one project that Council funded through State monies and I believe it is important that this is addressed immediately.

Council was allocated \$250,000 from the State Government as a part of the *Bushfire Community Resilience and Economic Recovery Fund – Phase 1*. The objective of this program was to deliver quick, flexible, small-scale grants to local councils for immediate, locally led community and economic recovery activities. The purpose was to support local business recovery and assist communities overcome the economic and social impacts of the bushfires.

One of the projects Council requested to be funded related to a development of a plan for agribusiness and equine industry, \$100,000 of the \$250,000 was allocated to this project in a partnership with Destination Sydney and Surrounds. While I understand agribusiness and equine industries are emerging in the Shire, in my opinion there is no evidence that this industry was significantly impacted by the 2019/20 bushfires. In addition, the project that was funded had a 12 month duration which raises concerns

AGENDA FOR THE EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF COUNCIL

Wednesday 12 May 2021

INTERIM ADMINISTRATOR MINUTE



around “immediate” response and is focused on very niche local businesses. I have also reviewed the project brief related to this project and there appears to be no focus on bushfire recovery.

It is my view that this project was inappropriately funded using bushfire recovery funding and as such should instead be funded by Council’s General Fund. A request will be made to the State Government to utilise the \$100,000 for genuine bushfire related projects and programs and I will personally talk with villages and RFS Local Captains in this regard.

Much is also happening at the operational level of the Council as the Acting General Manager addresses a myriad of issues including a deterioration of work, health and safety issues which we believe in some areas has led to a toxic culture. Employees should be valued and treated with respect. Hopefully with the imminent appointment of a new General Manager, this work will be accelerated over the coming weeks and I will continue to share with the community as best I can what is going on at your Council.

Viv May PSM

Interim Administrator