



Community Update

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

Under the Local Government Act, I am required to submit to the Minister for Local Government a report within 14 days of the end of the suspension period that is to include any recommendations in relation to improving or restoring the proper and effective functioning of the Council. I am proposing to submit a Minute to the Council meeting on 12 May 2021 in that regard.

In my short time at Wingecarribee Shire Council, I have taken the view that, while the Minister was justified in the suspension of the Council, the role of the administration and in particular the executive left much to be desired and was a contributing factor.

This Minute deals with a number of matters and in that context, I would advise the community that at the May meeting I will be seeking an extension of 3 months to my appointment. It is important that the Wingecarribee Shire community has renewed confidence and trust in the Council before the September 2021 elections. Time is short and there is much to be done.

The departure of the former General Manager and the two Deputy General Manager's allows for a refresh of the executive. It is also my view that the Council's organisation structure needs attention as it is both cumbersome and complex. Roles are just not understood in some areas and, from a residents point of view, very difficult to navigate.

46 applications for the role of General Manager were received, however, based on their responses to criteria etc, I was not confident in making a suitable appointment. Accordingly, I have requested the recruiter to re-advertise the position. The reputation of Wingecarribee Shire Council in the industry is not good but I am hopeful that with a renewed focus we will be able to find a calibre candidate. There will be a stronger emphasis in responding to the essential criteria and some earlier applicants will be encouraged in that regard. Leadership, involvement of the community, urgent need for change, respect and readiness for the incoming Council in September will be highlighted.

I have now started my consultations with villages in the Shire. In undertaking the visits, I am very conscious that not all organisations/groups speak for all residents so the community can be assured of a balanced approach. A request of the Acting General Manager has already been made for Council to improve and make easier contact with the administration and I have proposed a new position of Village Coordinator. Apparently, there is already a role in the organisation that deals with some village committees and the booking of halls that could possibly assist and I look forward to advice to the May meeting in that regard.



Numerous people have contacted me from across the Shire with a myriad of issues – frankly it has been a little overwhelming. A consultant has been retained for planning and development matters and all staff matters (present and former) are now being dealt with by the Acting General Manager.

I have little confidence that the suspended and resigned Councillors or the former executive handled many of the matters/issues/complaints well. That is not to say that they did not do their best but in my view in this area the community has been badly let down. The recent NSW Ombudsman report could be used as a very high level case study.

With the 2021/22 budget now being prepared by the staff, I have asked the Acting General Manager to provide funds for an Internal Ombudsman. There are many models in NSW local government on how to best provide such a service and no doubt they will be explored in any report presented to the Council. To guarantee independence I favour a role that is remote of the Mayor and General Manager.

Scoping (or lack of) of major projects seems to be a problem for the Council. In relation to Station Street it has been mentioned in nearly every consultation I have had with residents and community groups. I have listened and passed all information and my views to the Acting General Manager and he advised that he will present a report to the May meeting fully detailing the matter with professional justification and a recommendation.

The Southern Highlands Innovation Park (SHIP) is obviously a regional significant matter that appears to me is lacking a strategic approach on the part of Council. While major transport infrastructure upgrades are planned, including of course the Moss Vale Bypass and new Berrima Rail overpass, a holistic master plan and servicing strategy is required to unlock its potential. The Acting GM has informed me that he is now seeking funding from the Government to develop the master plan which will unlock the potential of the precinct and facilitate the aims and objectives of the South East and Tablelands Regional Plan. With such matters it is important that the community knows where the Council is up to and no doubt further reports will be submitted by the staff at the appropriate time.

I am very conscious of the dissatisfaction on behalf of a number of users of the Bowral Memorial Hall and their accusations of a lack of consultation on the part of the Council. The Council at its last meeting prior to suspension accepted a tender, however, it has not been signed and the staff have requested that the matter now be deferred for a month to afford them the opportunity of more consultation with users. I have also met with users and without building any expectations, support the staff's view in the hope that an alternate design outcome can be achieved.

I am determined to address a lot of matters in my time at Wingecarribee Shire Council and am seeking technical/professional advice both internally and externally. The Council has dealt with too many of the issues particularly with Station Street in Closed Council, workshops, or briefings. In my view this has led to a loss of

AGENDA FOR THE EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF COUNCIL

Wednesday 21 April 2021

INTERIM ADMINISTRATOR MINUTE



confidence in the community and I have now taken the decision to open all files to interested residents on the Station Street matter to ensure that Council is open, transparent and honest in all its dealings.

Yesterday the Small Business Commissioner visited the Shire and led consultations in Bowral, Robertson and Moss Vale. The Commissioner was responding to a formal request from the Assistant Treasurer. I attended all the consultations and the problems in dealing with the Council were again highlighted. The Commissioner indicated that his report will be presented to the Minister within about four weeks and while I look forward to his independent findings, based on yesterday's evidence it will not make for good reading from a Council reputation perspective.

Other matters that I have sought advice and report to Council include opening of Traffic Committee, Councillor briefings and workshops to the public and review of the Council's Communication and Media Policies.

The Acting General Manager advised me this morning that it has been revealed to him that Community Satisfaction Surveys have been conducted for a number of years, however, while the reports are on Council's website, the results have never been formally reported to Council nor recommendations implemented. To say we are both amazed would be an understatement. Such matters should be reported to Councillors and staff in a public open forum such as a Council meeting and under my watch this will happen at the May meeting.

Recently I met with the Chair of the Southern Highlands Food and Wine Association and was briefed on its work. Branding of the Southern Highlands as a major wine provider needs reworking and I have agreed to contribute up to \$5,000 in that regard on a dollar for dollar basis to retain a consultancy.

I see this as a small first step for Council in a rebuilding its failed relationship with small business.

The opportunity is also taken in this Minute to thank the Acting General Manager and staff generally for their assistance to date. Some tough decisions are being made. I know that some of my requests for information are placing demands on them in addition to the importance of carrying out the business as usual function of the Council.

Viv May PSM

Interim Administrator