

# Rate increase of 1.5% approved by council

ANDREW PALOCZI

apaloczi@gannawarratimes.com.au

GANNAWARRA shire's average rate increase for the 2020/2021 financial year is locked in at 1.5 per cent, with councillors voting not to impose the 2 per cent average rate rise permitted for that period by Victoria's Minister for Local Government under the State's Fair Go Rates system. The decision was made at Wednesday night's Gannawarra Shire Council meeting following discussions on the proposed Annual Budget for the upcoming financial year. In the proposed budget, the average rate increase was specified at the allowed maximum of 2 per cent.

At the meeting, Avoca Ward councillor Charlie Gillingham called for a dramatic cut in the proposed average rate increase for 2020/2021, proposing to halve it to an average of 1 per cent.

He linked that call to the current challenges faced by ratepayers in the COVID-19 influenced economic environment.

"Councillors, I'm pretty sure that the majority of ratepayers in our Shire have been doing it tough over recent times and especially since the COVID-19 pandemic started back in March," Cr Gillingham said.

"Our council is in a stable financial position and I believe this is an opportunity to cut some slack to our ratepayers."

Cr Gillingham noted some of the public submissions received in relation to the draft version of the budget called for no increase in rates, a request he said many other rate-

payers have made directly to him.

He put the cost to council of cutting the average rate increase to one per cent at roughly \$100,000, explaining that would lessen the burden on ratepayers during a difficult period.

Cr Gillingham said Gannawarra Shire Council has money available in its discretionary fund to help cover the cost.

Patchell Ward councillor, Brian Gibson, was supportive of the call for a reduction to the average rate rise for 2020/2021, but argued that halving it to 1 per cent would come at the expense of some council services to the community having to be sacrificed over coming years.

He floated a 1.7 per cent average rate increase for the forthcoming financial year, arguing that would not negatively impact Gannawarra Shire's Capital Works Program.

Fellow Patchell Ward councillor, Jody Basile, put forward the average rate increase figure of 1.5 per cent.

"I think 1 per cent (average rate increase) is too low and that will have an impact (on council services), but if we can meet in the middle at least it gives our community members a small amount of relief," Cr Basile said.

Her proposal for a 1.5 per cent average rate increase was promptly supported by councillors in the ensuing vote, with none having spoken against it.

The now adopted Gannawarra Shire Annual Budget for 2020/2021 will be adjusted to reflect the change in the average rate increase.

# Council move fails pub test

## Opinion

JENNY DENTON

jdenton@gannawarratimes.com.au

KERANG resident David Thompson was one of four people who phoned in to the Gannawarra Shire Council special meeting on June 9 to discuss the written submission he had made on the budget.

After spending a few minutes outlining his argument for increased spending on tree planting, he paused to ask if there were any questions from councillors.

"No, David. We just listen and discuss it later," the mayor said.

The same message was given to each of the residents who rang in to talk about the questions, criticisms or requests on the budget they had submitted in writing.

One of them was former mayor Max Fehring, who pointed out, among other things, that although the budget was presented according to recommended local government guidelines the format of the document meant hardly anyone, including the councillors, was likely to be able to understand it.

Max spoke for his allotted five minutes, before being politely farewelled with an assurance his contribution would be considered.

So far he has received no feedback on his input, and the final budget document, which was adopted on Wednesday night, doesn't indicate whether any changes were made as a result of any of the 16 public submissions the council received on it.

To be fair, the council has a lot on its plate.

Genuinely committed and already working hard, staff have reportedly gone into overdrive in recent months to adapt to the post-pandemic situation - scrambling to assist businesses and residents and find new funding,

as well as finalising the budget and carrying out a huge number of time-sensitive infrastructure projects.

Busy staff can't be expected to explain every policy to people who don't need to understand the detail, or respond to every inquiry or suggestion that comes their way.

However, what was on display at the budget meeting just looked like a piece of bad theatre.

That has been generally true of recent council meetings, where it is easy to form the impression policy decisions are being rubber-stamped rather than argued out, when they are voted on.

Following a change of meeting procedure sometime in the last year and a half, council staff who used to attend public meetings to read through business reports and explain their recommendations no longer take part in the process, with their reports instead now simply incorporated into the meeting agenda notes.

So efficiently are business items able to be dealt with now that ordinary council meetings - which would once have lasted all day - often run for less than half an hour.

One meeting earlier this year went for under nine minutes.

This sort of governance - compliant with the requirements of the relevant legislation but lacking openness and genuine engagement - can breed frustration and mistrust.

In this social media era, people who feel they are getting short shift through official channels often turn to their keyboards to wage battles of opinion and information - not all of it sound.

With passions rising online, commentary getting personal and truth at times going missing, people on all sides of the issue can end up angry and hurt.

The onslaught of keyboard warriors might drive those in control of official channels to want to close them down further.

It seems clear everybody involved

in the current council drama believes they are acting in the best interests of the shire.

However, the latest twist in the Cohuna airport saga looks to this reporter to be very hard to defend.

There may be a strong case for the council to opt out of an airfield expansion project fraught with uncertainty which would place added governance burdens on the council and financial burden on ratepayers.

There may also be strong arguments to be made about land status, planning permits, travel times, air ambulance services, runway orientation, weather conditions, aircraft size, fuel loads and sewerage ponds.

But whatever the merits of the arguments, offloading a community asset is a significant step.

The key point is that the airport is valued by many people in the Cohuna community, whose former shire once owned it.

That is something that apparently hasn't been factored into these particular council equations.

Proposing without notice - either to local residents or the land's owners - to break and abandon the lease doesn't pass the pub test of fair and reasonable governance.

Nobody involved in the decision has so far explained why it has been made without consulting stakeholders or - with council elections just four months away - in such haste.

As Cohuna doctor and Aviation Club board member Peter Barker wrote in a social media post, the council is acting as if what it's doing is nothing special, but actually it is a very big deal.

While an amendment added to the motion on Wednesday night means the council will now be required to work with community groups to ensure the viability of the airport, the decision to offload it is bound to increase division and hostility in the Gannawarra shire at a time when unity and goodwill are badly needed.



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