

E.R.A
Inc.

*Building Bridges
between Council
and Community*



ERA Newsletter, April 2012

Readers of previous newsletters know ERA exists because there is widespread and persistent concern among residents about Eurobodalla Shire Council's inadequate performance. Residents and all who are interested in good governance need to be aware that our dysfunctional Council needs repair.

This is not a criticism of Council's staff; they are among our strongest supporters. ERA is mostly concerned about the absence of leadership from Councillors and the incapacity of the most highly remunerated senior executive staff.

At the core of our problem Councillors and their advisers fail to show interest in residents views. While denigrating suggestions from individual residents and ERA, Councillors also ignore warnings signalled by:-

- 3000 residents who petitioned the Minister for Local Government for an independent review of Council's activities;
- the Insync Survey and the Blackadder Associates report [both prepared by Council's own consultants] revealing alarming deficiencies in the management, utilisation and organisation of Council's 480 staff;
- general disinterest, lack of trust and disrespect for Council's cosmetic approach to community consultation, most evident with the community's disassociation from the so-called Community Strategic Plan;
- protests and outrage expressed by residents at public meetings and in petitions relating to mismanagement of the Local Environment Plan;
- the extreme level of disappointment confirmed by the Micromex Survey, commissioned by Council in November.

Eurobodalla fails to progress as it should largely because our Councillors are too disunited to provide leadership and to represent residents effectively. Councillors are unable to steer Council's policies with authority and to guide the performance of Council's managerial staff in the manner prescribed by the Local Government Act.

Unfortunately Council's senior executive staff add a further dimension to the problem. Managerial shortcomings are evident in the range and frequency of problems reported by residents. Public dissatisfaction and lack of trust has been fed by appalling mismanagement of important matters requiring genuine community engagement, such as the Community Strategic Plan and the Local Environment Plan. Council's consultants [Insync and Blackadder] also revealed major managerial deficiencies.

Instead of acting decisively to improve the calibre and performance of Council's highest paid executive staff, Councillors denied the obvious and rearranged chairs on the lower decks.

Local government efficiency is inseparable from accountability. The need for senior local government staff to be accountable and performance oriented has long been recognised. Since 1993 the Local Government Act has included requirements for senior Council staff to be employed under performance based contracts, subject to annual review and not exceeding five years.

Unlike well run corporations that proudly provide details of their executive talent in annual reports, Eurobodalla Shire Council remains secretive about the qualifications, breadth of experience and employment conditions for its executive team. Council appears to have evaded the intent, and probably the requirements, of legislation dealing with senior staff appointments. So Council remains decades behind accepted practice for executive accountability and Eurobodalla ratepayers suffer the unfortunate consequences.

Overwhelming quantities of information thrust upon our leaderless Councillors shows they accept a passive, rather than authoritative, role in establishing Council's agenda, the information they need and how it is

presented. The quantity, rather than quality, of information dumped into Council documents suggests senior staff lack the professionalism or discernment to distil information to that which requires Councillors attention or guidance.

What can residents do ? By comparing our experiences and sharing our concerns, we can resist Council's practice of isolating and ignoring individual residents who have reason to be dissatisfied. ERA will continue to urge Councillors to improve their perspective. We persist with the view that an external, independent review of Council's activities and finances is the first, essential step toward building a better future. We have sought assistance from, and continue to liaise with, State and Federal authorities. And ERA hopes to assist the community to make well informed, sound choices when residents have the opportunity to elect Councillors in September.

Already ERA is hearing impatient demands from residents for change at the next elections. Pressure is growing for positive, capable candidates to be identified. We promise to keep readers informed.

Unlike Council with an annual budget approaching \$100 million, 480 full-time staff and professional staff employed to move attention away from areas where Council could do better, ERA has a zero budget and depends on volunteers to work toward better governance in Eurobodalla. Our performance is fuelled by information and support from residents. So please encourage your friends / acquaintances to come up to date with our website and join us at:- <http://www.eurobodallaratepayers.com.au>

ERRATIC, ASSET STRIPPING ACTION PRESENTED AS 'PLANNING'

Our rural residents have been alienated by unnecessary and poorly researched changes forced on land holders with clumsy mismanagement of the Local Environmental Plan (LEP) by Council's Planning Department. Indifferent to the community it serves, Council has also attacked its urban employers, residential ratepayers, by proposing to re-zone and sell areas of public open space, environmental and wildlife corridors throughout the Shire.



At the time of development Council decreed it was absolutely essential, and pivotal to approval, that these areas of public open space be set aside by the developer in the interests of the Shire's communities, for the sake of good urban design and development. Council now proposes to reverse and ignore all the exhaustive work and research it previously used to demand these public reserves.

Whether this is blatant misuse of Council's power, extortion, or just sloppy planning, it is improper for Council to demand land donations from developers for Council to convert to cash at a later date. It taints the trust and authority given to Council to administer Development Approvals. It sends a corrupt message to prospective developers, and all residents who

value open public spaces will feel conned.

Council has carelessly created anxiety and uncertainty among residents who understand and value the role of those public reserves. Ratepayers paid premiums for land in the vicinity and continue to pay premium rates. A number of ratepayers challenged Council to provide cost-benefit analysis and environmental impact studies. Nothing has been forthcoming. Instead, ratepayers have been directed to attend a public meeting to be chaired by a consultant, hired by Council.

Appointing yet another consultant to conduct Council business is wasteful. But Council's expensive Planning Department seems unwilling to conduct a simple public meeting, or to seek the views of stakeholders before presenting ill-conceived plans.

All Councillors were made fully aware of this issue. Of the five who bothered to respond, their consensus was to let this expensive process run its course so Councillors can pontificate and possibly reject the proposal. Better governance would see Councillors representing their residents properly, using their authority to require Council staff to produce a cost benefit analysis of the exercise before more money is squandered.

Money, not responsible planning, must lie behind this proposal to sell public reserves into a soft real-estate market. It looks like a desperate decline into asset stripping. Perhaps one of few options left to a General Manager who fails to convince ratepayers that Council's existing budget is prudently managed in the community's best interests..

A proposal to rezone 57 parcels is on exhibition for comment by 10 April 2012.

TO HOBART TOWN

Our Mayor and the General Manager both attended the Australian Coastal Councils Conference in Hobart from 5-7 March 2012. The General Manager presented a paper and the Mayor attended two executive meetings of the National Sea Change Taskforce.

Apart from confirming the conference proceeded largely in accordance with the program, the Mayor's report to Council reveals no insight, analysis or developments of particular relevance to Eurobodalla.

Some coastal Councils apparently decided the cost of attendance at this conference was not justified. It appears our small Shire was substantially over represented with both the Mayor and General Manager abandoning their desks.

For the cost to Eurobodalla ratepayers of fares, accommodation, conference fees, taxis, meals, telephones, allowances, incidentals and the GM's salary, perhaps totalling around \$10,000, residents should expect some explanation of what our delegation set out to achieve, together with how and when we might recognise any benefit from this expenditure.

The Mayor and General Manager travelled far to accomplish something that remains unclear. They both have a responsibility to lead by example with a business approach to aligning their costs with ratepayers benefits.

You can read the Mayors "full" report on our website <http://www.eurobodallaratepayers.com.au/Concerns/ERA7.htm>

MAYOR'S SENIORS MOMENT

In a personal contribution to Seniors Week our ageing Mayor, Fergus Thomson, embarrassed himself and the community on ABC South East radio the day after February's Council meeting.

To the surprise of listeners who had been at the meeting, the Mayor crowed about how Council had voted down Councillor Kowal's innocuous motion that Council write to the Director General of Planning seeking the inclusion of a position of representative for the Eurobodalla Shire water users on the Dargues Reef Gold Mine Community Consultation Committee.

When approached by the ABC to respond to the Mayor's triumphalism Councillor Kowal was perplexed. While some Councillors had ranted about too much community representation, his motion had been carried unanimously!

Come on Ferg, spare us your clumsy attempts to turn your seniors' moments into political point scoring opportunities



The ERA is on Facebook

To keep you up to date on the issues that happen between our monthly newsletters we have set up a Facebook page which is fast becoming a dynamic reference point for news and views

<http://en-gb.facebook.com/people/Eurobodalla-Ratepayers/100003700952596>

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

Martin Luther King Jr.