



BOB: Amanda, I watched the Extraordinary Council Meeting last Tuesday where the 2020-21 budget was discussed and eventually approved. Again, I found myself a bit bewildered by what went on and the way Councillors conducted themselves, I felt it was just another embarrassing shambles. As a more experienced Council watcher than me, can you explain what happened please?

AMANDA: I am enjoying the Zoom meetings as you can see facial expressions. I've always had a problem with keeping a straight face and not expressing exactly what I'm thinking, so congratulations to those Councillors and senior staff who do achieve a poker face!

I don't quite understand why the Extraordinary Council Meeting was chaired by Councillor Jeff Whitton. I know he is Chair of the Finance Committee, but I don't recall Councillor Joanne McRae chairing the budget meeting when she was Chair of Finance. I am not impressed with Councillor Whitton's chairing as the meeting was shambolic and he appeared to bully some Councillors and a couple of new items were added to the recommendations with no discussion or debate. One of them was from Councillor Duffy about the bats in Cook Park and it is not clear what was agreed.

Should Councillors take a pay rise?

A large part of the meeting was taken up with whether or not the recommendation for the Councillors to give themselves a pay increase was going to be part of the decision.

Orange City Council is frequently late in making its Council meeting business papers available to the public, and presumably Councillors. For a Council meeting on Tuesday night the papers should be made public on the previous Thursday evening. On this occasion the business papers were published on the website late on Monday morning and I don't know when the late papers were added!

The NSW Government allowed Councils an extra month to approve their budgets this year because of COVID-19. Orange City Councillors gave themselves 3 extra weeks to develop the budget but gave the community no extra time for engagement and comments. This did result in them being hoist by their own petard as the Local Government Remuneration Tribunal made its annual report on 10th June instead of the usual 'before 1st May' requirement. Clearly the late addition of a recommendation to increase Councillor salaries by 18% for the Mayor and 8% for Councillors made a number of Councillors uncomfortable that a 10% overall increase had not been part of the community consultation despite the spin that was put on the issue in the report to Council.

What the report said was: 'Councillor Allowance'

The Local Government Remuneration Tribunal recently reclassified Orange City Council from a Regional Rural Council to a Regional Centre. A consequence was that the maximum allowance for Councillors increased from \$20,280 to \$24,320 and the maximum Mayoral allowance increased from \$44,250 to \$60,080. This reflects the role of a Regional Centre Councillor. It is recommended that the Councillor allowance be set at \$21,888 and the Mayoral Allowance be set at \$54,072 for 2020/21, being 10% below the maximum allowable allowance for Regional Centre councils as determined by on 10 June 2020.

Recommendation

That the Councillor allowance be set at \$21,888 and the Mayoral Allowance be set at \$54,072 for 2020/21, being 10% below the maximum allowable allowance for Regional Centre councils as determined by the Local Government Remuneration Tribunal on 10 June 2020.'

In my opinion that is an unacceptable amount of 'spin'. The information that would have been useful to know is: How much more is it going to cost overall to increase the Councillor allowances as proposed?

The total annual increase in Councillor allowances is \$29,188.

The Councillors will receive an increase of \$1,608 which is an 8% increase.

The Mayor will receive an allowance of \$75,960 which is an 18% increase.

The total cost of Councillor and Mayoral allowances for 2020-21 would be \$316,728 an overall increase of 10%.

What does being a regional centre mean?

During the non-debate on the issue Councillor Jo McRae suggested that the increases should wait until after the local government elections on 4th September 2021 instead of having high percentage increases at this time.

The Queensland Government undertook a review of local government a few years ago and amongst other things concluded that Councillors should be paid more to improve the quality and diversity of people standing for election. Low salaries for Councillors tend to militate against diversity because it may be that the only people who can afford to take the job on are people who don't have to spend their time earning money including landholders and retirees.

It is not clear when the decision is deferred to. Councillor Duffy was very keen for the decision to be made at Tuesday's Council meeting and he referred to other Councils making the decision already even though the Office of Local

Government Circular only came out on Monday 22nd June.

How many Councillors should Orange have?

I have written in Orange City Life previously about how many Councillors Orange should have. Not less than 12 months before the next ordinary election, the council must determine the number of its councillors for the following term of office. If the council proposes to change the number of councillors, it must, before determining the number, obtain approval for the change at a constitutional referendum.

If the number of Councillors was reduced from 12 to 9 (including the Mayor) the overall cost of annual allowances at the new rate proposed would be \$251,064, a reduction of \$65,664p.a.

BOB: On the submissions that were made to the Council about the budget, and presentations made at the meeting, I notice that 2 of them were about environmental issues. Should one interest group be able to stop things happening?

AMANDA: It is disappointing for the community members who make submissions that Councillors do not discuss the submissions, and sometimes issues raised just go through to the keeper. A number of useful points were raised, and the staff comments can often appear defensive. Certainly, in my many years in NSW local government I have tried to change the way staff deal with community engagement to see it as an opportunity not a criticism and to solve issues rather than falling back on bureaucratic processes.

A number of submissions felt that the rise in water and sewer rates were unnecessary and Cyril Smith's submission is particularly pertinent. I will address this matter in another conversation.

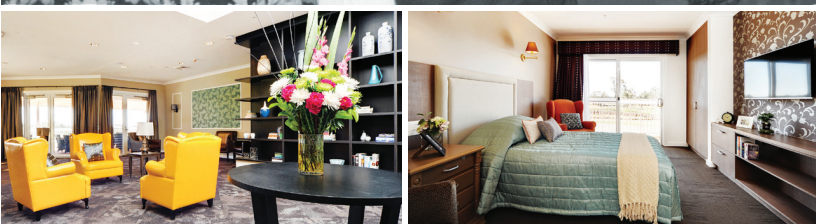
\$500,000 planning costs questioned

The issues that Nick King from the Environmentally Concerned Citizens of Orange raised about the intention to spend \$500,000 planning for Mountain Biking on Mount Canobolas were very valid. The area is in Cabonne Shire, not Orange and is a State Conservation area that requires the preservation of biodiversity. There has been a lot of discussion recently about Mount Canobolas being our main tourism attraction and the idea of having a cable car to take people to the summit. I understand that it is an Aboriginal sacred site as well as ecologically unique, so I don't think it is the case of one interest group trying to stop things happening. Mount Canobolas is a unique asset that we could honour in a much more profound way with a broader vision supported by all stakeholders than having a mountain bike trail or a cable car. Ecological and cultural experiences are what a lot of people want to see these days.



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