



**BOB:** Amanda, this week I thought we'd have a more candid chat about a couple of issues that are topical at this time. Nothing official but I'd be interested in your general thoughts.



**AMANDA:** Sounds interesting.

**BOB:** The sports stadium project out near Bloomfield looks set for a chequered path given some of the recent community feedback. It does seem an unusual mix to have virtually side by side, a hospital precinct and a major sporting complex. I thought the stadium complex was meant to go out beside the Northern Distributor, a site that seems to make more sense. What are thoughts on all this?

**AMANDA:** There seems to have been a lot of controversy about the Sports Stadium from the start when the Premier offered \$25 million to Orange in February 2019 to build a Sports Stadium conditional on the community electing the Nationals candidate to the NSW Parliament.

I was not in Orange at that time, so I decided to study some of the history around this issue, particularly as there seem to be some disagreement over the amount of community engagement that has happened. The NSW Government has been moving the emphasis of community engagement to the strategic end of proposals when ideas are first thought of, and reducing the amount that takes place when proposals start to become a reality, particularly with land use planning e.g. through Development Applications. People often do not get involved until the later stages and then find that they have little room to manoeuvre because the strategic plans have been approved after attracting little interest from the community.

I understand that the Sports Stadium was originally planned on land beside the Northern Distributor and the proposal was then moved to the current site at Bloomfield a few months ago. This proposal was changed in December 2019 to Bloomfield as the Bloomfield site has a number of benefits including existing power and water access, less administration costs, proximity to existing sports facilities and Orange hospital and the Southern Feeder Road. The North Orange site is undeveloped paddocks. I have not been able to find the report that went to Council on 3<sup>rd</sup> December, or what community engagement has taken place to date about this specific site.

I would have preferred the redevelopment of Wade Park as a significant venue because of its proximity to public transport. Another alternative could have been the trotting track which is a natural amphitheatre and at the gateway to O Town. I am also not convinced that the thought that a new venue would attract NRL games comes rather late as most NRL clubs are already committed and it costs significant amounts to compete with others to attract them. It does seem to be a strange mixture to have a hospital precinct and a major sporting complex side by side.

Last week's *Newswatch* had an article about the proposals with community members expressing why they think this is not a good choice and that there had not been community consultation about the site chosen for the stadium.

Mayor Reg Kidd said there would be further consultation with the Development Application for the removal of the trees on the site to be exhibited for community comment, but it is understandable that people feel it is a done deal when there are photos of the Mayor and others digging the first sod on this controversial site.

There has been concern over other development proposals recently where community members feel that they have not been given adequate opportunities to comment. This includes the proposal for the Retail Centre at Bloomfield

with Put Orange First and CBD retailers asking for the proposal to be re-exhibited for community comment as the exhibition that was held failed to gain the attention of the people most affected.

I have also found it difficult to find the opening and closing dates for consultations because of the way they are presented on Council's website. I have also commented recently about the need for additional community engagement opportunities during the COVID-19 restrictions. Orange City Council is inconsistent. It has exhibited the draft Heritage Review for 40 days '*allowing for additional time under current circumstances relating to COVID-19*' (report to Council's Planning and Development Committee 2 June 2020), and yet only exhibited the budget proposals for 28 days. I wrote an article in *Orange City Life* in April concerning community engagement at this unusual time and quoted from the Office of Local Government Engagement Guide for Local Government. The introduction states;

*'Our world has changed.'*

*The public health restrictions associated with the management of COVID-19 mean that we need to do things differently. For councils, this means that in some cases we need to temporarily change the way we engage with our communities and stakeholders. We have prepared this engagement guide to help you navigate your engagement options under the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979 (EP&A Act).'*

#### **The Guide also states:**

*'Before you do anything!'*

As a council, you have an opportunity to reach out to your community and stakeholders and seek to understand how they can engage with you. This is not the time for assumptions. Reach out to your communities and stakeholders and ask the question.'

Funnily enough, soon after that Guide appeared on the Office of Local Government's website it then disappeared! However, it would be good practice to '*ask the question.*' Our objective is to help the local community to get the best out of our council, and failing to deal with community feeling that it has not been consulted will only lead to a lack of trust.

We congratulated CEO David Waddell for his openness last week. It would be good if he could follow the advice of '*As a council, you have an opportunity to reach out to your community and stakeholders and seek to understand how they can engage with you. This is not the time for assumptions. Reach out to your communities and stakeholders and ask the question.'*

**BOB:** I remember that Council made a very late decision to spend \$50,000 on Perry Oval in its budget discussions and hear that there have been developments on that matter.

**AMANDA:** Yes, after Councillors had taken 3 extra weeks to develop the budget before putting it on exhibition for community comment for 28 days, Councillor Glen Taylor proposed in the final Council meeting that approved the budget, that \$50,000 be allocated for the upgrade of Perry Oval.

There is a report for next week's Council meeting recommending that the canteen, change rooms and toilets block at Perry Oval need to be demolished after an independent report found it was in need of major repairs

that would cost \$122,000. The building has not been used since 2013 when it was found to contain asbestos. It has been recommended Orange City Council pay about \$20,000 to knock down the facilities.

The report to Council states that current usage of Perry Oval is training for local teams and has been this way for over a decade. A new irrigation system is to be installed in this financial year to improve the field, but there are no plans for it to be utilised further, other than for training purposes. With this limited amount of usage on the oval and other better equipped ovals in the city, an amenities building with a canteen and change room is deemed unnecessary for the site.

Council does have a sports facility program, which no doubt includes plans for which sports fields are used for matches and other events, and which are only available for training, for the kinds of reasons given in the report. It must have been very annoying for the Chair of the Sport and Recreation Policy Committee to see this late proposal added to the budget. It will be interesting to witness the debate on this issue at next week's Council meeting.

It is interesting that councils are expected to have strategic plans, delivery programs and operational plans and be accountable to their local communities through measuring and reporting on progress towards achieving community priorities. At one time there was a NSW State Plan, which was also measured and reported on. Now there are Premier's Priorities. I suspect that subsequent NSW Governments realised that a State Plan could be a bit of a straitjacket when it comes to making popular decisions, and do not want to be held to the same standards of accountability as councils. But as we know it takes effort by the community to hold their councils accountable.

I noticed when researching the background to the Sports Stadium that the following was reported:

*Nationals MLC Rick Colless, who is also the Parliamentary Secretary for Western NSW, said Ms Hazelton — who was only preselected on the weekend — was offered a range of projects to select as her first announcement Mr Colless said she chose to make the stadium her priority, and added that he does not think it will backfire on the campaign.*

*"I don't think that it is an insult and it is certainly not a bribe, it can be seen more as a carrot than a bribe," he said.*

*"People have always accused us of pork-barrelling.*

*"If pork-barrelling is doing things and promoting projects that are going to make the lives of regional NSW better, then that is what it is."*

(ABC Central West 7 February 2019)

The first council I worked for in NSW was Parramatta City Council and I found it very frustrating that the Lord Mayor changed every year, and the voting was normally tied, so a straw was pulled out of a hat. This resulted in constantly changing direction, which wastes resources. Some people may think it naïve to try to hold councils accountable to progressing community priorities with value for money, but that is what various reforms to the NSW Local Government Act have sought to achieve. The NSW Government leaves it to us – the community – to hold our councils accountable.