



Future City, CBD Special Rates and Democracy

BOB: I see that the Council approved the OC Future City Framework at Council on Tuesday night. I know you've been following the development of Future City. Can you tell us more about what has been approved?

AMANDA: As you know, I have been a big supporter of the Future City proposals.

The Council adopted Tranches 1 and 2 of the Framework and CEO David Waddell explained that more detail would come back to Council about the individual projects and there would be more community engagement.

I applaud Council for making a start on implementing the proposals. New Deputy Mayor, Councillor Glenn Taylor, stated at the Council meeting that he had been a Councillor for over 25 years, Mayor Councillor Kidd for 31 years, and Councillor Russell Turner for over 20 years in total, and none of them had seen major upgrades of the CBD.

The report to Council gives financial implications as:

'The CBD Upgrade project is a 2 year \$30 million plan. Council has committed \$5 million per year, for 2 years, to this project. Full implementation will be contingent on external funding sources however the intent is to get started on the project with Council funding.'

Tranche 1: \$5 million Est

Tranche 2: \$5 million Est (excludes the March Street crossing which is proposed for grant funding)

Tranche 3: Further work required to establish costs but preliminary estimates are \$15.5 million.

'The funds that Council has adopted is for capital works and the program elements which are operational will be part of the quarterly review.'

This may be confusing to people not steeped in local government finances as the figures below show an estimated cost of \$9.55 million for projects in Tranche 1. It therefore appears that \$5 million of that is capital works which have been budgeted for and \$4.55 million are operational program elements which have not been budgeted for but will be added into the budget when the Quarterly Reviews are considered by Council.

So, Tranche 1 is made up of projects to June 2021:

Project	Estimated Cost
McNamara Street South Upgrade	\$500,000
Anson Street - Summer to Kite Upgrade Stage 1	\$500,000
Byng Street (Lords to McNamara) and Lords Place (Byng to Summer) Stage 1	\$1,700,000
Community/Council Greening Projects	\$200,000
Orange Public Art Program	\$300,000
Lighting	\$700,000
Scrambled Crossings	\$100,000
Matthews Park	\$250,000
Programs (assistance going online and covering empty shop windows)	\$300,000
Wayfinding/Furniture/Painting upgrades	\$450,000
Parking/Transport Review	No cost given
Pop-up/Start-up Support (shipping containers)	\$50,000
Total	\$9,550,000

Tranche 2 is made of projects to June 2022:

Project	Estimated Cost
Lords Place Upgrade	\$1,500,000
Robertson Park and McNamara North (Summer to Byng)	\$1,400,000
Programs 2	\$300,000
Community/Council Greening Projects 2	\$200,000
Orange Public Art Program 2	\$300,000
Wayfinding/Furniture/Painting upgrades	\$450,000
March Street Rail Crossing	Funded by grants
Anson Street upgrade Stage 2	No cost given
Byng Street (Lords to McNamara) and Lords Place (Byng to Summer) Stage 2	No cost given
Total	\$4,250,000

Councillor Kevin Duffy was adamantly opposed to the proposed changes to Byng Street and narrowing of Summer Street, but supported the framework overall. He said that his experience as a bus driver makes him think that the proposed traffic changes are not workable.

The Mayor mentioned negative comments on social media. I was interested to see comments on social media in Orange in the lead up to the Council meeting on 1st September. I am a member of a Facebook group that tends to have an older demographic of long time residents of Orange and one post estimated that 75% of comments were against the proposal to have a pedestrian mall in Anson Street and 25% were for. Another post said that there was another Orange Facebook group that 'never says anything positive.' It is somewhat inevitable that people will initially have a negative reaction to proposed changes and the Council reports says that *'it would be valuable to do more in depth community engagement about specific proposals as they progress.'* So, more information and discussion with community members will hopefully bring people around to being more supportive.

There is a lack of respect for Council in the comments that are made by Orange community members on social media, that shows a lack of trust.

BOB: I heard Councillor Kevin Duffy say something about CBD Special Rates. Do you know what that was about?

AMANDA: Sort of.

Councillor Duffy said that the CBD Special Rate has been collected for 15 years.

In 2020/21 \$713,186 will be collected from 327 rateable properties in the CBD. That is an increase of 3.5% on the previous year and do not forget that is on top of the ordinary business rate which is also paid on the same property.

In October 2019 local media reported that: *'according to data released for Orange City Council from the NSW Office of Local Government, average rates for businesses in Orange were \$6,336 annually.'*

However, average rates for other regional towns and cities in NSW were just \$3,751.'

It is an issue that I have been trying to find more information about for some time. I finally obtained a copy of the area where property owners pay the CBD Special Rate and recently asked, as a member of the Economic Development Community Committee, what the Orange Central Business Area Special Rate is spent on. I am yet to receive a response. Some parts of the CBD are very dirty and where I walk every weekday there are vomit stains splashed on the pavement and on the glass of a doorway, that appear to have been there for months if not longer. There is also a lot of litter that is not picked up. So, I would be surprised if CBD businesses are paying an additional rate for extra cleaning.

I have covered the topic of Council's Community Committees previously. Orange City Council has more than 20 Community Committees, which meet at a variety of intervals including quarterly, bi-monthly or when required. Council's website explains their purpose:

'Council wants to hear from community members who are interested in serving on a Community Committee. There are currently more than twenty community committees. These small groups provide a source of information and discussion to feed into the decision-making of Orange City Council.'

The purpose of the Economic Development Community Committee is *'to advise Council and make recommendations in relation to the implementation of economic development strategies contained within Council's Delivery/Operational Plan'*. It seems that the Committee does not operate to provide a source of information and discussion to feed into the decision-making of Orange City Council as discussion is often prevented and comments made by community members are not minuted to be fed into the decision-making process.

BOB: There seemed to be an issue about the method of voting for the Deputy Mayor. Several councillors talked about democracy, but I found the whole thing very confusing.

AMANDA: Yes, it was confusing, partly because Councillors were talking about two, or even three, different things at the same time. Apparently, Orange City Councillors have always voted in the past by secret ballot for the election of the Deputy Mayor, but could not do so on this occasion because two Councillors were not present in person in the Council Chamber. The Mayor said that he has always advocated voting by a show of hands in the past, but had always been outvoted.

Following considerable discussion and confusion about whether some of the councillors present in the Council Chamber wanted to leave the two councillors who were attending by Zoom out of the voting, it was agreed to vote by a show of hands. It is much more noticeable which way the 'Zooming' Councillors vote than those in the Chamber.

As a General Manager of a Council I have been faced with the situation where Councillors appeared to be concerned about voting in front of the media and public gallery over the issue of seeking community engagement on whether or not to fly the Aboriginal flag. Some of them put their hands near to their faces and it was difficult to understand who had voted which way!

With 4 candidates for Deputy Mayor, Councillors voted 3 times, as the candidate with the fewest votes is excluded from the next round. Some Councillors changed their votes between rounds and the final vote was between Councillors Taylor and Mileto. It was not clear whether the Mayor had actually voted and he spoke harshly to the CEO, Returning Officer, David Waddell, when he said the vote would have to be taken again. It was clearly the right thing to do to be clear that Councillor Glenn Taylor had succeeded in being elected as Deputy Mayor until the local government elections on 4th September 2021.

The other two issues that were talked about concerning voting were:

1. Current legislation (as temporarily altered as a result of COVID) requires that Councillors must be present in person to be part of a Council meeting. It was suggested that this legislation should now be reconsidered to allow councillors to attend by teleconference or telephone, and
2. The proposal that electronic voting be used for local government elections.

I support the first of these two proposals but not the second. Fairfield City Council is one of the few NSW Councils that runs its own local government elections and my colleague who was responsible for the elections always told me that it will not be possible to have electronic voting until it is possible to exercise one's democratic right to draw a rude picture on the ballot paper and have it counted as an informal vote!!