

## **Submission Regarding Application to IPART by Ashfield Council for a Special Rate Variation (SRV) - Feb 2015**

I wish to make a submission to IPART to refute the claims both stated and implied in the application by Ashfield Council for a Special Rate Variation that (1) proper community consultation has taken place concerning the proposal and that the views of the community have been taken into account in formulating the application, and (2) that there is broad community support for the proposed SRV. I believe that neither to be true.

In regard to the effectiveness of community consultation, it seems to me that the process was cynically driven by Ashfield Council to deliver the outcomes that they had predetermined and that any views put forward by residents to the contrary were simply ignored. For example, I received at my home a letter from Council inviting me and my wife to attend an "open day" and enclosing the reply card with the four options as described in Council's submission (part B page 31). We attended the open day only to find that the only Council staff present were "non-finance" managers (planning/engineering). They listened to my objections to the SRV and my suggestion for a full audit and review of Council's financial management policy and practices so as to ensure good and professional financial housekeeping, but could offer nothing beyond "fill out the card" and telling me how much work was needed on the Aquatic Centre. I duly filled out the card and added some further comments along the lines discussed but was not at all surprised to find that when the results came out, initially in papers supplied to a meeting of Ashfield Council in November 2014 and later in the actual submission to IPART, the results of the card entries had been dismissed (presumably because they did not tell the story Council wanted to project).

To put this observation in context, it has to be noted that there were a number of means of providing feedback on the SRV and these are outlined in the Council submission to IPART. On the basis of Council's own figures (Part B section 4.2 pages 35-41) 1702 prepaid response cards were considered of which 862 opposed the SRV and wanted no additional rate impost (51%). In addition 28 out of 37 individual letters (i.e. excluding respondents who offered no preferred option) opposed the SRV as did the signatories of 175 of two different form letters. By my addition therefore, at least **1065** local residents indicated to Council through this process that they were **opposed** to the proposed SRV. I would also respectfully suggest that the large majority of these respondents were people who had taken the time to explore and follow-up the issues before making submitting their replies, cards and letters to Council, either by attending the open days or by consideration in their homes.

And yet Council has chosen to ignore this response and instead seems to be relying on a phone poll of just **401** residents. Phone polls are notorious as I have found in a long business career for being able to be manipulated by both the words and sequence of questions being asked and the demographic being questioned, and while I am not privy to the detail of what was asked and of whom, I am deeply suspicious that questions early in the survey aimed at promoting a positive view of Ashfield Council and its activities could be designed to lead later answers and influence respondents towards the answers favoured by Council.

It is also of concern that, as noted by Council in its submission, there are large numbers living in Ashfield for whom English is not their first language and experience shows that the finer nuances of this kind of phone survey may often be lost on respondents from non-English speaking backgrounds.

To me, it is wrong for Council to persist in claiming resident support on the basis of what I see to be a highly questionable and unreliable survey especially when the purported results seem to be in such direct contrast to other, perhaps more considered, opinions provided through other feedback methods.

I do not contest the fact that the finances of Ashfield Council are in need of serious repair. I am concerned though that Council seems to be showing no determination to “live within its means”, as others of us in the community have to do when times get tough, but is simply trying to spend its way out of its mess by imposing an additional, unfair and unwanted impost on residents. Council seems now to be using at best questionable data to persuade regulators that community support exists for such a measure when it manifestly can be argued that it does not.

There are other measures open to Ashfield Council of which the following are but a few options:

- A full and rigorous audit of all financial practices and policies to ensure “value for money” for ratepayers.
- An end to excessive expenditures arising through over-zealous applications of planning and heritage criteria which in many cases do not align with other local Councils in the Inner West
- Abandoning unnecessary social projects such as “artists-in-residence” and instead using the premises “Thirning Villa” for proper economic return
- Cutting grants and other support for certain sectional interests within the community which have no benefit to the people of Ashfield at large
- Putting the Aquatic Centre under full commercial management
- Sharing common “back-office” functions with other neighbouring Councils in order to achieve economies of scale and with a view to full amalgamation at later date.

All of the above should be implemented before any consideration, let alone approval , is given to any form of SRV for this Council.

I should mention that I am a long-term resident of Ashfield (more than 35 years and my wife grew up here) so I am more than well versed in local issues and how Ashfield Council conducts itself. Neither of us is, or at any time has been a member of any political party nor do we have any political affiliations whatsoever.

Thank you for your consideration.

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