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SUBMISSION: SPECIAL VARIATION APPLICATION 2022-23 – CENTRAL COAST COUNCIL

The Peninsula Residents Association (PRA) makes this submission on the Central Coast Council's application to extend the existing special rate variation due to expire in 2024-25 for a further seven (7) years.

The PRA is a voluntary non-profit community group which aims to serve as a non-partisan forum and give the Woy Woy Peninsula community a collective voice on matters affecting its quality of life. It is committed to protecting and improving the Peninsula's liveability and sustainability including social and environmental aspects.

The PRA does not support the Council's application. Our reasons are set out below against IPART's assessment criteria.

Financial need

The application represents a significant time period (7 years) and financial burden on the community and its ratepayers.

The justification provided by Council is inadequate for a special variation of this order of duration and magnitude.

The justification and process adopted are insufficient for addressing the deficit in confidence and trust in local government in the community.

As IPART would be aware from last year's application, the financial state of our Council has caused significant ruptures in the community. There are diverse views about causes, responsibility and solutions. They remain as the community awaits the outcomes of the public inquiry into the Council, future of our elected representatives and local government elections.

Community awareness

The community has not been provided with meaningful information to form an educated view of the relative costs and benefits of particular services and propose alternatives.



Taking the Central Coast Library Service as an example, the types of questions and information of interest to the community about individual services include: What is the annual cost of running our libraries? What is its share of annual expenditure in total and per person? How has this changed over time? How is the service funded? How is the service used and by whom? How efficiently and effectively are they run? What measures are used to judge their efficiency and effectiveness? What are they telling us? What are they telling us?

Information like this about the particular services the Council delivers is absent from the process of community consultation and discussion.

Moreover, it is unreasonable to expect a local community like the Peninsula (at 40,000 people already the size of your average LGA) to be able to comment on a budget for a region of 350,000 people.

Transparency at a local level to which residents can relate is required for putting them in a position to provide informed comment.

Lack of resident comment does not reflect agreement with the Council's financial strategy, rather the impenetrability of its documentation.

The process has been rushed. A more sophisticated discussion is needed with the community about the role of local government and its sustainability.

Reasonable impact on ratepayers

The proposed extension represents a significant impost on ratepayers. Currently, the community is facing a time of low wage growth, rising cost of living pressures and an uncertain economic, political, climate change and public health environment domestically and globally. As already stated, the justification provided and the process of community consultation and discussion adopted by Council are inadequate for a special variation of this order of duration and magnitude.

Integrated Planning and Reporting (IP&R) documentation

The various plans that comprise the IP&R framework under which NSW councils operate are difficult for the community to comprehend.

In a stringent cost containment environment when, for example the community is told that there is no money in the budget for street trees, it is difficult to accept the resources that appear to be spent on the plan and strategy development and reporting process, document appearance, public relations and spin, promotional materials and activities. The Council has not controlled its discretionary spending.

It sends a poor message to the community facing higher rates for a longer period about overall priorities, best use of scarce resources and working as one.

Productivity improvement and cost containment

The productivity and cost containment strategy set out by Council is broad in scope, coverage and detail. It is not presented in sufficient detail and a meaningful form to aid community understanding.

For example, call centre consolidation appears to be a sensible measure. But what does it actually mean for service delivery, costs, relative resource use and benefits accruing to users and the community. Staffing and productivity improvements is a broad brush term as are the measures cited. They need to be related to particular services with details about expected impacts on service delivery, costs, relative resource use and benefits accruing to users and the community.

Moreover, there is no accompanying proposal to measure the performance of the productivity improvement and cost containment strategy, to monitor and assess its success in achieving its expected impacts and outcomes and to regularly report to and inform the community.

It is essential for demonstrating a track record of delivery, for public accountability and building community confidence and trust.

The PRA urges IPART to address this shortcoming in its findings. It should be developed in consultation with the community.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission.

Yours sincerely

Julian Bowker

Secretary

7 March 2022