

I am writing to object to the Special Rate Variation application by Armidale Regional Council. Amalgamation has had a detrimental impact on Armidale Regional Council finances due to financial ineptitude, poorly scoped and executed projects with 36% of projects over budget or having no budget or identified source of funds. The organisation disregarded delegation schedules and breached OLG capital guidelines. This reflects an organisational culture of poor governance along with a lack of accountability and transparency to ratepayers.

The reasons for my objection are as follows:

- The SRV application occurs at a time of financial hardship and uncertainty due the impacts are a prolonged intense drought, bushfires and a pandemic which have impacted on two key industries – agriculture and education.
- Financial support via Jobkeeper, Jobseeker and Farm Household Allowance is being withdrawn at the end of March and this will create further financial hardship, although it may take some time for this to become apparent.
- The Capacity to Pay report which formed part of the community consultation is based upon the 2016 Census, therefore it does not reflect the ongoing impacts of the drought, bushfires and a pandemic.
- The SRV application and rate harmonisation is poorly understood by community, but it is reasonable to assume significant rate increases for farmland which further disadvantages primary producers recovering from an intense and prolonged drought – recovery will take time as many primary produces destocked including core breeding stock.
- The community consultation was poorly executed and poorly understood as the information was overly technical. The community was not advised that the SRV application was to be permanent rather than temporary.
- At the time of the community consultation many vulnerable people continued to self-isolate and may not have had access to technology to engage in digital platforms.
- Access to explanatory information via the local newspaper was not available as the Armidale Express is no longer printed.
- At the time of the community consultation, Councillors had been suspended and were unable to provide further clarification and support to their constituents.
- The Council was involved in a protracted legal dispute to protect the CEO – organisational resources were diverted to sustaining an expensive exercise that further disadvantaged the ratepayers who now bear the costs.
- The Hardship Policy was not available on the website until last week, so this important information was not available to the community.

While the need for increased revenue may be great, the timing of the application occurs at a time of financial uncertainty for the community. A new CEO has recently been appointed and Local Government elections will occur in September. Therefore, it would be beneficial for the Council to first demonstrate the capacity to manage our money before a permanent SRV is approved.

After a period of fractured relationships within Council the community has lost trust – this needs to be rebuilt. The decision belongs, rightly, to a newly elected Council. I respectfully request that IPART does not approve the SRV application.