

BARBARA MOORE



Bellingen Shire Council Special Rate Variation (SRV) 2018/2019 F. Yr. Submission

22nd February 2018

Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (I.P.A.R.T.)

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Dear sir/Madam,

I wish to lodge my objection to Bellingen Shire Council's application for a special variation for rates 2018/2019 and to include up to 2020/2021 financial year.

Their application is for a permanent, three year increase commencing 2018/19 through to 2020/21 where the variations are:

2018/19: 3.7%

2019/20: 3.5%

2020/21: 3.5%

These variations are in addition to the rate peg.

History:

Bellingen Shire Council has applied for Special Rate Variations as follows:

- 2014: Bellingen Shire Council applied for a special variation and IPART approved a special rate variation of 9.5% bringing the total increase including the rate peg to 11.8%. I understand this increase was annually for three years and was to pay for road & bridge works.
- 2017: Bellingen Shire Council applied for a special variation and IPART approved a special rate variation of 4.5% bringing the total increase including the rate peg to 6.0%. Once again the increase was for road & bridge works.
- 2018: Bellingen Shire Council has applied for a special variation of 3.7% as noted above bringing the total increase including the rate peg to 6.0% for the 2018/19 year with further special variations to be applied for the next two years up to 2020/21. Once again the increase is for road & bridge works.

Every increase is compounded year on year.

I have to ask the question: How many more years will our council continue to increase rates above the rate peg for road & bridge works?

The Bellingen Shire is disadvantaged in many areas.

- 2016 Census: Population 12,893; Land area 160,205ha (1,602 sq. Km); Population Density 0.08 persons per hectare.
- Statistics from the previous Census of 2011 show that the population has reduced by 30 or one could regard it as static.
- Development (dwellings) is so small that one would regard it as negligible. There were only 19 residential buildings approved to be built as at November 2017 in the 2017/18 F. Yr. The number of residential building approvals has been significantly reducing since 2004/05 when a peak of 70 houses was approved.
- The Shire has an age structure with 'Older workers/pre-retirees', 'Empty nesters/retirees' and 'Senior's' higher than Regional NSW statistics.

- Only 9% of households earned an income of \$2,500 or more per week in 2016. Other income statistics - 10.3% earned \$400-499 (Regional NSW 8.8%), 10.5% earned \$650-799 (Regional NSW 9.2%) and 10.7% earned \$1,000-1,249 (Regional NSW 8.7%). Other statistics indicate that the Bellingen Shire is not a wealthy Shire.
- Apart from Crown land we are predominantly a farming shire where large areas of land outside the small compact urban areas are zoned prime agricultural.
 - Employment in Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing is 7.3% (higher than Regional NSW 5.7% & has dropped by 7% since the 2011 census
 - The 2011 Census figures for the highest levels of agriculture production dollars are: Dairy industry 50.5%, Livestock slaughtering 37.2% & Vegetables 7.2%. Dairy & Livestock slaughtering require large areas of land.
- In 2011, Bellingen Shire scored 950.1 on the SEIFA Index of Disadvantage.
- The Shire unemployment rate is 7.2% compared to 6.6% for Regional NSW.
- We have an older Median age of 49yrs - higher than Regional NSW or Australia.
- The majority of our Shire is National Park or NSW State Forest and a substantial area of land outside these areas is within either flood prone or bush fire risk land and therefore unable to be developed for housing (source of rateable land). Some of the roads and bridges that Council must maintain are within these areas of Crown land where no rates are paid.

My reasons for objecting to the Special Variation 2018/19 application by Bellingen Shire Council are:

1. Many of the Census statistics indicate that the Bellingen Shire is a disadvantaged (poor) community and not financially able to afford land rate rises above the rate peg. Many residents are on a fixed & often low income. The land values from the VG's office have valued our land at an extraordinarily high level compared to other local shires and this therefore increases our rates.
2. Bellingen Shire Council is poor at fiscal management and have a higher than average management (in-door staff) cost compared to similar councils on the Mid North Coast of NSW.
3. Government grants should be applied for to enable Council to regularly maintain or renew our many bridges & maintain our local including rural roads. This may not have been undertaken in the past however I note that Council has recently applied for \$5.5m to upgrade 23 timber bridges. This should be the means of financing these works rather than increasing land rates above the rate peg.
4. Bellingen Shire Council may tick all the boxes regarding Community Consultation however senior management and Councillor's treat ratepayers with contempt and cannot be trusted – they do not listen to the voice of the community. To that end many residents do not prepare submissions of objection yet the non-existence of these submissions is regarded as a vote in favour of the proposal. Their method of consultation is to inform & proceed irrespective of the results of public submissions. At a recent extraordinary Council meeting when the special variation was voted on by Councillor's the comments from council staff (Deputy General Manager and General Manger) was that if this special variation was not supported by the community then it would result in funding cuts for the libraries (3 of) and swimming pools (2 of) implying that all these services would be closed. This is a typical 'bullying - threatening' method used by Bellingen Council senior staff.
5. I question whether the dedicated 'Bridge and Roads' funds are spent efficiently. Once again I refer to my own local 'Roses Road' where the area I spoke of last year remains in a state of pot holes being 'Band-Aid' filled. There are other road examples in the Shire including within the CBD that remain either in a poor state or are inefficiently bitumen re-sealed.

Thank you for considering my submission.

Yours faithfully



Barbara Moore