

28 July 2015

ipart NSW

Submission “Fit for the Future” Richmond Valley Council Local Government Area

I would like to submit my opposition to Richmond Valley Council’s “Fit for the Future” Improvement Proposal (2015), for the reasons stated below.

1. NSW State Government documents for the future of local councils

Both documents - Revitalising Local Government - The Final Report of the NSW Independent Local Government Review Panel (October 2013) and Fit for the Future, a Blueprint for the future of local government (September 2014) are primarily concerned with Sydney. I believe the issues facing rural and regional local government areas require more lateral thinking. The strategies for the city and urban areas do not easily transfer to a small regional local authority with significant social disadvantage such as Richmond Valley Council.

2. Introduction to Richmond Valley Council demographic

The Richmond Valley Council (RVC) area is one of the most disadvantaged council areas in NSW. Tony Vinson’s latest report “Dropping off the Edge”, details areas of social disadvantage by postcode. (see Chapter 3). Most RVC postcodes are in the top 40 in relation to social disadvantage. The RVC area is not affluent and not likely to become so, with high levels of unemployment and under-employment, single parent families, large numbers of indigenous people who are recognised as disadvantaged across Australia and high numbers of retired people on fixed incomes.

Population levels are low in comparison with a metropolitan local government area with a consequently small rate base. RVC has handled this by raising council rates above the base increases with Special Rate Increases (SRI). This burden on rate-payers is not a viable survival strategy for communities already disadvantaged with low incomes. The RVC “Fit for the Future – Improvement Proposal” June 2015 document at 3:1 on page 20 illustrates that SRI is the major fund raising strategy for RVC. The document also asserts that the demographic is set to change with more wealthy young people moving to the area. Is there any realistic evidence for this or is it merely wishful thinking on the part of a cash strapped local authority?

A media release by Dr R Gates (Echonetdaily 24th July 2015) states that from the information he has been able to obtain, that RVC rates are set to rise by 82% by 2025. The high end of a CPI increase would be around 35%. So RVC rate-payers will be facing rate increases close to 40% higher than other NSW local government areas in order for RVC to remain a stand alone local government authority. This is not realistic or credible.

3. Between a rock & a hard place

RVC residents have been told that the only other alternative to RVC's Fit for the Future plan is to amalgamate with next door Kyogle Shire Council, a local government area with very similar issues. So two basket-case council areas amalgamating is considered a viable alternative? Or is it that by offering a solution no thinking person would propose, RVC's "Fit for the Future" proposal becomes the only one left on the table?

4. Lack of community consultation and relevant information difficult to access or not available

The RVC website holds documents stating that public consultation was planned for May 2015. I am not aware of any public consultation, meaningful or otherwise conducted in Evans Head, the coastal town in the RVC area. The only information that has been widely distributed is a highly coloured 'wish-list' pamphlet extolling the wonderful things that will happen under "Fit for the Future". This smart document does not point to the rate rises that will be necessary to fund these wonderful programs or RVC into the future. One program included in the pamphlet concerned a 'sculpture walk' through the Headland at Evans Head. The Headland is all Crown Land Reserve most of it managed by the members of the Dirawong Reserve Trust appointed by the NSW Minister for Lands. As a member of this volunteer organisation I know that the Trust was not contacted in any way concerning this grandiose vision for our future. That level of consultation is indicative of the way RVC operates.

There is no information on the RVC website that tells ratepayers how they might put in a submission either for or against RVC "Fit for the Future" proposal nor is the final date for any submissions displayed. I obtained the necessary information from the media release from Dr Gates detailed above.

5. Complexity of materials

There is no balanced information available except through extensive research conducted by individual members of the community and released through the media. The documents available from RVC, as usual, are dense and self-serving and seem to be designed to prevent local community involvement in the planning processes for their communities. Ordinary people cannot, or will not, plough through hundreds of pages to find out what is really going on by reading between the lines. They either haven't the time because of work commitments or haven't the skills to read, digest and challenge these wordy and lengthy papers.

6. A possible way forward

I do not believe that RVC's "Fit for the Future" proposal is a credible one. The only group who will benefit from adopting this proposal are the highly paid RVC officers who would retain their jobs into the foreseeable future. Nor do I think that amalgamating with Kyogle Shire Council is an option. (see above at 3). However, I do offer up an alternative proposal that doesn't yet seem to have been considered. In order to gain the rate base necessary RVC & Kyogle Shire local government areas need to be amalgamated with Lismore Shire and this large regional local government area provided with a suitable *Regional Funding Strategy* that doesn't force reliance on hefty SRI.

Yours sincerely

Elaine M Saunders BA(Hons), LLB, Grad.dip.LP

NB. I make no political donations of any kind.