

Submission Re: Blue Mountains City Council Special Rate Variation Application 2015

In their application for a Special Rates Variation, Blue Mountains City Council (BMCC) claim a majority of support for a proposed cumulative increase to rates of 40.4 % over the next four years. Given some aspects of the Community Consultation process, the validity of this claim is questionable and I would ask you to consider the following points in your assessment of this application .

- The question put to residents in the mail out survey was about levels of service. The answers given may have only reflected a desire for improved council services, or a fear that council services would deteriorate. There was no reference to the proposed rate increases in the question and residents were not required to indicate their willingness to pay higher rates.
- The views expressed by residents participating in the telephone survey may not be representative of those held by the majority of the total population of Blue Mountains Local Government Area. The sample selection method used in the phone survey introduced sample bias. Residents who stated that they had not read the Special Rate Variation brochure were excluded from participating in the survey. This will have resulted in a non-random sample of the Blue Mountains population as all individuals were not equally likely to have been selected.
- Similarly the sample chosen to participate in the workshops was also biased. The IRIS Research Report titled *Community Engagement on Options for Achieving A Better Blue Mountains Area Based Community Workshops September 2014* (p7) stated that " Workshop participants were recruited from local residents who had previously been randomly selected to participate in the 2014 BMCC Community Survey, or the 2014 Special Rate Variation Survey or the 2012 Area Workshops." I could not obtain any further details of this sampling method as IRIS Research stated in a phone conversation that under the terms of their contract with BMCC, they were not permitted to discuss the work they had done. BMCC did not provide any further information in a reply to an email request about the sampling method used (see Appendix 1).
- BMCC did not offer the continuation of the Environment Levy as a separate option and support to continue the Levy was tied to a choice requiring a Special Variation Rate increase. Residents of the Blue Mountains LGA value the environment highly. BMCC state that " The quality of the natural environment is important to Blue Mountains residents. "Looking After Environment" was rated as the most important key direction in the Council's 2014 community survey." Residents who wished to indicate support for the continuation of the Environment Levy could only do this by indicating support for a general rate increase.

Thank you for providing the opportunity to comment.

Yours sincerely,

[Redacted signature block]

Gaye Wingett

[Redacted line]

[Redacted line]

[Redacted line]

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: Monday, 19 January 2015 10:15 AM
To: [REDACTED]
Cc: [REDACTED]
Subject: FW: Special Rate Variation Community Consultation

Good Morning Mrs Wingett,

In response to your email seeking information on the Special Rate Variation community consultation, the following responses are provided to the questions you have raised:

1. **Which land values and ad valorem rates were used in the calculations presented in the Tables included in the Resourcing the Future pamphlet?**

The ad valorem rate figures, included in the *Resourcing Our Future* pamphlet, were calculated using the current rating structure and Base Date 1 July 2014 land valuation details as the basis. The tables presented impacts of three different funding scenarios on average land values.

2. **Were council staff excluded from the online/mail in submission process?**

No, Council staff were not excluded from the submission process. All residents and rate payers of the Blue Mountains Local Government Area were invited to have their say on options for Resourcing Our Future. The *Resourcing Our Future* brochure (with tear off comment slip) was sent to every Blue Mountains rate payer. Therefore any Council staff who were ratepayers received the brochure and had an opportunity to respond. To support people sending back their comments using the tear off slip, a pre-paid envelope was included. The vast majority of community responses were from this process (95% or 4,088 ratepayers). Strict governance procedures were implemented to identify and remove multiple submissions from the same person.

The Council also allowed residents to submit submissions on-line. Council staff were not excluded from this process. Only 1.9% (81) submissions were made on-line.

3. **Why did IRIS exclude people from the phone survey if they had not read the brochure?**

IRIS Research was commissioned by Council to conduct a survey of a statistically significant sample of rate payers to assess their views on the three proposed options for *Resourcing Our Future*, two of which included a possible special variation to rates. The questionnaire was only administered to those households who had read the *Resourcing Our Future* Information Package which included a letter from the Mayor and a Brochure and who were familiar with the special rate variation proposals and the reasons why Council is proposing the various options. This was done so that the ratepayers being surveyed were people with some level of understanding of what was being proposed and people. Otherwise it would have been pointless to survey people on three options that they had no understanding of. The Information Package also directed households to more comprehensive information available on the "Have Your Say" website.

4. **How were the workshop participants recruited by IRIS from the previously, randomly-selected pool of subjects who took part in the 2014 BMCC Community Survey, or the 2014 Special Rate Variation Survey or the 2012**

Area Workshops?

Workshop participants were recruited from local residents who had **previously been randomly selected** to participate in the 2014 BMCC Community Survey, or the 2014 Special Rate Variation Survey, or the 2012 Area Workshops. To achieve the required profile and number of workshop participants, recruitment targets were set for age and gender representation within each Area. A target of 40-45 people for each workshop was set with the expectation that some would not attend on the day, even though they had indicated they would.

Thank you for taking the time to contact Council.

Regards

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: Sunday, 14 December 2014 2:37 PM
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: Re: Special Rate Variation Community Consultation

Dear [REDACTED]

As per our phone conversation on Friday, 12th Dec I have written out the questions I put to you and a few more that I have come up with since then - sorry.

1. Which land values and ad valorem rates were used in the calculations presented in the Tables included in the Resourcing the Future pamphlet?
2. Were council staff excluded from the online/mail in submission process?
3. Why did IRIS exclude people from the phone survey if they had not read the brochure?
4. How were the workshop participants recruited by IRIS from the previously, randomly-selected pool of subjects who took part in the 2014 BMCC Community Survey, or the 2014 Special Rate Variation Survey or the 2012 Area Workshops?

Sorry to include the questions regarding the IRIS work but I rang IRIS and was told the company could not answer any questions as it was a condition of their contract. They said they could release information if BMCC gave them permission.

Thank you for your help with this matter.

Yours Faithfully,
Gaye Wingett