

### **Richmond Valley Council (RVC) Fit for the Future Proposal – lodged 29 June 2015**

RVC's has lodged a proposal to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) to stand alone as a council in the current round of local government amalgamations being examined by the NSW State government.

The proposal, whilst word weighty, is not cogent, it contains misleading or spin in justifying its self promotion and is fundamentally flawed as it is based on the false premise that the current economic trends will continue.

There is no contingency for a downturn in economic growth merely lip service in the SWOT analysis to "Threats – maintaining a vibrant and diverse local economy" but no strategies for when the tide turns viz. Economists are in agreement that Australia is on the "wrong side" of a slowing global growth rate. In RVC's application there is no allowance factored in for this monumental shift in economic fortunes for those on fixed or lower incomes. For when the wrecking ball of the economic pendulum rebounds, it will be devastating when it hits our rural towns. Bull markets are running out of steam and the Governor of the RBA has urged that "Australia needs [sic] to rethink its ideal growth rates". However all this seems to have passed by RVC in its preoccupation with the proposal to "stand alone".

*RVC has not demonstrated that it is fit to be a promoter of any development enterprise, whilst, at the same time, being the approving authority of such activities. I am gravely concerned that any Fit for the Future status would confer greater planning powers to RVC. Its track record simply does not translate into RVC being permitted or having the capacity to stand alone.*

In the previous Irongates debacle of 1996 the DA provided for the construction of drainage canals on developer's land, reduced width winding roadways and protection during construction of wildlife habitat. These three grounds were all clearly breached and, in essence caused the cessation of the development – but RVC was the authority that did not enforce these provisions of the DA they approved. We are now asked to let RVC have greater powers to approve developments.

Again, with the STP (Sewerage treatment works) RVC advertised and pushed it as a NEW ASTP yet as Applicant and Approving authority it had a classic conflict of interest and termed it in the paperwork as an "extension to existing STP". It appears this may have been done to avoid or minimise the environmental studies required to be undertaken – of course, once the "extension" STP was built the "existing STP" was demolished.

RVC makes claims that the various projects demonstrate its ability to be expansionist and to handle large projects – unfortunately it quotes an outdated project to support its claim. The Evans Head pool wasn't conceptualised nor constructed under the present Council management. To now claim this as an RVC crowning achievement is to put quite a spin on what was often a bitter resident vs council issue in Evans Head.

### *RVC claims under Attachment 10 – Community Engagement*

RVC pays scant regard to the Statement of Principles it espouses and its Community Consultation processes are simply to enable a box to be ticked

Council has not held any public meetings to explain its Fit for the Future decision nor to subject such decision and processes to public scrutiny and analysis.

Council regularly defers matters as being either commercially–in-confidence or legal privacy so as to take matters behind close doors for “debate”. There appears to be far too much litigation in running an enterprise of this scale. As this is all taken behind closed doors and into secret meetings we have no idea if the prevalence arises from a need to silence criticism or an unwillingness to negotiate and compromise or some other factors. What it does demonstrate is Council’s poor communication with the people it is supposed to serve.

Council does not actively seek or utilise critical thinking from within the community – in the recent Special rate application RVC resorted to stall tactics denying access to information on the basis that residents wouldn’t understand it or would misuse it and then when that line of non-disclosure was exhausted, it was too late to file a FOI application because Council had beyond the closure date to respond – so what was the point? Too often Council uses “commercial or legal sensitive” to take matters behind closed doors for Councillors “consideration”. Too often we are forced to lodge FOI’s to gain information.

Under its Community Engagement RVC talks of a (PARMS) as the framework to align staff performance, values and behaviours with corporate (council) and community direction’ however the leading employee the General Manger is exempt from divulging to the community any benchmarks or performance measurements. This is yet another “closed door” corporate sensitive” matter for which we are required to pay but have no knowledge.

The Attachment 10 should be disregarded as feather bedding of the proposal and not being meaningful to the deliberations.

*Finally*

I submit that RVC has not made out its case adequately nor that it is capable nor in the best interests of the entire community. Accordingly the proposal should be rejected.

Ian Drinkwater B Com (UNSW) JP

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**Date of submission: 30/07/2015**