

I urge the Tribunal to reject the application by Port Stephens Council for a special variation for the following reasons:

1 The findings of the Council's own surveys and community consultations show that there is overwhelming opposition to the proposal. The Council has misrepresented those findings by stating, without qualification, that there is community support for improved services and facilities. Of course there is, but not if they can only be achieved by a significant, ongoing increase in rates. Pointedly, Councillor Jamie Abbott, who is the State Liberal candidate for Port Stephens, broke ranks with her colleagues on the Council to vote against a special variation because of its unpopularity with the community.

2 By its own admission, the Council is in a sound financial position and does not have a backlog of essential major works.

3 Many of the projects that the Council plans to undertake if the variation is approved are unnecessary, unnecessarily grandiose, non-urgent or of dubious benefit to the community. The proposed multi-million dollar redevelopment of the Tomaree sports grounds is a good example.

4 The Council's priorities do not align with those of the community. For example, there is an acknowledged, significant shortage of car parking in the Nelson Bay CBD, especially during peak tourist times and especially since the Council closed the upper levels of its multi-storey car park on safety grounds several years ago. The Council has talked up various proposals for redeveloping the site to include public car parking, but nothing has eventuated. Just recently, though, the Mayor announced that the site was being considered as a possible location for a new TAFE campus that has been promised by the NSW Premier if the Coalition is returned to government. There was no mention by the Mayor of replacement car parking.

5 The Council's decision to seek a special variation and the projects on which it proposes to spend the funds reflect the lack of experience in local government of Councillors, most of whom, including the Mayor, are still in their first term in office.

6 Affordability is a major issue. Port Stephens has a large population of retirees on fixed incomes and pensions, particularly on the Tomaree and Tilligerry Peninsulas. Elsewhere in the region, there is a prevalence of low-

income households, while employment opportunities and business profitability in much of Port Stephens are tourism-related and, therefore, seasonal.