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Submission: My submission to IPART is the same as the one provided to Wingecarribee Shire Council. Council has had a number of rate rises in previous years and this proposed extensive rise is considered excessive. Other options have not been explored in enough detail with the outcome that rates continue to increase beyond CPI levels and what any reasonable person would expect from a government body. I would hope IPART are truly independent in their assessment of this proposal and not just a rubber stamp due to the fact that Wingecarribee are not proposed to be merged.

P & S Mitchell

The General Manager  
Wingecarribee Shire Council  
PO Box 141  
Moss Vale NSW 2577

Re: Proposed Special Rate variation

Dear Madam,

I refer to the proposed special rate variation aimed toward making Wingecarribee Shire "Fit for the Future". I am not supportive of the current scenarios 2 & 3 making my **default selection scenario 1** however if given a choice I would support none of the options and favour a complete review of the services council offers and how it is doing business.

Before I outline my position I provide the following background comments:

1. The Fit for the Future process seems to be setting criteria that are aimed at achieving certain outcomes. With about 152 Local Government areas in the state it would be reasonable to assume a number of them would require serious action to avoid future insolvency. Whilst it appears to be a necessary exercise some of the criteria seem to be set very high as a number of councils have opted for large rate rises on the scale of Wingecarribee's to maintain their independence. The fact is that some of them are not facing the reality of their position.
2. Local Government in my opinion requires a major overhaul with more power given to the public in many areas through on line interaction. There are the opportunities now with on line interaction to allow people a much greater say on various aspects of what happens in their local area. Amalgamations have some potential to achieve this through the scale of their operations however in larger areas this needs to be managed into sub districts.
3. Government at all levels is struggling and the greater reliance on private enterprise and user pays is inevitably the means to the end for infrastructure renewal for State and Federal governments. Local government in its current fragmented state cannot hope to achieve these scales of efficiencies for major renewal projects or a user pay system due to the political backlash and cross boundary inefficiencies. The future of a council relying on large handouts from State or federal governments for roads is limited. The higher levels of government are focused heavily on high profile issues such as health and education eroding local government funding whilst also cost shifting. Local Government at a larger scale may be arguably better placed to manage these challenges.

Now turning to Wingecarribee Shire and its operations and aging infrastructure. The WSC is obviously struggling when a quick tour of the shire sees crumbling roads such as Old Southern Road , Waite Street in Moss Vale and numerous others in very poor condition.

The WSC has tried a number of approaches to address the roads standard issue through day labour and contractors. The reality is that WSC is falling further behind as it struggles with a growing road network, however the answer should not be to press the rate rise trigger to the extent proposed.

The WSC needs to immediately review the following:

1. All non essential services. Whilst some may argue that all the services are essential they are not. Under the Local Government Act Councils have a choice of what they provide to their local community. There are a number of areas where it would appear services are offered to benefit limited interest groups or are based upon a political agenda. The WSC needs to seriously consider cutting all areas where there is overlap with state government services and utilising regional partnerships for a number services. Other services need to be reduced or eliminated.
2. Coupled with this is the need to maintain infrastructure. When you visit Tamworth or Dubbo sized cities they will generally have one swimming pool, being also located in areas where a swimming pool will be well patronized compared to the Southern Highlands. The enormous cost of running four swimming pools when there is also now a private indoor pool accessible is an example of the largesse that is unfortunately the result of poor decisions in the past.
3. WSC has large tracts of land under its care and control and these must all be managed and maintained including expensive fire hazard reduction. The lands under councils ownership, care and control need to be reassessed (eg two golf courses that could be sold to private operators, sell off wide road verges to adjoining land owners, review parks and reserve areas for sellable parcels) with the potential windfall of funds put into a trust, managed by an external party, to maintain roads in perpetuity.

These are contentious issues however if the Shire is to continue there is a need to go beyond town and village parochialism.

Council needs to hold a review **before** it creates an even more unaffordable position for first home buyers who are already struggling to enter the housing market or keep their heads above water having bought into home ownership. The increases proposed are significant, particularly considering the **WSC has had a number of special rate increases since 2004 already** and still has failed to meet specified criteria – where has the money gone? The days of gouging rate and tax monies out of middle income families needs to end and other options explored, this applies to all levels of government.

We all need to accept that the world is changing and whilst it is a feel good outcome where every project and service is supported it is clearly NOT sustainable. This is particular given Councils **significant** increase from rate income in the past twelve years all apparently to no avail given the current request for further significant increases.

Is Wingecarribee Shire fit for the future ? If the position is taken that we just need to keep raising rates without any other options being seriously explored then the answer is NO.

Yours Sincerely  
P & S Mitchell

30/01/2016