

From: Catherine Short
Sent: Thursday, 12 March 2015 2:32 PM
To: IPART Mailbox
Subject: : Objection to the Ballina Rate Rise

Dear Sir/Madam,

Although I did not attend the Lennox Head meeting mentioned in the following letter from Sharron Short, I concur with the sentiment expressed within it.

Yours faithfully,
Catherine Short

From: sharron short
Sent: Wednesday, 11 March 2015 9:31 PM
To: IPART Mailbox
Subject: Ballina Rate Rise

IPART 11 March 2015 OBJECTION TO THE PROPOSED BALLINA SHIRE RATE RISE

Dear Sir/Madam,

I wish to lodge my objection to the proposed rate rises for the Ballina shire. I submitted my objection to the Council at the appropriate time so the following will include most of the points in the letter I sent.

1. At the Council's Lennox Head meeting to discuss the proposed rate rises, the presenter who accompanied the mayor, David Wright, said that it is a "recognised fact" that pools run at a loss. Why on earth, therefore, does the Council wish to compound the budget deficit by focusing not only on maintenance but also on "improvements", such as heating Ballina pool, etc.? Surely, this is just throwing good money after bad! Not only will there be capital outlay, there will be ongoing costs, with no guarantee of recouping either. Also, on checking the other letters sent to the Council, I noticed that it appears frequenters of the pool are not in favour of the suggested "improvements".

2. At the Lennox Head meeting, part of the consultation process Council is adopting, the mayor's explanation for increasing rates to cover pool maintenance costs was that, when there is a deficit, or Council is at least seeking to increase rates to cover increasing costs, or trying to receive a government grant, Council needs to nominate a particular project to justify a rate increase. Perhaps the Council should have thought to nominate a different project which would have affected a greater number of people. Swimmers at both Ballina and Alstonville swimming pools represent only a very small proportion of the rate-payers. It is most likely that many of those swimmers included in your pool attendance statistics are non-rate-paying children who frequent the pool so the statistics are even less representative of Ballina shire rate-payers.

3. Why are appropriately qualified and competent people to handle departments not employed? Why are consultants, whose fees, generally speaking, are exorbitant, **frequently** used? During the rather brief meeting at Lennox, there was mention made of at least three consultants being employed recently for different problems. A consultant has been appointed to work out what should be done with a grant for Lennox Head's Lake Ainsworth. Surely, frequently employing consultants is an admission that staffing is not given appropriate consideration? (Although I was told that a consultant could be a safety valve should there be litigation.) As well, the pool consultant employed has given no guarantee of his

recommendations ensuring increased numbers to the pool. Obviously, more consideration needs to be given to allocating funds and staffing appropriately so that rate rises above the original allocation are not necessary.

4. Entry fee to the pools could be increased to assist maintenance costs. The mayor stated his objection to this but an annual fee of c. \$180 (from memory) and \$330 for a family is relatively cheap, especially if you consider membership fees for most health and sports clubs. The aquatic pool at Lennox Head has an annual fee of over \$400 per person. It would be difficult to increase the entry fee dramatically but there is scope for it to be substantially higher than it is.

5. There is talk a new sports centre in the Ballina area. A new pool could be incorporated into this. The pool at Ballina is prime real estate on the banks of the Richmond River and would provide income eliminating the need for increased rates for pool maintenance. Conversely, the pool could be leased out, thereby providing income which could be directed into paying for pool maintenance, after necessary, not exorbitant, maintenance has been done.

7. A more realistic budget needs to be created and more thought given to projects so that money is not wasted. Until quite recently I was paying rates to the Brisbane City Council, as well as to Ballina Council. Rates and water were separate but adding the two together, the total paid was just over half of what I pay in the Ballina shire. In any government system there is a great deal of waste. ("It's okay, the government's paying" is often heard) I have worked in the State system and in a local government system overseas and was often surprised by waste and ill-conceived plans. There have been suggestions in the local "Advocate" of where some cuts could be made. (Note 5 November 2014 issue). One aspect which has been criticised by many is the excessive number of new cars used by Ballina Council. There have been cases where work has been done somewhere, only to be pulled down/dismantled/etc. because of lack of forethought.

8. The idea that the rate increase will remain and, of course, the fact that the increase is compounded each year, is anathema to me. Even a one-off levy, or equivalent, depending on legalities, would be more acceptable. Statistics vary a little but the following letters were in the local paper and, I believe, forwarded to Council. The following are excerpts from letters in the local "Advocate" newspaper.

a) "...we should be aware that two 5.5% increases over two years followed by three increases of 2.5% is, in fact, an increase of 19.86% over five years. If the rates were increased by 3% following the two intended rises for a following three years, this would mean an increase of 21.62% over the next five years."

b) "They (Council) also seem to have forgotten that just three years ago they already hit us with a 7.4% increased "Special Rates Variation" which was slapped on top of our already increasing rates. That year they also bumped up our water, sewerage and waste charges. Now it seems they want an additional 11.3% over and above the original "Special Variation". Does that make this latest rates increase a "Very Special Variation, a Super Special Variation, or just a massive 17.7% slug"?

c) David Wright (Mayor) said the proposal sets out to increase rates by 5.5% for 2015/16 and 2016/17 and then in the following year 2017/18 the total rate would increase by the usual estimated rate pegging percentage of 3%. The increases will remain as a permanent rate increase, rates will not revert to their pre-2015 level after 2017/18.

Can the present Council not propose a levy to deal with pool maintenance? At least, this way, the rate rise is not going to be compounded to the degree that Council is suggesting now. Despite what the mayor said at the Lennox Head meeting, the rate rise is, supposedly, to deal with pool maintenance, not other Council responsibilities.

9. In relation to IPART, I fail to understand what is the point of rate rises being "officially" **fixed** when it is possible for constant increases beyond what is supposedly permissible? Why are you not getting it

right in the first place? At present I believe there are fourteen Councils with requests in to vary the rate rises which you determined. Was the original, agreed upon percentage totally unrealistic? If you have a job to do, surely you should be able to get the majority of it right, not have fourteen councils declaring that you are incapable of doing your job.

10. Council could function more effectively by lowering the rent on some of the Council-owned shops, especially in Ballina, where many shops have remained empty for long periods of time. A lower, regular income is better than none at all. Also, the Wigmore Arcade upgrade seems to have been poorly handled. I know that the bag and accessory shop there finished trading quite some time ago, the uncertainty of when the upgrade would take place causing the owner to finish business long before necessary. The result? A popular business GONE! A regular income GONE! Many of the shops in the arcade were empty long before the arcade upgrade was begun, not just a few months beforehand. Quite a few shops in River Street are vacant, the rent being prohibitive I was told by a number of them.

11. Councillor Jeff Johnson, now an independent candidate in the N.S.W. State elections, wrote in the 4 February "Advocate" this year that he opposed the proposed rate rises. He said, "Over 1,500 rate-payers took the time to take part in the consultation process and the vast majority rejected the proposal. Even council's survey consultant (used to justify the rate decision) presented a mixed result, despite the questions seemingly encouraging a positive response. In addition to the council surveys and polls, the vast majority of phone calls and emails that I received were strongly against another 'special' rate rise, keeping in mind that we had had a number of extra rate rises over the last decade." He adds, "...council has the resources and reserves to fund this (pool maintenance) without asking the ratepayers to dig into their pockets once again." He asks, "If council's budget is so constrained and the upgrade of our public pools so urgent, why hasn't the council been preparing for it over the last few years through prudent, financial management?" He also criticises what he sees as excessive use of consultants.

Suffice it to say that, especially in view of the amount of money we pay now for rates, I am **vehemently** opposed to the suggested "rate variation". I am in favour of much more sensible budgeting.

Yours sincerely,

Sharron M Short