

Independent Regulatory and Pricing Tribunal
IPART
localgovernment@ipart.nsw.gov.au

Mr. Terence Walker
[REDACTED]

9 March 2017

Dear Sir or Madam

RE:- Ratepayer submission in response to Bellingen Shire Council's SRV application 2018/19

My wife and I are ratepayers on two properties in the Shire of Bellingen, our home, address above, and a heritage listed, commercial property at [REDACTED].

I object most strongly to Bellingen Shire Council's audacity in applying for a special rate variation beyond the annual rate peg. The granting of this SRV would result in an increase in cost to the ratepayers of around 20% over three years. Furthermore since ratepayers are likely to face an increase in the Valuer General's land values during that time, then between 2014 and 2021 we will have been subjected to an increase in our rates by approximately 40%.

Despite what council seems to think, this is not a high income area with the last census showing that approximately 27% of inhabitants are on some kind of Government Relief. Many are on fixed incomes and allocated pensions and the fear of unaffordability to remain in their own homes, due to the added rate pressures, is a tangible fear for many.

It is the presumption of entitlement that is so galling about the upper management at BSC who, misguidedly, think they are doing a great job. They have increased the number of people working inside the council chambers to a ratio of more than two to each one working outside. They pay extraordinary fees to "consultants" annually. They even committed council funds to financially supporting the "YES" vote in the recent plebiscite.

One particularly expensive exercise for us, the ratepayers, culminated in the General Manager, [REDACTED], authorising the expenditure of one hundred & fifty thousand dollars over the space of two years (refer Annual Reports 2014/15, 2015/16) to investigate and bury a Code of Conduct breach. If this sounds farfetched I would be more than happy to share the documentation which I presented at the NSW Civil Administrative Tribunal in a fruitless attempt to get some answers. This is an absolute disgrace when Local Government Staff can prevent honest investigation by engaging a law firm using public money to ensure the findings are not made public. It is this lack of transparency and accountability, which individuals espouse, yet know nothing of the meaning of the words that not only makes them unfit for their jobs as "public servants" but makes Bellingen Shire Council unfit for the future.

These people need to do more than just take the path of least resistance, they should prioritise the shires needs, they should learn to live within their means as adjoining councils do. Why should ratepayers be further penalized for their bad management. At a recent public meeting where a rate increase was part of the discussion a substantial gathering of ratepayers attended, the General Manager and councilors were also there. During the meeting affordability was aired and a question was asked of attendees. Raise your hand if you have been given a wage increase in the last 12 months, not one person raised a hand. In fact, most of the comment was "we haven't had a wage increase for years". The General Manager and councilors who in every circumstance vote for these increases receive an indexed wage increase every year along with the council staff.

Historically this Shire has had the same number of roads and bridges, and the roads are exactly the same length. However, we now need twice the number of staff to achieve a lesser maintenance outcome.

Aside from the last financial injection from the RMS our gardens and road verges are weed infested (Photographic evidence available) along with the mindless removal of a number of 100 year old heritage trees by [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. This action was undertaken after an arborist report was commission by members of the community at a cost of \$5500. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Volumes of evidence regarding the wastage by this council is available from concerned rate payers. Bellingin Shire Council is grossly over staffed and is clearly guilty of mismanagement.

It is my unfortunate and admittedly cynical belief that IPART will not get the number of submissions necessary to stop the granting of this SRV. People are busy, lazy, ignorant, resigned and in many cases scared of crossing the council for fear of retribution. However I urge you to regard those you do receive very seriously. The groundswell of discontent with Bellingin Shire Council management and our elected councilors is enormous and growing daily.

Where is the justification for the increase?

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]
Terence Walker
[REDACTED]