

Special Rate Variation Application

BELLINGEN SHIRE COUNCIL

Bellingen has applied for a special rate variation of 6%, primarily to maintain bridges and roads in the shire. Few would argue that both bridges and roads are long overdue for maintenance work. Most in the shire would also agree that we are in this parlous state due to neglect by previous Councils over many years.

I oppose this increase for the following reasons:

1. There are considerable savings to be made in areas of current Council expenditure. This was pointed out by two Councillors who voted against the increase.
2. At a recent (Chamber of Commerce) meeting the mayor stated he had no experience of finance or business. On being questioned he stated that spending on 'community' was equally important and he is opposed to cutting back on these programmes, despite the fact that the budget will be in the red particularly if they do not receive the 6% variation.
3. Many living in the area are retired with little increase in income to look forward to, which includes my wife and self. There are also a very high proportion of pensioners in the shire and the proposed rate increase is beyond any cost of living increase they might expect from their pensions.
4. We have just received our land valuation and note our UCV has increased by 18.13% over the 3 years from 1/07/2013 to 1/07/2016. This will also lead to rate increases in due course.
5. In preparing the Fit for the Future budget, Council seems to be relying on funds, grants etc., from State and Federal coffers. Both these governments give the impression that they are struggling to control their deficits so largesse from this quarter cannot be guaranteed.
6. I accept we have large areas of the shire which are not rateable. However, we have known this for years and have not yet learnt the lesson of cutting our costs to concentrate on essential maintenance. The example of Nambucca Head's shire which in the early part of this century concentrated on essential maintenance is exemplary.
7. Community consultation for Urunga was a bad joke. We were advised by letterbox drop of a community meeting on the same day as the meeting. We certainly would have attended but by the time we read the notice, the meeting had already been running for an hour. I believe this was the case for most of Urunga. To add insult to injury, it was claimed that people were not interested because only five turned up!
8. I found to my delight that we have a Community Consultation Officer. In a small shire like ours, every Council worker should be a Community Consultation Officer so this position could be abolished. Perhaps you might also look at senior personnel salaries keeping in mind we are a small shire with only a very limited ratepayer base and small budgets.
9. Council does own unused assets, e.g. a corner building in Urunga which has been empty for many moons. Perhaps sell same and get the rates.
10. I suggest to Council that they go back to the drawing board and show positive ways to cut costs in areas other than bridges and roads. Concentrate spending on the key areas of roads, bridges, parks and reserves and river health. Areas which do appear to be working well are water, sewage and rubbish.
11. I ran a business for many years and knew that expenses could NOT exceed income in the long term. One thing I did concentrate on was that each machine in the factory HAD to have a twice-yearly full maintenance check, even perhaps if it meant postponing new curtains for the offices.

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Submission: Whilst I appreciate the need for more funds I oppose the increase on the grounds that savings should be made in areas other than essential maintenance and services. The attached document outlines a number of points I would make. I am certain that were a vote held a massive majority of residents would be opposed, not to maintenance spending but the special variation.