

Submission from Lemon Tree Passage Parks Reserves and Landcare Group to Port Stephens Council Special Rate Variation application.

Lemon Tree Passage Parks, Reserves and Landcare is a volunteer group working in local parks owned and managed by Port Stephens Council.

We recognise it is not appropriate for us to make comment either for or against a Special Rate Variation based on the economic impacts on residents. However, volunteers working in their parks are well aware of the poor condition of facilities and have advocated for many years for the current backlog of maintenance to be addressed.

Despite Council finances being in surplus, the history of the maintenance of assets and facilities in Lemon Tree Passage parks has reflected an emergency, reactive response rather than a planned approach. There are serious concerns that if the Special Rate Variation funds a list of new, non-essential projects, they add a significant amount to future maintenance budgets.

Port Stephens Council has asserted that “this application will include a detailed plan of the work we propose to undertake” (Port Stephens Council website - SRV Myths Busted), yet the project titled “McCann Park Improvements” lacks even the most basic detail of what is proposed.

Some projects on the SRV list are considered in isolation without thought to the surrounding impacts. For example a new shared pathway is proposed for the foreshore of Lemon Tree Passage. It fails to take into account that large sections of the park are regularly flooded by both inadequate stormwater control and tidal ingress on an eroded foreshore. Projects to address these major flooding problems are not funded by an SRV - yet the shared pathway is.

Over 50 projects on the Capital Works Plus Plan have no estimate of cost. A judgement on the value of these projects to the community and their sustainability cannot be established without a cost estimate.

Members of our group attended both the Community Strategic Plan and SRV public consultation meetings. In our submissions to the Integrated Planning and Reporting on exhibition in June, our group called on Council to fund essential projects and address the backlog of maintenance in Lemon Tree Passage parks. In the submission to the SRV projects in August, we asked for more detail to be provided, especially for the project “McCann Park Improvements”. In the submission to the revised IP&R in December, we echoed the points and comments made previously.

Despite this, along with the rest of the community, we were unaware of significant and important changes made to the application to IPART, compared to the last version of the IP&R. These changes were approved at the extra-ordinary meeting of January 2019, well after the exhibition of the final “revised” version, which closed in December 2018. There was no opportunity for further consultation and no opportunity for comment on the changes contained in the application made to IPART. All previous consultation meetings, notices on Council's website, or lists of projects in the plans on exhibition failed to mention the following:

- The amount allocated to Raymond Terrace Town Centre Improvements had to be increased by 3 million dollars (from \$12m to \$15m) with a corresponding increase in borrowings, after an “administrative error” was found.
- The list of projects previously allocated to the community of Lemon Tree Passage (population 2589) was

amended in January 2019 to add the extra area of Tanilba Bay (population 3156). There is no corresponding increase in funding. The changes were accepted by Council without any details being provided. It is not apparent how Port Stephens Council's previous allocation of \$2 million dollars is to be shared. It has not been explained how the same amount of money can meet the needs and priorities of so many extra people living in distinct and separate communities.

- The 30 page submission to the revised IP&R in December 2018 titled, "Tilligerry Forward", contained a lot of detail of the project "McCann Park Improvements". Despite repeated requests from Lemon Tree Passage Parks, Reserves and Landcare Group, other similar community organisations and residents, Port Stephens Council's plans for any change of use of this open space have not been made public. The project remains as a title only in its application to IPART.
- Port Stephens Council has acknowledged their current Strategic Asset Management Plan (SAMP9) was based on outdated 2011 census figures and does not apply the most relevant census of 2016.

As a community group we are concerned that this SRV application gives priority to major new projects at the expense of funding the infrastructure backlog and the renewal of existing assets. Further, the lack of detail that has been provided and the changes to the final version of IP&R documents do not reflect the level of community consultation required.