

4. MAYORAL MINUTE

4.1 Special Rate Variation - Community Consultation process

Attachments

1. Your City, Your Future brochure (distributed under separate cover)
2. Results from telephone survey (distributed under separate cover)

In this mayoral minute, I wish to highlight to council the systemic bias in the special rate variation community consultation process.

The community was only provided with one option, the special rate variation. The “Your City, Your Future”, brochure sent to all residents clearly indicates the special rate variation is the only option. The brochure itself states that “we need to make a change now”, clearly excluding the possibility of doing nothing. Hence council has only presented one option to the community.

This, to a large extent, has defeated the purpose of the consultation. With only one option presented there’s nothing to consult between. Consultation is supposed to be an open dialogue.

Indeed, IPART recognises this. Page 2 of the “*Community awareness and engagement for special variation applications*” fact sheet makes it clear that council should present “*alternatives to a rate rise*”. Campbelltown Council has not done so.

Along with the bias introduced by only presenting one option, the survey methodology itself likely skewed the results in favour of a rate rise.

I refer to the “*results from telephone survey*”, page 11 asks the question “*how important do you believe it is for Council to implement programs that will provide better infrastructure?*”. Unsurprisingly, 95% confirm it is important to improve infrastructure. It's like asking people if they want to be healthier. The overwhelming majority will say yes, but if asked whether they think it's worth giving up junk food or exercising, there's going to be a more mixed and interesting result. Simply asking people if they want better infrastructure doesn't have much value as a survey question, but what it does do is set up the idea in people's minds that infrastructure is important. It sets up what is referred to as “response bias”, in that respondents have been shown to favour answers that they believe the questioner wants them to answer, rather than their true beliefs. For this reason, effective surveys should be neutral, not highlight particular issues to be valued.

The bias continues. Page 12 and 13 is read to the respondent, with phrases like “*In order to make Campbelltown an even better place to live, Council is proposing a Special Rate Variation of 11% in July 2014*”. Here, the bias is quite evident. The respondent is told by the surveyor to oppose the special rate variation is to oppose making Campbelltown a better place to live.

I'd also like to note that 63% of respondents were not even aware of a special rate variation being sought. The only information they had received is a one-sided argument, from the surveyor, in favour of a special rate variation, and were then immediately asked whether they support it.

In spite of all this, community sentiment reported in the survey was roughly neutral. With the rating scale from 1 to 5, with the centre rating of "somewhat supportive" at 3, the mean rating was 3.19, only slightly above neutral. Unfortunately we do not know what the results of an unbiased survey would have been, but it's quite possible that could have exposed general opposition to this rate-rise by the community.

It is my opinion that this process has been set up not to consult, but to use ratepayers' funds to convince them to support a rate rise, and to convince IPART that the people of Campbelltown support a rate rise. I don't think the people of Campbelltown will take kindly to their money being used to tell them what opinion they should have on an issue, nor their opinion twisted to support a political cause. This process has been a perversion of democracy where taxpayer funds have been used to push a particular political point of view. I would ask councillors to seriously consider the bias in this process and whether we, on behalf of the people of Campbelltown, have any sort of mandate to continue with this process.

Recommendation

That the information be noted.