

Rate increase a 'minor burden'

By Michael Cox

A UNIFIED Camden Council last week supported a plan to apply for a rate increase and a \$2 million low interest loan in an attempt to reduce its \$12.6 million asset renewal scheme by half in the next six years.

All nine councillors supported the move.

Camden mayor Lara Symkowiak called the councillors' decision to apply for a flat rate increase of 1.1 per cent for the next six years "a win for ratepayers".

Councillors voted on an option to use a combination of funds that included: \$1.5 million in internal reserves, a reduced special rate variation which would create an extra \$2.5 million in rate revenue, and \$2 million of borrowings from the state government's loan infrastructure renewal scheme, which would be repaid in 10 years.

Governance director Steve Kludass said the council was making "inroads" to ensure it didn't leave a legacy of debt and a backlog of infrastructure in years to come.

"Now is the time to start kicking some goals and start hacking into the backlog," he said.

"If we do our bit today we can keep it under control."

Mr Kludass said maintaining assets, which included roads, parks and community facilities, was arguably the state's, if not the nation's

largest concern. He said the first round of the state government's loan infrastructure renewal scheme had funded 80 projects across 60 councils with almost \$440 million.

"It's a novel idea and good scheme," Mr Kludass said.

At the end of the next financial year the council's special rate variation of 4.5 per cent will end.

However, the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) has allowed councils across the board to increase rates in 2013-2014 by 3.4 per cent.

The council devised its 1.1 per cent increase to fit in with the already approved 3.4 per cent, aligning it with Camden's current rate system, at least for the next financial year.

Mr Kludass said this policy would tackle infrastructure maintenance and didn't rely solely on rate revenue to do so.

"It's a good mix, a fair package and a minor burden to ratepayers," he said.

Local Government and Shires Association of NSW president Ray Donald said: "Local government has faced significant cost increases over the past year, particularly in relation to electricity and construction costs, and it is good to see this reflected in IPART's determination."

Camden councillor Greg Copeland said the community would accept the decision and see it as a good compromise.



Struggling:

Art lovers Rowan and Pania Gregson, pictured last year when they took over the iconic Boyd Fine Art Gallery, which will close the doors this month and sell online.

Picture: Jeff de Pasquale

Struggling gallery shuts up shop

IT'S a case of Struggletown by name and struggle by nature for the iconic Boyd Fine Art Gallery, which will close its doors this month.

For almost three decades, the gallery in Harrington Park's Struggletown complex has been a place for Australian artists to exhibit and sell their work.

But owners Rowan and Pania Gregson said the retail outlet had become "economically unviable" and the couple will move the business online.

The couple cited the gallery's small size, "awkward entrance and lack of complementary businesses" as reasons for the closure.

It was an extremely difficult decision to make as the gallery is such an institution in the area

— Rowan Gregson

"Interestingly, we have been told many times 'they don't call it Struggletown for nothing,'" Mr Gregson said.

He said closing the business, which he took over from the Boyd family in October last year, was "extremely difficult".

"The gallery is such an institution in the area. That's why Pania and I agreed to take over the gallery in the first place," he said.

The Gregsons said they would continue to represent professional

artists through their website (boydgallery.com.au) and hold several "pop-up exhibitions" at the Camden Civic Centre and The Australian Botanic Garden Mount Annan.

"So instead of bringing people to the art, we'll be bringing art to the people," Mr Gregson said.

The Gregsons are holding a "farewell exhibition" and Christmas sale with discounts of up to 25 per cent until Saturday, December 22.

CAMDEN

Rate increase 'won't have any impact'

CAMDEN Council's decision to adopt a 4.5 per cent rate increase in 2013/14 will be put on public display for comment from January 28.

The proposed rate variation will allow council to address a backlog of work as part of the community infrastructure renewal program.

Council governance director Steve Kludass said the special rate variation would have no impact on residents compared to the last financial year.

"On June 30 the current 4.5 per cent approved rate will come back to the normal rate, which in essence would reduce rates by 4.5 per cent," he said.

"By putting that 4.5 per cent back on, we're replacing what has been taken off, so rates for the average ratepayer would stay the same as they have been."

Mr Kludass said the special rate variation played an important role in renewing council's assets.

"The six-year, \$6 million renewal program has helped us put together some great projects over the past few years and made our assets perform better," he said.

Details: 4654 7777 or visit camden.nsw.gov.au.

Planning for a secure future

CAMDEN COUNCIL SEEKS INCREASE TO BOOST INFRASTRUCTURE

Sean Thompson

CAMDEN Council has stated it has a strong and sustainable plan for the future in response to claims in the Sydney media that it is in a poor financial position.

The council was responding to leaked information from the state's financial auditor TCorp in January.

The leaked documents detailed the municipality's works backlog and other issues ahead of TCorp's statewide financial audit of councils which is set to be released in June.

Council's corporate services manager Paul Rofe

RATE VARIATION

WHAT: Camden Council is seeking a 4.5 per cent rate increase for the 2013/14 financial year.

WHY: To allow council to address work backlogs as part of its infrastructure renewal program.

said the request to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal for a 4.5 per cent special rate variation was part of a long-term plan to manage the \$12-million works backlog.

"It's a balancing act between renewing tired and

HAVE YOUR SAY

WHAT: The rate variation is on public exhibition until Monday, February 25.

FEEDBACK: Residents are urged to have their say by sending an email to: trial@camden.nsw.gov.au.

DETAILS: 4654 7777.

old assets and ensuring we have the ability to provide the right infrastructure for new residents in the future," he said. Council has already spent \$3.5 million in the renewal program and the special rate variation will allow us to spend an

other \$6 million over the next six years.

Governance director Steve Kludass said the decision to increase rates was based on feedback from the local community.

"Out of everyone we surveyed over the past 12 months, 49.2 per cent of people listed improving the standard of infrastructure as their number one priority," he said.

Mr Kludass said council's \$20 million in Section 94 funding from developers had been earmarked for expenditure over the next four years to help accommodate predicted growth.

LARA SYMKOWIAK Camden Mayor

Council's day-to-day operational budget is in a good position, however, extra funds are needed to address longer term infrastructure projects. If the backlog isn't addressed now, council's assets and infrastructure will deteriorate to an unacceptable level. Councillors voted unanimously to support this proposed SRV. If approved, this would be a continuation of the 2009 SRV.

STEVE KLUDASS Camden Council governance director

"We're responding to what people need, and they've told us they want assets such as roads, drainage and parks renewed for current and future generations. We have to make sure we manage growth for future residents coming to the region."

STEVE GRABOWSKI Narellan Chamber of Commerce president

"Council has recorded a surplus plus budget and I'm glad to see it's going back to the community. Our roads are good, our parks are clean and there's money in the kitty, so as far as I'm concerned, I'm happy."