

Community Engagement Plan

Funding Strategy for Infrastructure Asset Renewal including

Proposed Special Rate Variation 2014/2015

November 2013 – February 2014



Table of Contents

1.0	BACKGROUND	3
1.1	Integrated Planning and Reporting	3
1.2	Community Engagement Strategy and Plan	3
1.3	Special Variation Guidelines	3
1.4	Phase 1: Review of Community Strategic Plan and IP&R Framework	4
2.0	PROJECT DETAILS	5
2.1	Objectives	5
2.2	Consultation period	5
2.3	Level of impact	5
2.4	Level of engagement	5
2.5	Key messages	5
3.0	KEY STAKEHOLDERS	6
3.1	Internal Stakeholders	6
3.2	Community Stakeholders	6
4.0	CONSULTATION MATERIAL	7
4.1	Documents to be Exhibited	7
4.2	SRV information material	7
5.0	COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT METHODS	7
5.1	Community Telephone Survey	7
5.2	Exhibition Points	8
5.3	Public notice and advertising	8
5.4	Direct mail – information brochures	8
5.5	Other information material	9
5.6	Consultation website	9
5.7	Community information sessions	9
5.8	Telephone enquiries	10
6.0	SUBMISSIONS	10
6.1	Submission protocol	10
6.2	Privacy and personal information protection	10
6.3	Response to submissions	11

1.0 BACKGROUND

1.1 Integrated Planning and Reporting

Under the Integrated Planning and Reporting (IP&R) legislation, which was introduced in 2009 as part of the NSW Local Government Act, each Council, by 30 June in the year following its election, must review and adopt a set of integrated plans, based on a *Community Strategic Plan*.

The IP&R legislation requires the development of the Community Strategic Plan to be carried out with a community engagement strategy. This strategy must:

- be based on social justice principles
- identify relevant stakeholder groups and how they will be engaged
- include a 28-day public exhibition of the draft IP&R documents
- ensure public submissions are considered before the final plans are adopted

There are also requirements under the legislation for the public exhibition of the draft 4-year Delivery Program and for the annual exhibition of the draft Operational Plan, which includes Council's proposed revenue policy, rates and fees and charges.

1.2 Community Engagement Strategy and Plan

Blacktown City Council adopted a Community Engagement Strategy as part of the development of its initial IP&R Framework in 2010. The document was based on IAP2 international best practice standards.

In the 2012/2013 IP&R review (see section 1.4), the Community Engagement Strategy was assessed against the legislative requirements. It remains relevant, as it is based on the equity principles of Council's Social Plan and includes a Community Engagement Policy, a tool kit and resources for staff undertaking community consultation and engagement and an implementation framework.

The present document is a proposed *Community Engagement Plan* which has been formulated according to the principles of Council's adopted policy and strategy. It addresses community consultation from November 2013 to February 2014 on Council's Proposed Funding Strategy for Infrastructure Asset Renewal, including Special Rate Variation for 2014/2015.

As part of this plan, revisions to two of Council's adopted IP&R documents will be exhibited, as the Proposed Long Term Financial Plan 2013/2013 and Proposed Revisions to Delivery Program 2013-2017.

1.3 Special Variation Guidelines

The Guidelines for Special Rate Variation applications for 2014/2015, which were issued in September 2013 by the Division of Local Government (DLG) after consultation with IPART, make it clear that community consultation is an essential element.

NSW councils can apply to increase their overall rates income above the rate pegging limit, through a process termed a Special Rate Variation (SRV) application. The Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) has responsibility for assessing and determining SRV applications. The deadline for applications for special rates increases commencing in 2014/2015 is 24 February 2014.

IPART assesses SRV applications from councils based on criteria which include the following key considerations:

- The need for and purpose of the SRV is clearly articulated and identified through the council's IP&R documents, including the Delivery Program and Long Term Financial Plan (including a 'baseline' financial scenario and special variation scenario).
- Evidence of engagement of the community on the need for and extent of a rate rise, and demonstration of an appropriate variety of engagement methods to ensure opportunity for community awareness and input. The IP&R documentation should canvas alternatives to a rate rise, the impact of any rises upon the community and the council's consideration of the community's capacity and willingness to pay.
- The relevant IP&R documents must be approved and adopted by the council before the IPART application.
- The impact on affected ratepayers must be reasonable and affordable, having regard to the current rate levels, existing ratepayer base, capacity to pay and the proposed purpose of the variation.
- An explanation of the productivity improvements and cost containment strategies the council has realised in past years, and plans to realise over the proposed special variation period must be included in the application.

This Community Engagement Plan, together with the steps previously carried out, aims to ensure that the relevant requirements of the Guidelines are fulfilled.

1.4 Phase 1: Community Strategic Plan Review and IP&R Framework

The community engagement strategy envisaged in the IP&R guidelines must be a continual process, not a one-off exercise. Like all local governments, Blacktown City Council conducts extensive engagement and consultation with its community around both policy and strategy settings and particular projects and operational matters.

Council's Community Engagement Strategy aims to provide a cohesive and leading practice framework for this engagement work.

Following the Local Government general elections in September 2012, Blacktown City Council undertook a review of its IP&R Framework and the relevant documents, as required by the legislation. This engagement was guided by a formal Community Engagement Plan.

Following this phase of community consultation, Council at its Ordinary Meeting of 26 June adopted a revised Community Strategic Plan – **Blacktown City 2030** as the overarching policy document, together with a full suite of supporting IP&R documents.

Council's IP&R Framework established the basis of community need for the proposed Funding Strategy for Infrastructure Asset Renewal, including Special Rate Variation. This will be detailed in the intended application to IPART.

The current Community Engagement Plan addresses the focused and intensive consultation program required for the SRV application.

2.0 PROJECT DETAILS

2.1 Objectives

The objectives of the community consultation are as follows:

- To ensure, as far as practicable, that all residents and ratepayers (including all categories of ratepayers) are aware of the funding proposal and in particular the rate increase proposed for an SRV.
- To encourage feedback and formal submissions on the proposal from all stakeholders.
- To research in a more structured way the views of the community on the possible funding options as part of the planned Community Satisfaction Survey 2013 (note: Micromex Research has been commissioned to undertake the City-wide telephone survey in November 2013).
- To ensure all comments and enquiries are responded to effectively and in a timely manner
- To ensure all feedback received during the submission period is taken into consideration by Council in determining whether to proceed with an SRV application.

2.2 Consultation period

November 2013 to early February 2014.

Details of the intended timeframes for particular steps and media are outlined in Section 5.

The deadline for this consultation program is to provide a complete report of community feedback to Council's first Ordinary Meeting of 2014 (currently scheduled for 19 February 2014).

2.3 Level of impact

Under the framework of Council's Community Engagement Strategy, the Proposed Special Rate Variation will have a high impact on the whole of the Blacktown Local Government Area.

2.4 Level of engagement

Under the framework of Council's Community Engagement Strategy, the levels of engagement identified in the project are: Inform and Consult.

2.5 Key messages

The following key messages will be widely disseminated during the exhibition:

- The nature and purpose of the funding strategy, especially the rate increase.
- The impact of the proposed rate increase on average ratepayers and the availability of information from Council on the impact on individual ratepayers and properties.

- Dates, times and locations (online and physical locations) where the public can view the consultation material.
- Dates, times and locations of the Community Information Sessions.
- Details of when and how stakeholders can make a submission.
- Contact details within Council to enquire and discuss the proposal
- Key steps in the determination of this proposal by Council and by IPART (should Council proceed to make an SRV application).

3.0 KEY STAKEHOLDERS

The following key stakeholders will be targeted for this consultation project:

3.1 Internal stakeholders

- Mayor and Councillors
- Council staff, particularly management staff to continue detailed planning and respond to public submissions

3.2 Community stakeholders

The critical stakeholders for this consultation are the ratepayers of Blacktown City Council. While feedback from other stakeholders and groups will be welcome and encouraged, the impact of the proposal is essentially on ratepayers and efforts to inform and engage ratepayers must be given priority for available resources.

As the proposed SRV will impact differently on different categories of ratepayers, appropriate engagement must be directed in particular to the following groups:

- Residential Ratepayers (includes Farmland Ratepayers) – approximately 90,000 individuals.
- Business “General” Ratepayers (defined geographically in the proposed SRV) – approximately 1,600 property owners. Note that some of these ratepayers are not residents of Blacktown City.
- Business “Sub Category” Ratepayers (defined geographically in the proposed SRV) – approximately 3,300 property owners. Note that many of these ratepayers are not residents of Blacktown City.

Businesses, business representatives and their employees in the City are also key stakeholders.

Other interested stakeholders may include:

- State and Federal Members covering the Blacktown City area.
- Community generally and special interest groups (e.g. environmental, social, cultural, recreational).
- State and Federal Government agencies.
- WSROC and WSROC councils.

4.0 CONSULTATION MATERIAL

The following documents and information will be made widely available during the exhibition period, in both electronic and hard-copy format:

4.1 Documents to be exhibited

The following draft IP&R documents are to be publicly exhibited for comment and formal submissions:

- Revised Long Term Financial Plan 2013-2023 – full update of the adopted plan
- Revision of certain sections of the Delivery Program 2013-2017 – selected sections only, not the full document.

These documents are to be subject to the same consultation guidelines as were established under the Community Engagement Plan for the IP&R Review (see Section 1.4) together with the further relevant steps outlined below.

4.2 SRV information material

The following key materials will be made available to the community and stakeholders online and in hard copy as appropriate:

- Newspaper advertisements.
- Detailed information brochures on SRV. Separate versions to be provided appropriate to each Ratepayer category (see Section 3.2).
- Factsheets and detailed supporting SRV materials – including maps of the proposed new “Business Sub Category” areas.
- Posters and displays.
- Presentations of key information on the SRV.
- Supporting information – including all Council’s adopted IP&R Framework documents – will be made available online (and in hard copy on request).

5.0 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT METHODS

The following community engagement methods will be used to inform and consult the identified stakeholders on the proposed funding strategy including SRV.

In keeping with the principles required by the IP&R legislation and the SRV Guidelines (see Section 1), a range of print-based and online media and promotional methods will be utilised.

5.1 Community Telephone Survey

A section relating to the infrastructure renewal issue and possible special rate increase is included in Council’s Community Satisfaction Survey, which will be conducted by the consultants Micromex Research in November 2013.

The Community Survey and the questionnaire for this section of the survey has been separately approved by Executive.

The sample size of the Community Survey allows the results to be statistically valid

for a City-wide response. The results of the survey will form part of the report to Council in February 2014 on the views of the community on the SRV proposal.

5.2 Exhibition points

Throughout the consultation period, the draft IP&R documents and selected other exhibition material will be available in hard-copy form during normal business hours at the following locations:

- Blacktown Civic Centre
- All Libraries (five locations throughout the City)

5.3 Public notice and advertising

The public will be notified of the funding strategy and SRV consultation via display advertisements in all local newspapers. Advertising will be carried out in two rounds, December 2013 (as soon as the website and consultation materials are ready) and immediately before the Community Information Sessions in January 2014 (see below). A notice will also be placed on Council's website, with a link to the exhibition material.

The public notice will include essential details on the purpose, nature and impact of the SRV, dates, times and locations where the public can view the exhibition material, and details of when and how people can make a submission and the Council meeting which will consider submissions.

Media releases and Council's social media facilities will also be utilised to promote the proposal and opportunities for public involvement and comment.

5.4 Direct mail – Information brochures

As noted in Section 4.2, a detailed information brochure on the proposed funding strategy and rate increase will be mailed to all ratepayers in December 2013.

This direct mail will require some 95,000 brochures to be posted to ratepayers, assigned according to category.

The mailout will be arranged through the agency which is contracted to print and post Council's rates notices, ensuring that there is consistency with the rates notices.

In the case of ratepayers with registered agents (e.g. owners of properties which are leased), the agents will be supplied with brochures on behalf of their clients with the request that these be passed on to the ratepayers.

Separate brochures with relevant information will be provided to residential, business general and business sub-category ratepayers. Copies of these brochures will be available online and in hard copy through the other engagement steps outlined in this Section.

As the impact of the proposed SRV is more significant on the new proposed Business Sub Category, a further notice will be sent to these ratepayers in January 2014, to remind these ratepayers of the proposal and encourage their submissions.

5.5 Other information material

A range of other information material (as noted in Section 4.2) is being prepared and will be made available online and in hard copy, through all the engagement steps noted in this Section.

5.6 Consultation website

Council is contracting the leading supplier of online community engagement in Australia, Bang The Table, to establish a dedicated consultation website for this project.

A special website www.yoursay.blacktown.nsw.gov.au with the title “Building A Stronger Future” will be established as a comprehensive source of information and documents on the proposed funding strategy and rate increase, and to encourage public awareness and comment. This website will be hosted and moderated for Council by Bang The Table. The information provided on the site will be the responsibility of Council.

Key information and links to the consultation website will also be provided on Council’s main website.

The primary purpose of the consultation website will be to provide a comprehensive and easy-to-use source of all information and documents on the proposed funding strategy and rate increase, to which all advertising and enquiries can be directed.

As a secondary function, the website will also allow users to register in order to give their views on the proposal through an online discussion forum and through a “Quick Poll” which allows “voting” for or against the proposal (on an informal basis).

As registration for the website can be anonymous, views recorded on it will be reported to Council, but are not treated as formal submissions.

5.7 Community Information sessions

Community Information Sessions will be held in each Ward of the City in January 2014 as part of the consultation program.

The information sessions will be promoted through the various media noted above, including the direct mail information brochures and newspaper advertisements, the consultation website and Council’s main website, and social media.

These sessions are not public meetings, but rather an opportunity for ratepayers to speak one-on-one with Council officers about the rate rise proposal, raise particular issues and receive answers directly. A general presentation on the funding strategy and rates proposal will be available at the information sessions and discussed with interested ratepayers as individuals or small groups.

The sessions will be held as follows:

4pm - 8pm Tuesday, 14 January	Mount Druitt Hub
10am - 2pm	Riverstone Neighbourhood Centre

Thursday, 16 January	
4pm - 8pm Thursday, 16 January	Max Webber Library, Blacktown
10am - 2pm Saturday, 18 January	Jim Southee Community Centre, Kings Langley
10am - 2pm Monday, 20 January	Emerton Leisure Centre

5.8 Telephone enquiries

Enquiries will be handled by Council's Corporate Planning staff, who will direct submissions and specific matters (e.g. Rates enquiries) to the relevant staff.

Telephone enquiries received by Council on the rates proposal will be directed in the first instance to Council's Rates section staff, as the majority of calls would be expected to focus on the specific impact of the proposed rate increase on ratepayers' properties.

Other specialist staff will respond as required to other issues raised by callers.

A rates calculator tool is being developed to enable Rates staff to answer enquiries relating to the impact of the rates proposal on individual ratepayers. This tool can also then be available to provide specific information to attendees at the Community Information Sessions.

All enquiries, and answers to those enquiries, will be recorded. This will ensure consistency in advice. It will also assist in reporting to Council on the outcomes of the exhibition period.

6.0 SUBMISSIONS

The following policy statement will be made available throughout the exhibition period via Council's website and notifications.

6.1 Submission protocol

- All submissions must be made in writing and cannot be accepted if anonymous.
- Submissions may be posted or emailed to Council, or handed in person to Council staff (prefer to direct ratepayers to the Civic Centre for this purpose if possible).
- Comments left on social media (i.e. the consultation website, Facebook, Twitter or online forums) or on feedback forms without contact details will not be regarded as formal submissions. However, a summary of this feedback will be included in the report to Council if relevant.

6.2 Privacy and personal information protection

A submission made to Council in relation to the draft IP&R documents may contain 'personal information' as defined by the *Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998* ('the Act').

Notwithstanding the above, details of any submission may be made available to:

- Officers within the Council for the purpose of assessing the submission.
- People who apply to view Council's file relating to the matter in accordance with the Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009.

It should also be noted that details of submissions (excluding names and address) will be included in a report prepared by staff, summarising the key issues raised in submissions during the public exhibition period. This report will be presented to Council and will be made publicly available.

6.3 Response to submissions

- All submissions will initially be responded to by a letter from the General Manager, providing information on the funding strategy and SRV and information on other issues as appropriate.
- Submissions will be referred to the relevant Council officer(s) for assessment in regards to the appropriate advice to be provided to Council and response to the person or body making the submission.
- All submissions and a summary of the key issues raised and proposed response will be reported to Council as part of its considerations in resolving whether to submit an application to IPART for a Special Rate Variation. It is intended that the relevant report will be considered by Council's Ordinary Meeting on 19 February 2014.
- Following Council's consideration of all submissions and other feedback, and determination on whether to submit an application to IPART for a Special Rate Variation, all persons and bodies making submissions will receive a written response within 10 working days advising Council's determination of the matter.