

Thank you to everyone who turned up for the February Gympie Regional Council Ordinary Meeting. Although the numbers were a little less than usual, we still made our presence known as much of the discussion from the councillors was directed towards the public gallery with regards to the importance of the ratepayers and residences being informed and having their voice heard.

Anyone would have thought there was an election coming up!!

6.1 Corporate Services Directorate Update

Finance 2023-24 Financial Statements Planning for the preparation of the finalisation of the 2023-24 financial year and preparation of the 2023-24 Financial Statement has commenced. The timetable is being prepared in accordance with the anticipated requirements of the Queensland Audit Office's External Audit Plan.

A statement made by the Director was issues identified was that council required better financial planning going into the 2024-25 budget planning.

Revenue Reviews - Work has commenced on comprehensive reviews of Council's revenue streams. These works include a strategic review of rating categories and Water and Wastewater, Building Certification and Fleet/Workshops activities. The Water and Wastewater review will include determination of Full Cost Pricing Models, dividend calculations, tax equivalent implications and appropriate levels of debt.

The outcomes of these reviews will be extensively workshopped with Council and subsequently incorporated into Council's 2024-25 Budget. It will be interesting to see what information on the reviews is communicated to the public.

GRC is currently in the process of upgrading its Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) and Electronic Document and Record Management (EDRM) system. A team has been set up to focus on the project, with GRIT (Growth, Resilience, Integrity, Tenacity) being the collective name of the team tasked with delivering the projects.

It was asked by Cr Polley how much of the project funding had been spent and could not recall what the total budget allocated for the project.

The Director responded that the GRIT roll on will be discussed in the workshop, which is interesting as the information could not be discussed today in front of the public.

Financial literacy training has been rolled out to managers, coordinators and supervisors. Financial literacy was seen as a shortcoming in the organisation. There has been good feedback about the training and should ensure better money management in council.

Identity Management

This is about instigating a secure swipe card access system where ICT has configured Silverfort (identity management software) to protect their on-premises providing multifactor authentication when accessing systems.

The People and Culture activities of the last quarter have focussed on three main areas: Recruitment / Workforce Planning / Organisational culture and wellbeing. Workforce data presented to the Executive Leadership Team over the past quarter. Data collected shows that employees leave within 1-2 years of commencement or else they tend to stay 5-9 years. The median age of our workforce is 47 years and the median tenure is around 4 years. The annual turnover rate was 18% with the quarter showing a slight reduction with fewer job advertisements being placed in December.

Disaster Management Dashboard and Communication Plan

The communications team have been working with the Disaster Management team to upgrade the Disaster Dashboard, and communication plan to ensure residents are well informed before, during and after disaster events.

Cr Devereaux stated that many members of the public are still saying they have no idea about the dashboard and stated it needs better advertising as many people are surprised, they have one.

Regional Economic Development strategy

Gympie Regional Council has commissioned the preparation of a new Regional Economic Development Strategy (REDS) for the next five years (2024-2029).

Governance, Integrity and Risk

Preparation for Local Government Elections 2024 Local government elections are held every four years and on the same date for all 77 councils across Queensland. The 2024 Local Government Election will be held on Saturday, 16 March 2024. The local government election work program continues in preparation for the new Council.

Caretaker Period Policy:

At Council's Ordinary Meeting on 25 October 2023, Council adopted its Caretaker Period Policy. The purpose of this policy is to provide guidance to Councillors and council staff on appropriate standards and restrictions, and their responsibilities, during the Caretaker Period prior to the quadrennial Queensland Local Government Elections.

Policy Update

The below governance policies have been reviewed and will be among other policies to be presented to the new Council post 2024 Local Government Elections:

- Acceptable Request Guidelines and Staff Interaction Policy
- Standing Orders, to reflect the November 2023 version of the Queensland Government's Model Meeting Procedures
- Confidentiality Procedure
- Councillor Expenses Reimbursement Policy
- Social Media Policy
- Delegation for Appointment of CEO.

Cr Devereaux asked why the Portfolio Policy was being reviewed considering it was only reviewed in October 2023.

The Director stated that depending on the number of councillor turnover the policy will be presented to the new councillors to see if they still want the portfolios.

Cr Polley questioned about concerns about the election and what councillors could and couldn't speak about but there appeared to be some relaxation with a couple of councillors being able to respond to ratepayer and residents' concerns.

The Director stated that historically there has been a problem with transparency to councillors.

Governance Framework Reset Project

The Governance Framework Reset Project funded by Local Government Managers Australia (LGMA) Queensland has been continuing. This project provides council with assurance and oversight of the key policies and practices being embedded into Council's governance framework. This includes developing tools for Councillors and staff, performance of independent reviews and providing advice in regard to local government best practice.

Cr Stewart asked when the budget review process would begin.

The Director stated that the process had begun internally but due to the election the councillors would not be involved until the election result had been declared.

Cr Polley asked why the Director had highlighted the staff turnover average and duration period.

The Director stated that is always good to review for staff engagement.

Cr Smerdon asked what the budget was for GRIT?

The Director replied that the budget was \$11M and was to be discussed in the WORKSHOP meeting later.

Note: It is important to know that no information is being made available to the public regarding these matter. \$11M is not an idol amount of taxpayer's money that is being spent by council staff on programs not being made public other than a short title overview statement.

6.2 – Second quarterly update – operational plan 2023-24:

The Director noted that the development of the new Planning Scheme has been delayed. Councillors are finally asking questions of staff of the proposed policies. The planning scheme is a long-term document that will have lasting affects on our region for decades. The new councillors will hopefully continue requiring the council officers to be acting in the best interests of the people of Gympie and not the best interests of the Qld government. There is still time for the new council to question the planning scheme so that the suitable changes for the people are made before the draft planning scheme will be ready for adoption by September. It then gets submitted to the state government, before returning to council for further public consultation. We the people need to hold council officers to account.

Cr Devereaux asked about the Internal Strategy document review

The council officer stated that it is an internal review process.

Cr Devereaux stated that the public don't see these reports as money well spent. It was amazing that in all the time we have been attending the meeting how many times the public and ratepayers' best interests were mentioned.

Cr Devereaux asked why the Planning Scheme flood mapping was not online as there is a lot of discussion online about where is it.

The council officer stated it was planned to be put up but there was a review being undertaken currently of the website.

Cr Polley asked the question of why councillors aren't allowed to say more to the public

The CEO responded the organisation can take a more proactive approach to communicate the systems and processes to the public. In early 2024 council will be working on improving the communication.

6.3 – January financial report

The Director stated Income is trending better than budgeted due to an increase in the number of properties resulting in more rateable properties. Employee costs are higher than budgeted due to overtime costs and workers compensation. Council has spent more on capital projects than expected. Much of the cost is to do with disaster recovery works which are funded by the Qld Reconstruction Authority (QRA).

The percentage of outstanding rates at 31 January 2024 was 48.74% compared to 47.4% for the same period in the prior financial year. Rates assessments were calculated and issued in late January 2024, with a due date of 7 March 2024. It is anticipated that the level of outstanding rates will reduce from February 2024 onwards.

Total cash on hand at 31 January 2024 was \$77.8m and of these funds, \$77.1m was invested with the Queensland Treasury Corporation with \$0.25m invested with Auswide Bank and \$0.25m invested with Bendigo Bank.

One of the most startling comments came from the Director when questioned by Cr Polley on the amount of cash held was that he responded with, 'there is a fine line between holding too much cash funds on hand because council wouldn't be able to justify rate increases'!!!!!!!!!!

The Director stated that council needs 3 months operating expenditure on hand to fund long term projects. He stated, 'this was similar to the household budget, at some time you have to pay back the line of credit'.

Cr Devereaux stated that it would be good to educate the public **'to stop the push back from ratepayers'**.

The cash balance includes constrained funds of \$69.1m which is made up of the prepayment of grant funds, the **prepayment of the state waste levy, infrastructure charges** and provisions for **rehabilitation of landfill and quarry sites** across the region. There is NO public allocation of the purpose of these required funds and who benefits from them.

6.4 – Procurement report

Council agreed to award a contract of \$554,000 to Mansey Ltd for the supply of two standby generators, one for the water treatment plant and one for the Pavilion which acts as a disaster evacuation centre.

Cr Polley asked if there was an ability to increase the refrigeration units at the pavilion as during the floods as food donations could not be accepted.

The Director stated that the funding from that would need to come from council's budget as it is not an structural asset.

7.1 – Environmental Grants Program

Following the Ordinary Meeting of 31 January 2024, officers were requested by councillors to review the two unsuccessful applications and liaised with relevant applicants. Further information was provided for the environment grants that were not approved in the January meeting. One applicant had ineligible costs and exceeded the allowable amount, and the application was better suited a community grant and they are applying through that program. The other application had insufficient information and justification for the grant. In both cases staff discussed the issues with the applicant groups. The applicant advised that they intend to apply in the in Round 2 pursuant to that category. Cr Devereaux stated that during the January meeting the council officers advised both applicants were eligible. The council officer stated that there is a difference between being an approved applicant meeting the standard but the applicant was not recommended as the application contained expenses that were not eligible.

8.1 – Flood Recovery Progress Report

The Director took the report as read with the information being discussed at the workshop meeting where no public are allowed access.

It was noted that all projects are now in progress under the QRA. All projects under REPA are expected to be completed by June.

Note: With all the discussions regarding public concern for information, the supplied report within the agenda online was not legible. Again, this is the treatment of the ratepayers and residents by council officers.

There are 14 projects all funded under the QRA funding from the commonwealth government funding.

Cr Polley asked about the changes to the flood buy back scheme.

The Director stated the changes were made following the January meeting where councillors asked if there was an ability for the houses to be tendered to the removalists, they can make the decision if the house can be reused or demolished.

8.2 – Capital Works progress report

Key Project Updates Gympie Civic Centre

- Target date for reopening remains late 2024
- Site visit with key user groups held early December 2023
- Detailed design and tender documentation progressing
- Additional information provided to loss adjustor over last month

The capital works program has over \$58million has been spent on capital works to the end of January. It is expected that about \$160million will be spent by the end of June, most of the works are funded by the state government through QRA.

7.2 Development Application for Material Change of Use - Transport Depot (Removalist's Depot) and Warehouse (Storage of Shipping Containers) at 427 Carlson Road, Coles Creek

A development application proposing a removalist's depot was presented to Council at its Ordinary Meeting on 24 January 2024. At the meeting no resolution was made by Councillors and had been requested the proposal be re-presented for consideration.

The presented recommendations at the meeting were in contradiction to the previous ordinary meeting recommendation tabled and included conditions mentioned without any listing of conditions being displayed by the council officer for councillors to be in a position to make an informed decision that was in the best interests of the people.

Cr Hartwig stepped in and made it clear; council is not listening to the councillors who are representing the people. The CEO asked the council officer if they could give an outline of the suggested conditions. Amazingly the council officer was not in a position to give this to councillors.

Cr Milne asked why this was brought to council?

CEO intervened by giving this as an example of a public interest item

Cr Milne asked was this setting precedence.

Cr Hartwig responded by saying that precedence would be set if Councillors voted for or against the recommendation. He stated the Planning Scheme is designed to allow public input as well as designations in the scheme.

Cr Fredman stated he felt he had been misled by council as he went to the trouble of visiting the site and the information, he gathered was ignored by council staff.

Cr Milne stated that we don't like policy and procedures, but it is there for a reason.

The questions for Cr Milne are, who wrote the policy and procedures? It was not written with the people for the people, it was written by state government departments in the best interests of government. Who wrote the local laws that council officers are applying, not the people!!

The Planning Department have overstepped their roles and been caught out!!