

The Gundagai Independent

212 Sheridan Street, Gundagai.
Phone: 6944 1027 :: Fax: 6944 2222
Email: independent@tatimes.com.au

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MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2014

\$1.10 (includes GST)

Councillor believes merge has merits

While the majority of Gundagai Shire Councillors stand by their stance to resist a possible merge with any neighbouring local government area, Councillor Ron Magnone believes not only are councils headed down the path of amalgamation, but that Gundagai Shire Council should look very carefully at the benefits of a merge.

The state government will roll out funding sweeteners to achieve voluntary change in the local government sector, with Premier Mike Baird last week committing \$258 million in incentives for the state's 152 councils to decrease their numbers, including \$105 million for regional councils.

The funds are part of the Fit for the Future package of up to \$1 billion, which also includes offering councils cheaper loans and reductions in red tape, should they chose to merge.

Mr Baird said the package will "put ratepayers first so councils deliver better roads, footpaths and sporting fields."

Despite the cash incentives, Mayor Abb McAlister remains adamant that Gundagai Shire will stand alone, saying the council is financially sustainable and will remain so in the long-term.

When the issue was discussed at last Tuesday's ordinary council meeting, Cr McAlister said: "Let it (amalgamation) come - we'll be fighting it."

"We are a sustainable council, and you only have to look at our 10-year financial plan to see that," he said.

"We have been able to borrow \$3 million from the state government for the main street upgrade and were able to put in \$1 million ourselves - we wouldn't have been able to secure that money if we weren't viewed as being a sustainable council."

"We appreciate that we'll have to look at more sharing of resources with other councils and we will also be pushing to be part of the (proposed Riverina) Joint Organisation trial, but we'll fight to retain our own identity."

Cr Magnone, on the other hand, believes the \$1 billion reform package has its merits and presents opportunity for a Council that he says is becoming more reliant on funding from the state government.

"Rather than sticking our head in the sand, we should see this as an opportunity to secure future funding for our community," he said.

"What we have to be conscious of as a Council is that when we look at any significant project we have undertaken in the last 10 years, like the



With the state government dangling cash incentives before councils in the hope they will take up the newly-announced \$1 billion amalgamation package, Cr Ron Magnone says Gundagai Shire Council should consider the offer.

If we look at all the good work that this Council has done in the Adjungbilly area, as an example, would the old Adjungbilly Municipal Council have been able to maintain the spending of current days had it not amalgamated with Gundagai?

- Cr Ron Magnone

netball courts for instance that still have not been completed after 14 months, we have had to rely heavily on external contributions and grants, whether it be from the state or federal government or even in-kind from the community.

"To proclaim we are or can be sustainable into the future does draw a very short straw."

Cr Magnone also rejects the belief that Council will lose its identity in the event of a possible merge, branding the notion as "nonsense". "If we look at all the good work that this Council has done in the Adjungbilly area, as an example, would the old Adjungbilly Municipal Council have been able to maintain the spending of current days had it not amalgamated with Gundagai?"

"This Council always talks about playing as a 'team', but if we, as councillors sit on the sideline bar-racking for the opposition and choose not to put a few solid runs on the board for the team, our residents aren't going to be very happy and we won't be selected next time."

He believes that by rejecting a

merge, Gundagai will effectively be "isolated", and that this will have an impact on future funding decisions.

"At the end of the day there are arguments both for and against. What I would really like before we go out there huffing and puffing is that we sit down with our community and have a genuine discussion about the way forward. Give them all the facts, the good, bad and the ugly, and lets have a mature debate," he said.

An analysis by Treasury's financial services arm, TCorp, recently found that last year two-thirds of NSW councils were operating in the red, running combined deficits exceeding \$400 million.

Mr Baird said the Fit for the Future package is the most significant investment the State has ever made in the local government sector.

"We are committed to (state government program) Rebuilding NSW and to achieve this we need a strong local government sector," he said.

"However, this is not possible when more than one-third of the State's councils are facing financial problems."

He said the package is about councils working for the communities they represent and putting downward pressure on the rates they pay.

"The NSW Government wants communities to have confidence that their council is financially sound, operating efficiently and in a strong position to guide community growth and deliver quality services. "This is a historic package that gives local councils the incentives needed to ensure they are in a position to provide the services and infrastructure their communities

need and deserve."

The Fit for the Future package is based on a report put together by the Independent Local Government Review Panel and released in April of 2013, proposing to dispose of more than 50 regional councils.

The report named Gundagai Shire Council as an 'at risk' council, with preferred options outlined in the report pointing to Gundagai, along with Tumbarumba, having a 'high merger potential' with Tumut Shire Council.

"The NSW Government takes this reform program very seriously. It recognises that without significant financial and other incentives and support, change-resistant councils may be hesitant to take up reforms proposed by the Independent Local Government Review Panel," said Minister for Local Government Paul Toole.

He said the package of incentives and support assists local councils to remove the obstacles that may have prevented reform in the past.

"Our State cannot continue to be constrained by local government boundaries that were set more than 100 years ago," he said.

"That's why we have created the \$1 billion Fit for the Future package - to help councils take the next steps towards change."

"We are supporting councils that wish to voluntarily merge by providing financial incentives and other support to assist the process."

Councils will have until June 30, 2015 to submit their proposal on how they plan to be Fit for the Future. It will be assessed by independent experts against independently-established criteria.

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THURSDAY, OCTOBER 30, 2014

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A home and our heritage up in smoke

Gundagai residents have been left bewildered and disheartened after a centuries old tree on the North Gundagai common was set alight and destroyed in a recent act of vandalism.

Mason Crane, research officer at the ANU Fenner School of Environment & Society, said the River Red Gum, which was burned out sometime over the weekend of October 11 and 12, was not only a valued piece of the town's heritage, but also a habitat for many wildlife species living in the tree hollows, including a possum and its baby.

"It would've also had about 20 or 30 different reptiles living on it," he said.

"River Red Gums are very susceptible to fire and we lose about 20 per cent through bush fires, but this is a loss that could have been avoided."

Mr Crane estimates the tree to have been somewhere between 500 and 1000 years old.

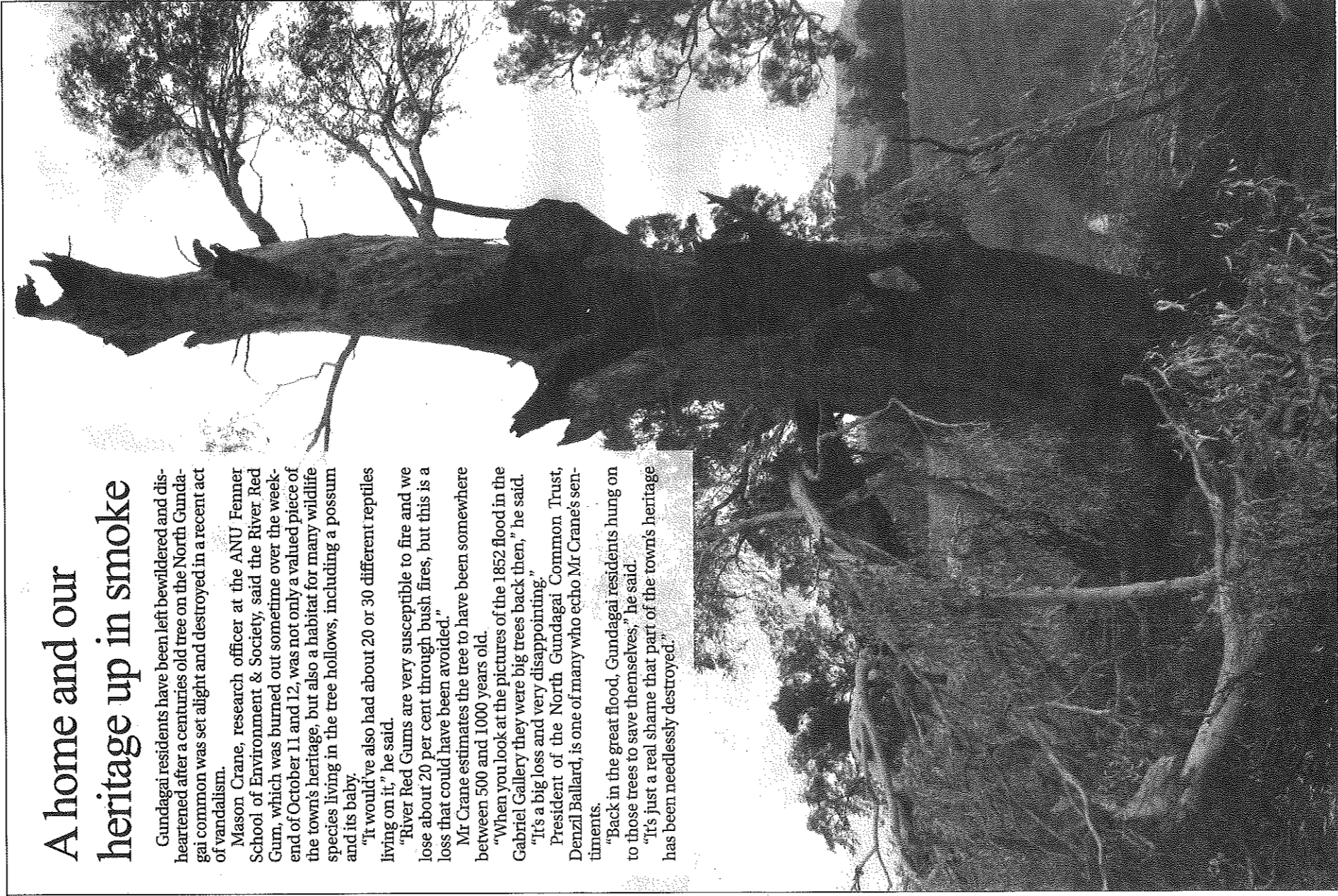
"When you look at the pictures of the 1852 flood in the Gabriel Gallery they were big trees back then," he said.

"It's a big loss and very disappointing."

President of the North Gundagai Common Trust, Denzil Ballard, is one of many who echo Mr Crane's sentiments.

"Back in the great flood, Gundagai residents hung on to those trees to save themselves," he said.

"It's just a real shame that part of the town's heritage has been needlessly destroyed."



GSC remains defiant as Premier urges councils to merge

The prospect of council mergers was high on the agenda at the annual Local Government NSW conference held in Coffs Harbour last week where Premier Mike Baird urged delegates of the 152 NSW councils present to put their "pride into the back seat" and be willing to make hard decisions to ensure they have a future.

Mayor Abb McAlister, acting general manager Phil McMurray and Councillors Ron Moses and Mike Kingwill attended the two-day conference and Mr Baird's first address to local government representatives since the state government announced a \$250 million package last month providing incentives for councils to amalgamate as part of its Fit For The Future reforms.

Sydney councils are being offered a share in \$153 million to merge, while \$105 million will be available for regional councils.

All NSW councils have been told to demonstrate their financial viability by June 30 2015. The submissions will then be assessed by an independent panel.

Speaking at the conference, Mr Baird appealed to councils to look deeply at considering amalgamations, saying local pride had to be put by the wayside when considering the future.

"How can we use this process to deliver better services and more infrastructure for our community?" he said.

"It's almost that sense of having to put pride into the back seat and put the community into the front seat."

The Premier said economic reality suggests councils would be more efficient after amalgamations and help to eradicate a \$280 million deficit.

"We know that the status quo is not sustainable," he

said. "Losing a million dollars a day is not something we can ask the community to bear."

Gundagai Shire Council (GSC), however, fervently adheres to its decision to stand alone as a council.

The mayor and acting general manager took the opportunity to air their case for retaining Council's own identity with Local Government Minister Paul Toole at the Riverina Eastern Regional Organisation of Councils (REROC) annual general meeting in Wagga on Monday, where Cr McAlister says Mr Toole was receptive to their point of view.

"He realises that it's not a one size fits all scenario when it comes to rural councils," Cr McAlister said.

"He told us if we feel that our Council is moving forward and is financially sustainable, then to go ahead and put in our submission to stand alone."

Cr McAlister said community consultation will play a vitally important role as Council enters the submission making stage to prove to the state government that it is indeed fit for the future.

"As a Council we are financially sustainable, we are in a good position, and our long-term financial plan shows that our reserves are in great order, we have a very positive Council and we've had positive results over the past 10 to 15 years," he said.

"We've been able to contribute \$1 million to the main street upgrade and were able to borrow the remaining \$3 million. After re-structure, we now have an excellent and modern plant fleet and were able to this year purchase a \$500,000 stabiliser, which is already showing cost savings, with many positive comments from residents about the improved road network."

Continued page 3

Disappointed locals are wondering why someone would deliberately destroy this centuries old River Red Gum on the town common.

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Post office relocates to supermarket

The Gundagai Post Office will relocate to the IGA Supermarket at 152 Sheridan Street this weekend.

The post office will cease trading at its current location at 5pm tomorrow (Friday) and will re-open for business at 9pm on Monday November 3 at the IGA supermarket. Australia Post says the existing red street posting box and all PO Boxes will also relocate to the IGA supermarket to make it easier for customers to access postal services in the one location.

"The new Gundagai Post Office will continue to provide the same range

of products and services and will operate 9am-5pm Monday to Friday. There will be no change to mail delivery and collection times," an Australia Post spokesperson said.

"Australia Post would like to thank David and Jennie Maslin for providing postal services to the Gundagai community for the past nine years. Jennie will manage the post office at the IGA Supermarket for a short period to assist Sam Bhardwaj and the IGA team, and help ensure a seamless transition for customers."

Revolving screens showcase town to travellers

Gundagai Shire Council will spend a little over \$2000 to install a revolving TV screen at the Five Mile complex on the Hume Highway, allowing for local businesses to advertise to a wider audience.

While Council funds the LED screen and software, businesses will pay an upfront cost of \$50 to advertise, with an additional \$50 to make any changes.

"The screen will have rotating pages, showcasing the town's tourist hot spots as well as local business," said economic development officer Miriam Crane.

Frequency change spells telly retune

In two weeks time some television channels will change frequency in Gundagai and residents may need to retune their televisions and set-top boxes in order to continue to view free-to-air television. This is part of the final step in Australia's move to digital-only TV.

The change is scheduled to take place in Gundagai on November 12 at 3.30pm. If you are missing a channel on or after this retune date, you should retune

to ensure you continue to receive all available free-to-air channels.

Retuning is simple, and for most systems you should press the 'menu' button on the remote control and follow the prompts to retune. If you have difficulty retuning you should refer to the manufacturer's handbook, ask a friend of family member for help, visit the Digital Ready website at www.digitalready.gov.au or call the Digital Ready Information Line on 1800 20 10 30 from 8am to 10pm, seven days a week.

If you find channels haven't changed, you may be receiving a signal from a different TV transmitter. You can check to see which channels should have changed by entering your address into the 'get retune info' box on the website.

In some cases certain digital equipment will automatically retune itself, in which case you won't need to do anything.

GSC remains defiant as Premier urges councils to merge

From front page He said potential merging of councils would also put an end to the dearly held and long recognised speciality of local councils, which is their closeness to their communities. "We don't want to lose that," he said. "And if we were to lose council staff through an amalgamation, the community would lose a group of people who also contribute in big ways through local organisations and committees."

GSC is still in favour of the formation of joint organisations (JOs) under the reform and

recently threw its support behind REROCs submission to be part of a JO trial, set to commence in February next year. A JO would undertake a range of "high-level functions" on behalf of member councils.

Local Government NSW (LGNWSW) president Keith Rhoades said while reform was "on our doorstep" there was a "lack of clarity" about how scale and capacity of councils was to be assessed.

"Does the government intend to change its 'No forced amalgamation' policy if councils aren't willing to

merge, or if their proposals are rejected?"

"Rest assured while LGNSW will continue to fight forced amalgamations, we urge councils to respond to the Fit for the Future challenge, and get your proposals in earlier rather than later, whether you intend to merge, or feel you have scale and capacity to stand alone."

Office of Local Government acting CEO Steve Orr told councillors opposed to amalgamation at the Coffs Harbour conference that new templates and support material would be provided before the end of the month.

Stormy weather causes power outage

Essential Energy restored power to approximately 2300 customers in Gundagai, Wantabadgery and surrounding areas on Monday afternoon after a fault on the high voltage electricity network at 1.45pm resulted in an unplanned supply interruption.

Regional manager South Eastern Phillip Green said while the cause of the fault was not immediately apparent, storm activity in the area including high winds and lightning, was likely a contributing factor.

Network protection equipment shut off power to the affected area isolating the fault location, and crews from Gundagai Depot were immediately despatched to investigate the cause and begin the process of power supply restoration.

Essential Energy reminds the community to be careful around the electricity network during storms, to stay at least eight metres away from fallen power lines or anything in contact with them, and call 13 20 80 to report supply interruptions or damage to the network.

"We thank customers for their patience while we undertook inspections to confirm the safety of the electricity network."

Essential Energy reminds the community to be careful around the electricity network during storms, to stay at least eight metres away from fallen power lines or anything in contact with them, and call 13 20 80 to report supply interruptions or damage to the network.

Learner driver found snoozing after crash

A 31-year-old male driver from Gundagai copped four infringement notices from police after crashing his vehicle on the Grahamstown Road at about 11.30am last Friday.

Police allege the man's westbound Toyota Hilux left the road after he fell asleep. The vehicle came to rest on its side after colliding with trees. The man walked from the scene to a nearby residence where he was found asleep on the verandah.

The learner driver was issued with infringements for learner unaccompanied, negligent driving, not change address and not transfer registration.

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Author goes in to bat for Aussie baseball hero

Australia is nothing if not a nation that loves to love its sporting heroes, and has had its fair share to idolise over the years. But one such hero, Aussie baseball player Joe Quinn, has quietly slipped through the cracks, his extraordinary story of a career spanning 17 years in the American major leagues in the late 1800s remaining untold. Until now.

With the 2014-15 Australian Baseball League season just underway, the timing could not be better for Gundagai author Rochelle Nicholls to release her book, 'Joe Quinn Among the Rowdies', the product of seven years research, uncovering one of Australia's greatest forgotten sporting stories.

Not into baseball? You don't have to be, for Rochelle assures us that the tale of Joe Quinn is as much about 'having a go' and standing up for your mates as it is of sporting endeavour.

"Quinn's story is so much more than a story about baseball," she said. "It's the story of love, family bonds, and a man who took on incredible odds, the triumph of the little guy against the big guy."

Quinn was born in a squatter's camp outside Ipswich in 1862, and spent his early years in Queensland until his family was driven from Australia by the economic and environmental harshness of the young colony. It was while working as a miner in rural Iowa that 17-year-old Quinn picked up his first base-

ball, and within two years he was a professional slugger on the runaway celebrity train that was American baseball in the nineteenth century.

"Support for the underdog runs deep in Australian folklore. From Ned Kelly's last stand to Gallipoli, it is part of the Australian character to respect the desire to win rather than the actual outcome," she said.

"Joe Quinn's story is the classic underdog tale of a boy who dares to take on the Americans at their own game - it shows a level of audacity that any Australian could be proud of."

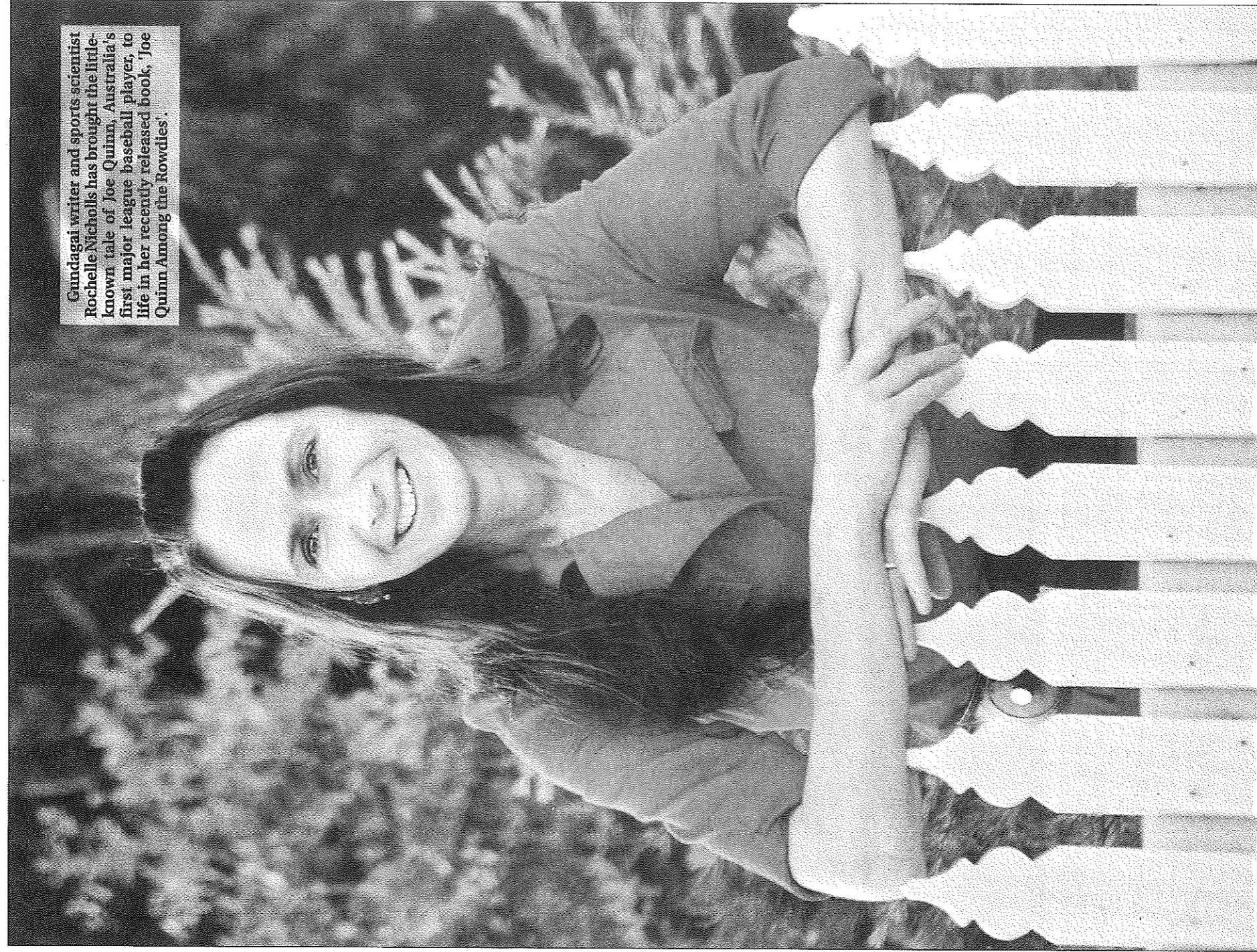
Quinn played on five championship teams during 17 seasons in the major leagues, winning awards for his play at second base and voted 'America's Most Popular Player' in 1893. Quinn also remains the only Australian to ever manage a major league team.

Yet despite his popularity and fame in the United States, Rochelle says Quinn retained a modesty and humbleness that evaded most other big name players of that era.

"He was awarded a diamond set gold watch when he was voted most popular player through a newspaper poll, yet, while he kept the watch in his pocket, he had the diamond taken out," she said, such was his indifference to the riches that inevitably go along with the fame.

Continued page 3

Gundagai writer and sports scientist Rochelle Nicholls has brought the little-known tale of Joe Quinn, Australia's first major league baseball player, to life in her recently released book, 'Joe Quinn Among the Rowdies'.



Council receives tools to prove it's fit for the future

After the release of information that will provide the foundation for their submission, Gundagai Shire Council (GSC) can now begin the process of proving to the state government that it is fit for the future.

NSW Minister for Local Government Paul Toole released the Fit for the Future self-assessment tool, templates and guidance material to councils across NSW last

Friday. "The Fit for the Future package of up to \$1 billion is the most significant investment the State has ever made in the local government sector," Mr Toole said.

"It is up to councils to decide what the main focus of their proposal will be.

"Councils are losing \$1 million a day and we've got boundaries that were drawn up over a hundred

years ago. It is clear that 'no change' is not an option.

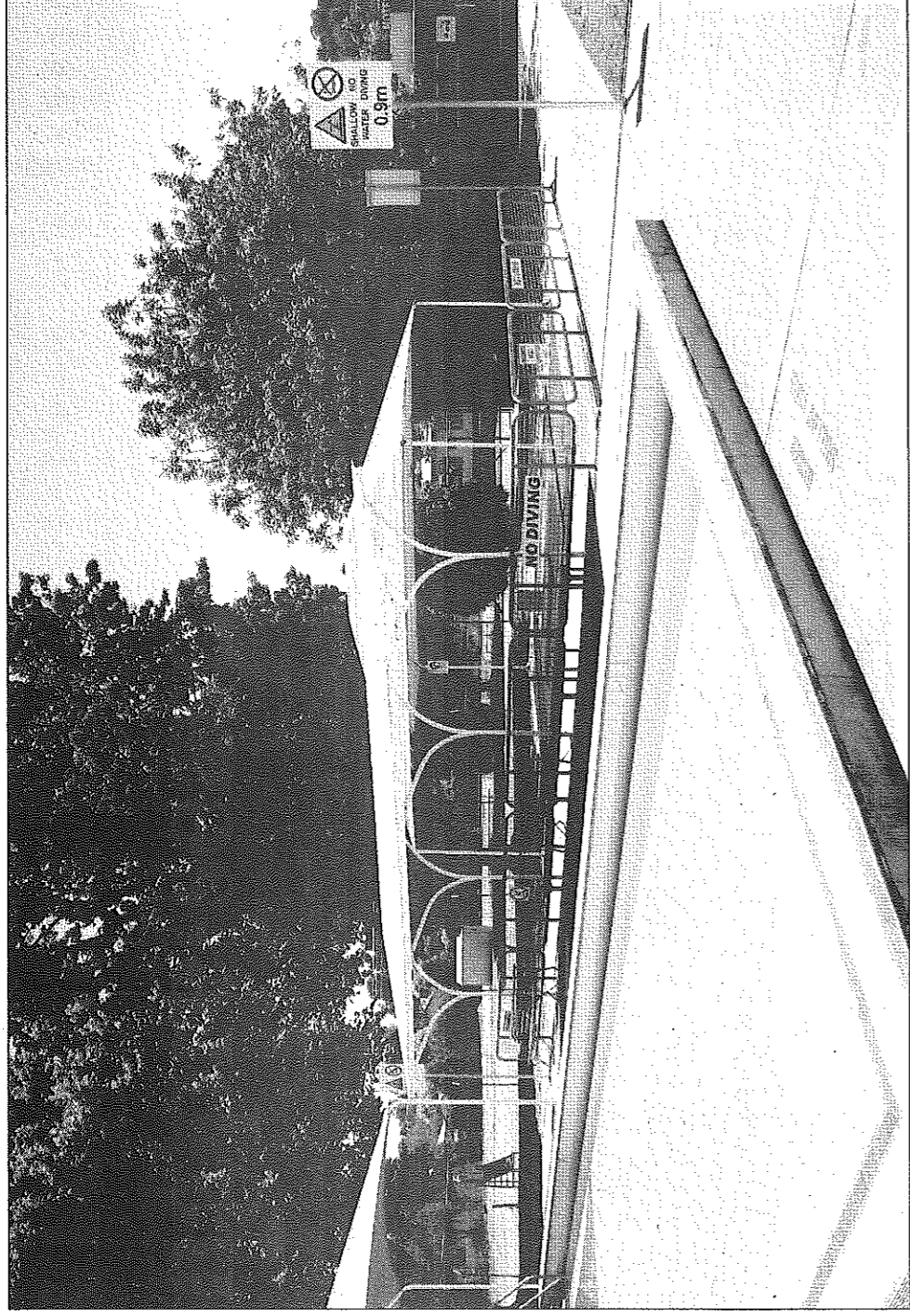
"However, the NSW Government also understands that one size does not fit all councils.

"This is councils' opportunity to design their own improvement plan and set their vision for the future, using the extensive work of the Independent Local Government Review Panel as an important starting point."

The material includes access to fully-funded facilitators to help neighbouring councils begin discussions about structural change, subsidised business case studies to look at the potential benefits and costs of mergers, and access to a panel of technical experts to assist with financial modelling, community engagement and other key components of preparing a proposal.

With GSC standing firm behind its decision to reject any possible merge with neighbouring councils, Mayor Abb McAlister said a key part in the preparation of Council's submission will be community consultation.

Council has until June 30 2015 to submit their proposal on how they plan to be Fit for the Future. Each proposal will be assessed by independent experts.



Left: Sign overlook? In the space of approximately 14 metres, there are four 'no diving' signs on just one side of the wading pool at the local swimming complex. The new signage is part of a required safety upgrade but Gundagai Shire Council aren't convinced the number of signs installed are warranted.



Road maintenance on Gocup Road Changed traffic conditions

Roads and Maritime Services is carrying out widening and safety improvements on Gocup Road, 3km south of Gundagai, to improve road safety.

The work involves widening the road for 2.25km and installing a right turn lane and left slip lane into the abattoir.

Working days are Monday to Friday 7am to 5pm and Saturdays 7am to 1pm.

Partial lane closures using traffic lights and speed limits will be in place. Motorists may experience delays of up to 10 minutes.

The project is expected to be finished in May 2015.

We apologise for any inconvenience this work may cause and appreciate your patience.

265902

For more information call: Project Engineer
George Caldwell on 131 782 (toll free) or email:
Wagga.Wagga.Regional.Office@rms.nsw.gov.au

Need a sign? Head to the pool

Gundagai Shire Councillors might argue that the Great Wall of China isn't the only thing that can be seen from space, after deeming the amount of signage at the Gundagai swimming pool, as part of a recent safety upgrade, as "complete overlook".

The upgrade was recommended by Royal Life Saving Society Australia (RLSSA) in a report handed down to Council after an inspection of the facility in February. Council allocated \$60,000 in the 2014-15 budget for the upgrade, with the main areas of work carried out being on signage, grouting, paint, shed, tiling, toddler pool maintenance and the diving board.

But it was the issue of sig-

port, there is no way I would have interpreted it to say we needed that much signage," he said.

Cr Ron Moses agreed with the mayor, saying: "It's meant to be an area for fun and recreation - not a jail."

Apart from the nine 'shallow water' signs around the wading pool, ten 'no diving' signs now adorn the relatively small area. Not to be outdone, the Olympic pool now boasts a massive 13 'shallow water' signs.

Manager urban and rural services Tushli Shrestha told Council the works came in under budget, with the work being done by Council employees.

He said during the upgrade,

some unforeseen maintenance work had to be carried out including replacement of the water pump and replacement of the damaged chlorine tank.

The pool opened for the season on November 1.

Spotted at the pool last Thursday, local resident Tony Brown who works overseas as a construction manager in the oil and gas industry for much of the year, says he looks forward to coming home to the peace and tranquility of the small-town pool facility, and is a regular patron throughout the summer months.

"I think the signs are intrusive, yes, but once you familiarise yourself with OH&S, you realise it's for everyone's benefit," he said.

As part of the state government's Fit for the Future reforms, Riverina Eastern Regional Organisation of Councils (REROC) has been announced as one of the five successful regions across NSW to become a pilot Joint Organisation (JO).

Gundagai Shire Council, a REROC member council, resolved to throw its support behind REROC in its bid to become a pilot JO, at an extraordinary meeting in October. Gundagai joins with Bland, Coolamon, Cootamundra, Greater Hume, Junee, Lockhart, Temora, Tumbarumba, Tumut, Urana and Wagga Wagga in making up the Riverina pilot JO.

The state government proposes JOs will enable councils to work together more effectively within their regions, as well as

transform the way state and local government collaborate on key community priorities such as jobs, planning and infrastructure.

"Establishing these new regional structures will make it easier to manage important projects, to better deliver the jobs, education, housing, roads, bridges, sports grounds, libraries and other facilities and services that regional and rural communities need," said Minister for Local Government Paul Toole.

"The selected pilot regions include a diverse mix of councils which have demonstrated a strong history of effective collaboration and are ready to partner with the state to tackle some of the key issues in regional communities.

"The NSW Government understands that one size does not fit all for regional communities. It is critical to get Joint Organisations right so that they foster consistent collaboration, yet are flexible enough to meet individual community needs and to operate with minimal cost and red tape."

REROC chairman, Councillor Paul Bravbrooks, said he believed the organisation's "significant successes over a substantial period of time", demonstrating how well its members co-operated, was pivotal in it being selected for the trial.

Other trial JOs are Central West, Hunter, Illawarra and Namoi.

The pilots will commence shortly, beginning with a workshop in November to help initiate the process.

Community invited to health meeting

Gundagai residents are invited to attend the Murrumbidgee Local Health District (MLHD) 2014 Annual Public Meeting in Wagga Wagga on December 17.

The meeting will be held at the Commercial Club from 2pm to 4pm and Board Chair Gayle Murphy encourages all interested local residents to attend.

Murphy said.

"It's also important to hear feedback and comments from the community and we will invite questions from the floor."

For more information or to attend the meeting, contact Community Engagement Manager Setchen Brimson on 6933 9100. Afternoon tea will be provided.

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Regulator rejects exorbitant street lighting increase

The Australian Energy Regulator (AER) has released its draft determination on street lighting charges, rejecting Essential Energy's bid to substantially increase the price it charges councils.

In July, Gundagai Shire Council (GSC) joined with Riverina Eastern Regional Organisation of Councils (REROC) in voicing their concern over the proposed price hikes through a submission REROC presented to the AER, with REROC executive officer Julie Briggs describing the figures to be of "enormous concern."

Under the proposed price hike, GSC were set to face a massive 112 per cent hike which would have added \$20,000 to the power bill. Twenty-seven other regional councils would also have been adversely affected, facing an average price rise of 95 per cent.

Essential Energy charges Riverina councils to run and maintain the public lighting infrastructure, and in its submission to the AER it stated the proposals had been prepared in accordance with the National Electricity Rules. It said in the past the cost of the public

lighting services had been under-recovered, so it was introducing a new model that would better reflect those costs.

The AER not only rejected the price increases, but described Essential Energy's maintenance regime as inefficient.

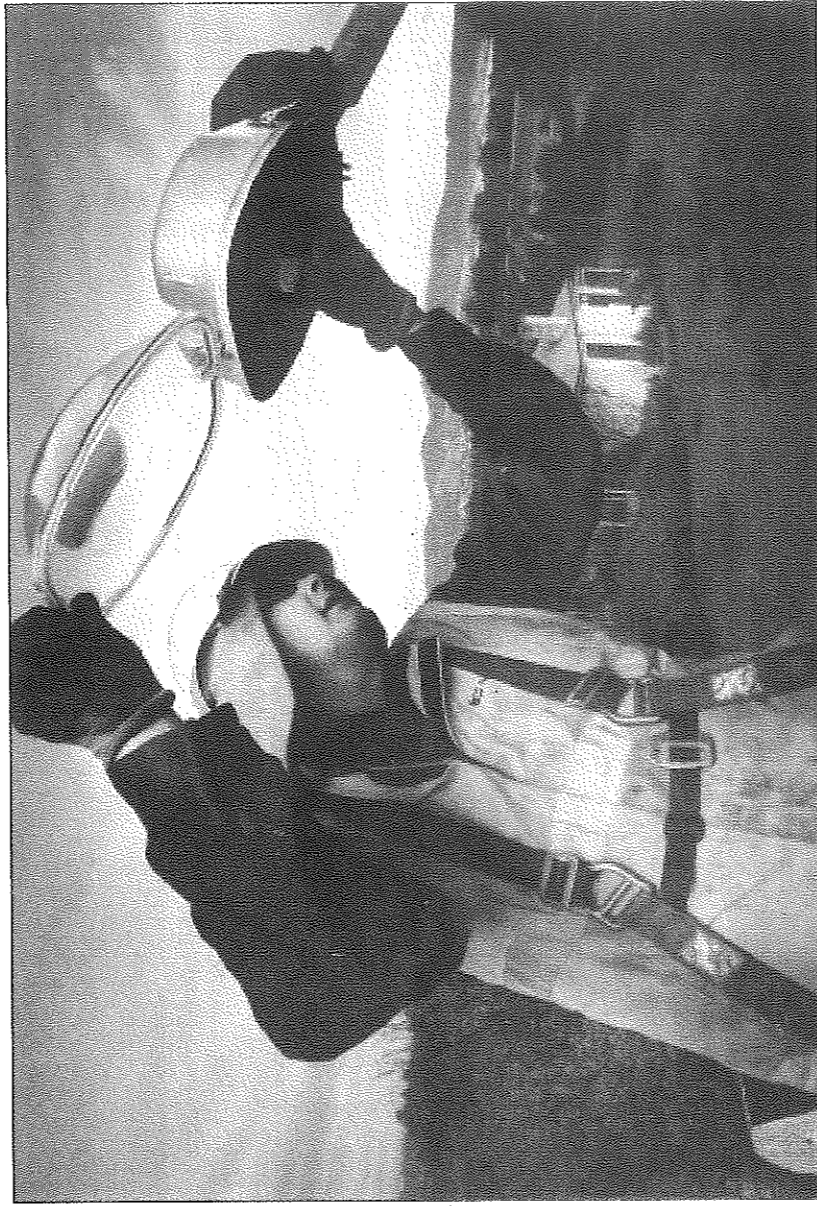
In its draft determination, the AER stated it rejected the proposed average increase of 62 per cent in 2015-16 and 3.3 per cent per annum increase in the remaining four years. Its draft decision is for an average increase of five per cent in 2015-16, and prices for the remaining years would be adjusted according to its price cap form control.

General manager Phil McMurray said while this is a good outcome so far, Council shouldn't get too excited.

"This is just a draft and Essential Energy are bound to be unhappy," he said at last Tuesday's ordinary meeting. "There may still be a modest increase."

The GM said REROC will keep fighting, and praised the tenacity of Julie Briggs.

A final outcome is due on April 30 2015.



Essential Energy's push to more than double Gundagai Council's street lighting bill has been rejected by the regulator in a draft finding. A final determination will be made in April.

No reform talks with neighbours just yet

Gundagai Shire Council (GSC) will not meet, at this stage, with any other neighbouring councils to discuss their respective futures under the state government's Fit for the Future reform, opting instead to firmly map out their position in-house before "keeping the door open" to holding talks with interested Junee, Cootamundra, Harden and Tumut Shire Councils. All NSW councils have until June 30 2015 to submit proposals to their state government, naming their preferred option under the reform. For Gundagai, the options include standing alone as a Rural Council, with some functions undertaken by a Joint Organisation (JO), or merge with a neighbouring council.

GSC are standing firm on their decision to retain their own identity, however face challenges in putting their proposal together within the timeframe when the state government is yet to formally determine what a Rural Council model will entail.

Council voted that the senior staff committee, senior staff and a facilitator meet at a date prior to Christmas to discuss their position

and in moving toward being Fit for the Future, with a view to reporting back to Councilors as soon as possible.

Mayor Abb McAlister said with no ordinary meeting in January, if Council leave talks until February, they will be "way behind the eight ball".

In the absence of Cr Mason Crane, Cr Ron Magnone was the only councillor to oppose the decision at last Tuesday's ordinary meeting.

"It seems that the senior staff committee make all the decisions," he said. "I think we should have a meeting in January."

In written correspondence, Junee general manager James Davis invited Gundagai to have "formal discussions to establish whether or not Gundagai wish to retain their current status or would like to discuss other innovative options to enable becoming Fit for the Future".

Cootamundra general manager Ken Tethewey said while he understood GSC to be in favour of the Rural Council model, he extended an invitation to discuss the pros and cons of an alternative merger

arrangement, should Council decide to vary its present stance in the coming months.

Tumut general manager Bob Stewart proposed a meeting between Gundagai and Tumut mayors, deputy mayors and general managers to consider implications of the reform package, while Harden, who are investigating the possibility of a merger with Cootamundra, would like Gundagai to participate in their reform discussions, according to acting general manager Trevor Drowley.

While Junee and Tumut specified no timeframe for a meeting with Gundagai, both Cootamundra and Harden expressed their preference to meet for talks before Christmas, if possible.

Council's auditor, John Mason, said most NSW councils will have trouble meeting the benchmarks set by the state government.

"The hurdles are very high," he said. "Gundagai Shire Council has proven that it's been Fit for the Future since 1923 and now all of a sudden it's not - how does that work?"

Cr McAlister and general manager Phil McMurray attended a meeting with the Riverina Eastern Regional Organisation of Councils (REROC) Board and state agencies last Tuesday, where framework for the JO was set, after REROC was named as one of five ROCs across NSW to trial as a JO, with Gundagai being a member council.

Issues discussed were consensus of what core functions should be undertaken by JOs and how councils fit in as members.

Both Cr McAlister and the general manager described the meeting as "very positive".

"I think it (a JO) will work, and I'd like to think that at the end of the day we could function under the umbrella of a JO," Cr McAlister said.

Meanwhile, Council has praised the United Services Union (USU), which represents local government employees, for its upfront letter to Local Government Minister Paul Toole, outlining the concerns they are fielding from councils across the state regarding the Fit for the Future reform package.

The USU seek clarification on a number of points, including what evidence there is that amalgamat-

ing two or more councils will make them more sustainable and have greater scale and capacity, and indeed while liaising with all councils, says it is yet to find anyone that clearly understands what 'scale and capacity' means.

The union queried what would happen if communities oppose amalgamations, and with most councils currently failing the economic ratios/criteria set by the government, asked what evidence there is to suggest that merging councils will be in a better position to be able to meet the criteria.

It further asked Mr Toole what the government's reaction will be to councils that do not make a submission before the June 30 2015 deadline, and argued that councils have effectively been given eight months to do what "arguably is an 18 month plus process". It then queried how the state government will respond to the councils who require more time to properly consider their future.

GSC requested a copy of Mr Toole's response to USU, and asked that a letter be sent to the union expressing their support of the line of questioning.

Letter to the Editor It's our river too

To the Editor,
I really enjoyed reading the front page of The Independent on Monday January 12. This was the kite flying exercise by the NSW Irrigators' Council (NSWIC) about a possible dam on the Murrumbidgee River below the junction with the Tumut River. I also enjoyed the thought of the good Editor as he ran with this decades old story.

So, with a tongue firmly planted in both cheeks, I had to respond. My first thought is to point out that it is our river too! The irrigators are only entitled to some of the water that flows down from the river. Gundagai gets its town water from the river. Landholders use the river for stock water. The river is part of social and cultural heritage, and basic to our way of life.

The river is also central to an ecosystem, based on the flood plain with its River Red Gum and Black Box trees. The eternal cycle of flooding and drying is essential to that ecosystem. The river is not just a canal for the downstream irrigators.

So I would be more inclined to support such a dam if the irrigators were to firstly purchase the affected properties. And of course if the irrigators were to then pay for the construction and maintenance cost of the dam. There are of course

plenty of other solutions to the irrigators' problems. They could: irrigate less; be more efficient with their irrigation; grow crops that require less water, for example stop growing rice.

The irrigators could also eliminate the Tumut River choke by other means.

For example, they could pay to have the Tumut River dredged and widened to carry more water. They could even line the river with cement to eliminate all those nuisance bank collapses.

But better still, why not let all that water flow out west to Leeton and Griffith. The Tumut River choke can be eliminated by the irrigators using the water along the Tumut River and upper Murrumbidgee River floodplain. Even I can remember in the not too distant past, people growing peaches, corn, tobacco, millet, lucerne and a myriad of vegetable crops in this area.

My only worry with this silly dam proposal is that Katrina Hodgkinson appears to be taking it all seriously. She must think the Gobarralong Bridge does not need replacing because it will be covered by water from the new dam. At least we will not have as far to go for water skiing once it's built.

Yours etc,
Ray Kingwill
Gundagai

Local Government NSW (LGNWSW) has launched its priorities for the upcoming state election in March, one of which seeks, from all parties contesting, a guarantee of no forced amalgamations in the face of the state government's Fit for the Future reform.

Councils are currently preparing their Fit for the Future submissions which, among other things, require consideration of the option of mergers. The state government has offered substantial financial incentives for voluntary mergers but has yet to guarantee that the policy of 'no forced amalgamations'

will be maintained. LGNSW president Cr Keith Rhoades said he had 'concerns' that NSW councils were being pressured into merges.

He said former NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell promised in 2011 that there would be no forced council amalgamations, only voluntary ones, but with the state election looming, this promise could evaporate.

"There are strong rumours that this is just amalgamation by stealth, because if you don't apply to be classed as Fit for the Future you don't get any funding and you leave yourself vulnerable if

the government changes and they don't have the word 'forced' in their documentation," Cr Rhoades said.

He was also troubled that some councils could end up sidelined from funding and decision making.

"It potentially creates a two level system - councils that are in favour with government and those that aren't," he said.

As part of voluntary structural reform, one of seven core themes that make up the priorities, LGNSW would also like to see addressed: Fit for the Future criteria and assessment process recalled in response to Local

Government sector feedback; enhanced incentives for voluntary mergers; ensure voluntary merger processes involve a community vote; enable proper, fully-resourced trialling and evaluation of pilot Joint Organisations before rolling out to other areas; enable county councils full membership of Joint Organisations; guarantee Local Government retains ownership and control of council water and sewerage utilities in regional NSW; and guarantee no imposition of any 'rural council' model.

Voters are set to go to the polls on Saturday March 28 for the state election.

Seniors, grab your free concert tickets

Local seniors are being urged to get in quick next week and grab their free tickets for the 2015 Premier's Seniors Week Gala Concerts.

The Gala Concerts are being held on March 17 and 18 at the Qantas Credit Union Arena (Sydney Entertainment Centre).

Free tickets to the concerts for NSW seniors will be available through Ticketek from 10am this Thursday January 22, 2015.

"The Premier's Gala Concerts are held each year as a gift for the hard-working and well-deserving seniors of New South Wales," Member for Burrinjuck Katrina Hodgkinson said.

"The concerts have a fine tradition of providing a fan-

Angry Inch' and Matt Lee, Star of 'Mary Poppins' and a judge on television's 'So You Think You Can Dance'.

Tickets are available for concerts being held on Tuesday March 17 at 4.30pm and Wednesday March 18 at 10.30am and 2.30pm.

Attendees must be NSW residents aged 60 years of age or older.

People with a lifelong disability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are classified as a senior if they are aged 50 years or over.

Tickets can be booked at www.ticketek.com.au/nswse seniorsweek and in person at participating Ticketek outlets and Westfield Concierge desks.

Bookings are also available by phone on 1300 130 613 for the cost of a local call, however seniors are encouraged to be patient if booking by phone, due to the large volume of calls.

"I recommend booking tickets online if you have access to the internet and email," Katrina said.

"This system is quick and easy, with 65 per cent of concert patrons now obtaining their tickets online."

The Premier's Gala Concerts are a feature event of NSW Seniors Week, a nine-day senior's festival featuring more than 900 events across the state.

NSW Seniors Week 2015 will be held from March 14 to March 22.

People and events

Bumper wildflower blooms at Kosciuszko

Nature lovers looking for something to do these holidays should head to Kosciuszko National Park where the best of summer wildflower blooms are now on display.

The wildflowers of the Snowy Mountains are truly one of Australia's great botanical treasures, and during mid-summer the high plains around Kosciuszko are lit up with a succession of magnificent floral blooms. There aren't many places in the world where you can easily get up to that sort of elevation to observe such a display.

NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) Alpine Ecologist Ken Green reported 67 species currently flowering in Kosciuszko.

Ranger Danny Corcoran said some species were flowering exceptionally well.

"This year, the Candle Heath is the best I've ever seen it," he said. "Rainbow Lake and other short walks provide good ways to experience native Australian alpine wildflowers."

"Stop in and see the staff at the Jindabyne or Tumut visitor centres for advice on which walks suit your needs and how to prepare for

a safe and enjoyable walk."

Family Reunion

Many Gundagai residents will remember the Harrington family who lived in Gundagai many years ago.

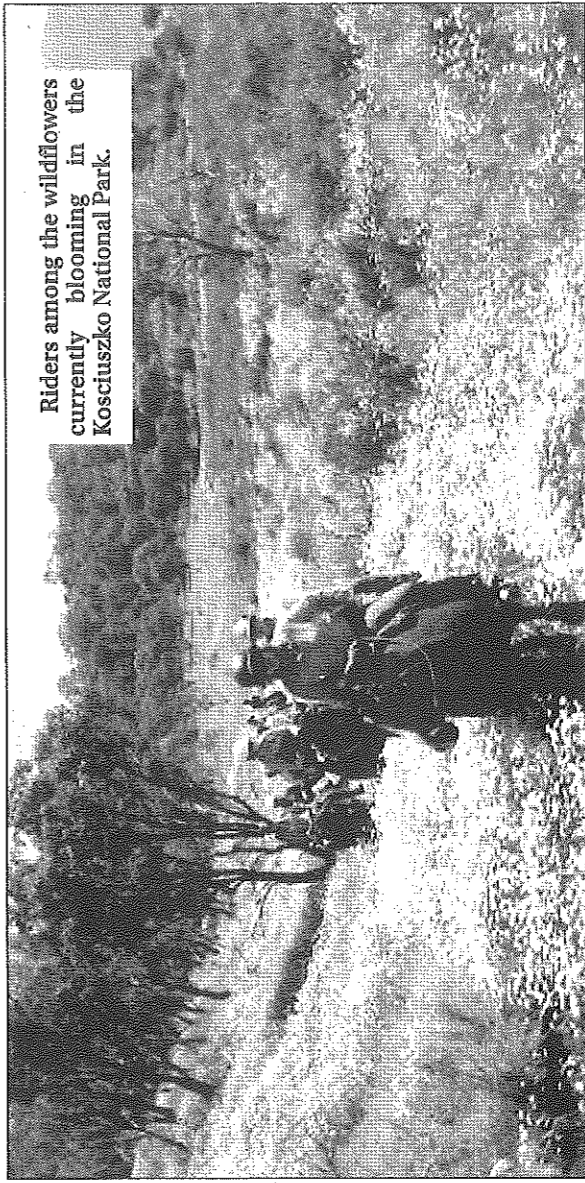
The family has decided to hold their family reunion here in town on Anzac Day where about 60 members are expected to congregate for the morning march before the big catch up.

Vivien in Author Line-up

Muttama author Vivien Thomson will be part of a line-up of writers with a difference at the seminar "From the Frontline", to be held on the Central Coast on February 14.

As a seasoned fire fighter who penned the book "Ashes of the Fire Fighters", Vivien joins with four other emergency service workers who have each written a book detailing the perspective from a first responder at the scene of a critical incident.

With a traditionally closed culture, a 'toughen up' attitude and a public perception of invincibility, it is rare that we hear about what impacts front line emergency services behind closed doors.



Riders among the wildflowers currently blooming in the Kosciuszko National Park.

She will join a policeman, paramedic, doctor and post traumatic stress disorder support group facilitator in discussing their collective works.

The event is being touted as 'an honest look at life as an emergency services worker'.

Christmas in Melbourne

Johnneen Jones spent Christmas in Melbourne with her family who

were again home on leave from Germany. Johnneen's son, Gundagai native Ben Hudson, now takes up the position of CEO of the Executive Board of Rheinmetall Landssysteme GmbH, an engineering

company employing 2000 workers. Ben has been a busy month for him who returned to Germany on 1 January to take up his new position but also to find new housing in Hanover and to begin to pack

up the family's previous home in Dusseldorf. Ben's wife Amber, and daughter Grace, follow Ben back to Germany next week.

MOW Roster

Tuesday, January 20 - Staff; Wednesday, January 21 - Staff; Thursday, January 22 - Staff; Friday, January 23 - Gloria, and Monday, January 26 - Gundagai Real Estate.

Out and about

With Marie Lindley

Sandy and Kathy Tait of "Gunnong Jugrawah", Gobarallog have just returned from a three week stay in England. They were visiting their son Ollie, his wife Amber and their three children at The Haymarket Stud where Ollie works as a Vet. The family also visited Barcelona, in Spain for a few days.

Congratulations to Sara Manton, daughter of John and Jayne Manton of "Oakhill", Tarrabandra, who attained a place at Charles Sturt University at Wagga Wagga with her HSC results. Sara, who was a student at Gundagai High School has decided on a career in teaching and will study Kindergarten to year 12 in Education, and begins her studies on 2nd March.

Garry Hillier, Tenaë Ansell and their son Tye of "Glenrain", Tarrabandra have just returned from Tasmania after two weeks holiday with Tenaë's parents, Rodney and Debbie Ansell of Oulverston.

Whilst there Tye turned one year of age, and was baptised at The Sacred Heart Church, Oulverston. The same church that his mother Tenaë, and his grandmother Debbie were baptised at.

Danny and Viv Lindley and their children Clare, Jack and Lachlan of "Kookoomaroo" have just returned from Maryborough, Queensland, where they spent Christmas with Viv's sister Erica Beggs, her husband, and family. Whilst there they also visited Emerald for a few days.

It was good to meet up with Megan Carpenter of Springvale, Brisbane, elder daughter of Noel and Jenny Hourm who has been spending some time with her parents. Megan's partner Peter Richards had come down with her, but had to return to work. Megan's children Sally, Kris, and Brady also came for a visit as well. On returning home Sally and her husband Michael Dobson and their son Flynn flew out for England where they will stay for four years.

Fleur Williams and her two children Zara and Pearce of Wollongong have been visiting Fleur's parent John and Helen Pearce. Fleur had a great time catching up with old school friends and taking her children to visit Gundagai's tourist attractions, and of course the grandparents John and Helen just

doted on them.

Lisa Peterson, her partner Nat Mackenzie and their cute fourteen month old son William of Port Macquarie have been visiting Lisa's parents John and Norma Peterson. They have all had a great time, especially William, enjoying all the attention from his grandparents.

The Gundagai Riverfest Committee will present the play "Dimboola", featuring an all local cast of characters on Saturday March 28, at 7pm at Gundagai District Services Club. The cost is \$25 per person and the tickets are available at Gundagai Visitor Information Centre, Phone 69440250.

Dimboola was first performed by The Australian Performing Group at La Mama, Melbourne, on 6th July 1969. Dimboola received its first professional production, by The Australian Performing Group at The Pram Factory, Melbourne, on 25th April, 1973.

Dimboola is a celebration of the wedding of Protestant Morrie McAdam and Catholic Reen Delaney in the Mechanic's Institute Hall in Dimboola, Victoria. No holds are barred as the two families come together for the wedding which Jack Hibberd calls "the testing strength of the newly conjugated tribes" The family members try to preserve social grace and dignity in the face of impending disasters. And disasters there are plenty! After the drinks have flowed a little too freely, mayhem and humour ensues when the families exchange insults and punches, as they resolve to come to terms with the situation.

Jim Graham, retired Gundagai High School Science Master, is the Director.

Jim has starred in many Dramatic Society productions in the region. Book early, as you can be assured it will be a night of fun and laughter.

The Gundagai Pastoral and Agricultural Society are seeking a Secretary Office in the main street of Gundagai for the lead up to The Gundagai Show. The office would be required from 10th February to the end of the month. If you know of a place available, please phone Secretary, Ian Clingan 69442232.

If readers have information for this column I would appreciate it if you could contact me on email jrmelindley@westnet.com.au

WITH CR ABB MCALISTER

Gundagai welcomes new citizens this Australia Day
More than 3000 people from over 100 countries will celebrate Australia Day by taking their citizenship pledges at one of the many ceremonies hosted by NSW councils.

Is a very special occasion for new citizens. Welcoming our newest residents to Australia and coordinating citizenship ceremonies on behalf of the Australian Government is one of the most important and valued services that councils provide to their local communities each year, especially on Australia Day.

Citizenship ceremonies are celebrations and Council staff put in a lot of effort to ensure it's a special and memorable occasion. For all residents, this is an opportunity to embrace what it means to be an Australian and get excited by the opportunities that exist in this great country. A full program of the days activities is included in today's paper.

Main Street Upgrade Project
We have appointed Mr Tim Morris, Civil Engineer, on a casual basis to project manage the work. Tim is the former Director of Engineering at Coolamon Shire, overseeing the main street upgrades

enough over the last month with lives not only lost on our roads but the awful events that brought our year to a close. "Australia Day is a great opportunity for the people of NSW to pull together and spend time with their friends and families, let your hair down and have some fun, but make sure if you leave with your family, you get home with your family.

"If you're planning to have a few drinks, driving simply isn't an option so make sure you have a Plan B. Don't be an idiot and don't let a few drinks ruin your life or worse, the lives of other innocent road users." Launching Operation Safe Return, Minister for Police and Emergency Services Stuart Ayres

the necessary requirements to be considered "Fit for the Future", and in doing, has or will, put in place plans that: 1) ensures that financial sustainability can be achieved - noting that financial sustainability includes achieving an operating surplus as well as providing satisfactory levels of service that are acceptable to the community of Gundagai Shire 2) ensures that Council's Asset Management Plan is appropriately structured and has been incorporated into Council's Long Term Financial Plan.

I anticipate that Council at its next ordinary meeting will confirm that it desires to remain as an independent organisation that:

- 1) has managerial and political independence
- 2) has the ability to determine its own rating structure and its expenditure priorities
- 3) has the ability to manage its assets and determine its community direction
- 4) is seen as an independent Council for the receipt of Grants from the Federal Government under the Financial Assistance Scheme.

Council will continue discussions with REROC Councils concerning the formation of a joint Organisation and will continue to participate in regional planning and collaborative arrangements under that banner.

Fit for the Future
Council has had a working group considering its response to the State Government's "Fit for the Future" reform package.

There will be a need to make some changes to satisfy

MAYOR'S MEMO

in Coolamon and their villages. He has been recently doing contract and project management work with the RMS in Sydney. We are delighted to have Tim on board.

Tim is currently doing all the pre-construction planning. Tim has identified a few conflicts with the design and the underground services. Telstra have indicated potential large costs to relocate their services, so a solution to avoid placing the new kerb over these is being dealt with by some minor redesign now. A lot of focus is currently on the physical location and condition of the underground services. Tim will be scheduling the construction activities shortly following.

Council is establishing a Community Liaison Group, made up of members of the community and in particular the business community, to make sure that the project can be planned and delivered in a co-operative and informed manner.

If you are interested in participating please contact Council's General Manager Mr Phil McMurray on 6944 0200.

Fit for the Future
Council has had a working group considering its response to the State Government's "Fit for the Future" reform package.

There will be a need to make some changes to satisfy

Double demerits this long weekend

Ahead of the long weekend, road users are being urged to think twice before speeding, not using a seatbelt and not wearing a helmet as double demerits will be in force from tomorrow, Friday January 23 to Monday January 26 (inclusive).

Minister for Roads Duncan Gay and Minister for Police and Emergency Services Stuart Ayres are asking drivers and riders to look after their mates and help ensure they get home safely.

"It's been a tough week with 12 lives tragically lost in the last seven days on NSW roads, and 24 people killed already this year in crashes - I don't want to see you or your mate included in this number," Mr Gay said. "NSW has been through

said high visibility police would be out in force targeting dangerous behaviour.

"Three people tragically lost their lives during last year's Australia Day period - we don't want to see anyone else pay the ultimate price," he said.

"We know double demerits act as an effective road safety initiative with deaths on our roads during holiday periods reduced by a third since they were introduced, which is why they'll be in force this long weekend.

"Police will be targeting speeding, drink and drug driving, fatigue, mobile phone and seatbelt offences."

Motorists are also reminded that school zones are back in operation from Tuesday January 27.

New kitchen worth thousands on offer

Rural and regional community groups have less than two weeks left to apply to win a kitchen valued at \$30,000 through the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW (RAS) Foundation Community Kitchen Grant.

Courtesy of Masters Home Improvement, the Community Kitchen Grant supports a local organisation wishing to improve their kitchen in an existing com-

online application form.

The RAS Foundation is a charitable foundation that encourages educational opportunities and helps build strong and sustainable rural and regional communities through a range of targeted community grants and scholarships.

Applications close February 2, 2015 and the recipient will be announced in April, 2015.

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Labor adopts no forced merger policy

Council remains opposed to any amalgamation

While Liberal Premier Mike Baird and his ministers refuse to rule out overturning their 'no forced council amalgamations' policy following the election, Labor has declared there will be no forced council amalgamations if it wins government.

If forced amalgamations were to take place there is the prospect Gundagai Shire Council could be merged with Tumut and Tumbarumba councils, or Cootamundra and Harden.

Mayor of the Gundagai Shire Council, Abb McAlister, remains opposed to any mergers believing amalgamation offers no advantage to local councils.

"At the end of the day they can't tell us any benefit to amalgamate and I can't see any benefit," said Clr McAlister.

"It takes away independence, certainly the community doesn't

want it at all. We think we have a sustainable future to stand-alone so that's what we are aiming at, we certainly don't want to amalgamate. It wouldn't be doing our community any favours at all."

Clr McAlister thinks the community would lose much more than a council based in town - they would be losing a town institution. At this stage the Gundagai Shire Council doesn't have a plan in place to fight a merger but if an amalgamation was forced they would do everything they could to stop it.

"We haven't considered that yet because we don't expect to be merged, and if it happens we will certainly consider it but I know there will be an uproar from the community," said Clr McAlister.

"We're totally against any mergers and so is our community."

Tumut Shire Council Mayor

Trina Thomsons respects the position of Gundagai Shire Council but is more open to the possibility of mergers and believes discussions and examination can only benefit the community.

"I understand the apprehension of smaller local government areas. Tumut would probably feel the same if it was tacked onto the end of say Wagga, because you feel you are going to lose that voice or that ability to make decisions for your community," said Clr Thomson.

"It's about looking to the next 10, 20, 30 years and local government really needs to take a hard look at how it delivers services and the standard of services. If nothing else even just the talk of mergers is making local government really look within and that's really positive irrespective of mergers or outcomes."

Clr Thomson does not believe

forced amalgamation is likely but has a staunch belief in the resilience and optimism of local people.

"The government has said all along that they will not have forced amalgamations or forced mergers," said Clr Thomson.

"What's really interesting about Australians all over is we make the best of a bad situation, if there were to be forced mergers in the future I believe when it came down to it our communities would really work together to ensure it didn't have a negative impact."

Tumut Shire Council is confident it will meet all the government 'fit for the future' requirements by the June 30 deadline and are in discussion with boarder councils.

"Tumut Shire Council is already working on understanding what it means to be fit for the future and

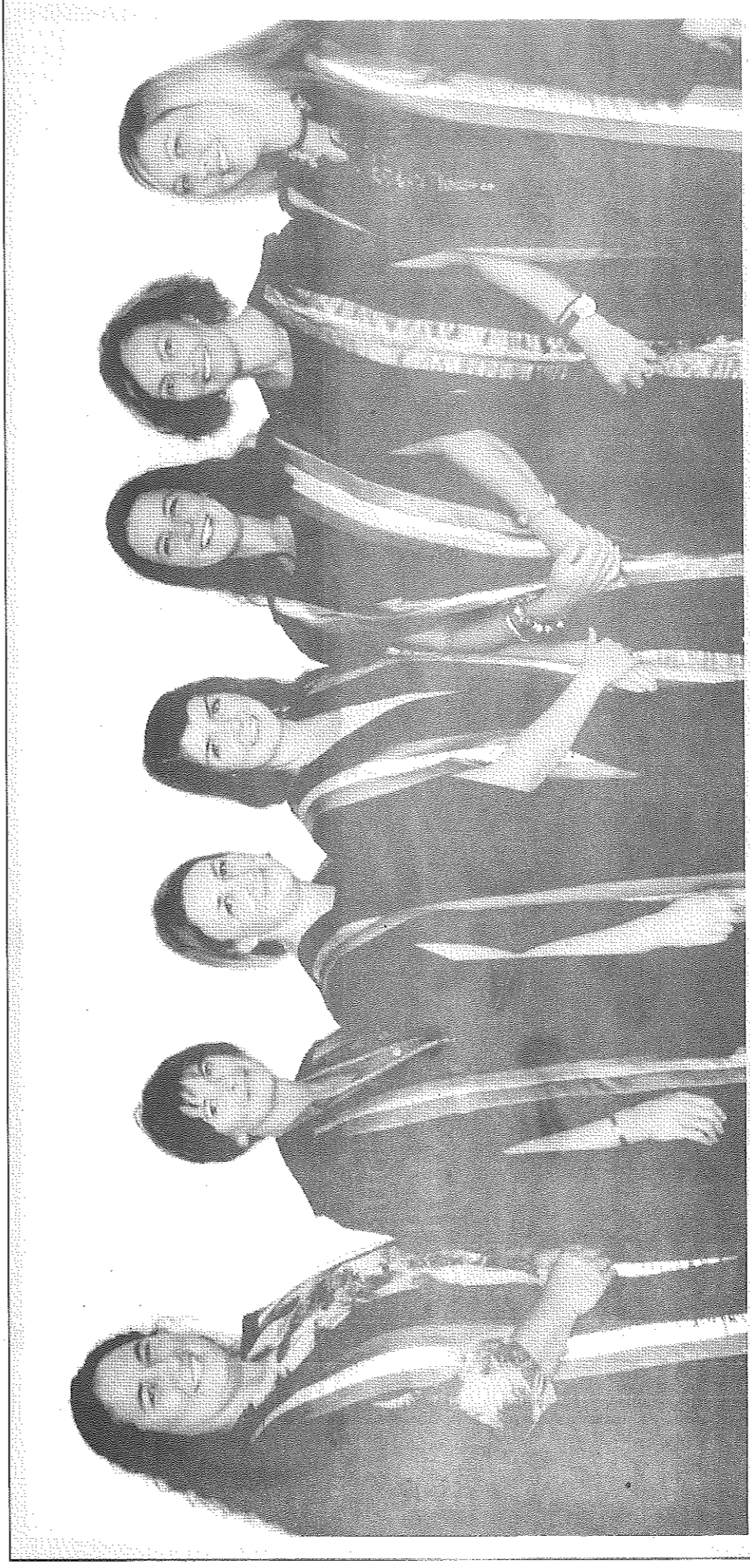
what it means to meet all those targets, we have had approaches with Gundagai and Tumbarumba," said Clr Thomson.

"Tumbarumba are looking at all of their options and I think we'd like to meet with them in the not too distant future and have an open discussion about the benefits or the disadvantages of what a merger may be."

Clr Thomson does not believe community uniqueness would be lost in a merger, forced or not.

"My perspective is that it's the individual community not the local government that makes the community so special and gives it its opportunities," said Clr Thomson.

"Within our own shire, we have our individual towns of Batlow, Adelong, Brungle, Talbingo and Tumut each of those towns still have their own identity."



Gumnut Childcare Centre were strongly represented at the recent TAFE NSW Riverina Institute awards night in Tumut. Gumnut staff members (from left) Amanda Fairley, Ann Lindley, Jodie Crossley, Darcy Hughes, Alana McDonnell, Lindy Dickson and Kristal Graham all graduated with a Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care. Staff at Gumnut are continually making sure they are up to date with all current certificate and diploma's to give the best education to all of their students.

Pool owners urged to get compliant

Gundagai pool owners will be granted a 12-month extension to make sure they have a valid compliance certificate before their property can be sold or leased.

The NSW government recently made the determination for pool owners across the state, following discussions with child safety advocates, councils and industry stakeholders.

"We have listened to stakeholder requests for more time and examined the evidence from certifiers," Minister for Local Government Paul Toole said.

"The evidence showed there was a high failure rate for initial inspections and a heavy demand to make pools compliant."

The extension until April 29 2016 ensures; Homeowners and landlords wishing to make pools compliant but experiencing a wait for a contractor will have sufficient time; Increased numbers of qualified private certifiers to conduct inspections; More certifier courses available to ensure that the high standard of inspections is maintained; and Councils will continue to run risk-based inspection programs, including compulsory three-yearly inspections for strata units, tourist and visitor accommodation, to improve compliance rates and child safety around backyard pools.

Michael Ilinsky from the Royal Life Saving Society NSW said the

Society supported the extension of time to enable the community to complete the necessary works to ensure compliance.

"Royal Life Saving Society NSW will continue to work to protect children in over 320,000 backyard swimming pools across the state," said Mr Ilinsky said.

The president of the Building Professionals Board George Maltabarow also supported the extension, saying it would enable more inspectors to be accredited.

The NSW Government encourages all owners of properties with a pool or spa who are thinking of selling or leasing to apply for a Swimming Pool Certificate of Compliance now.

Robinson Funerals

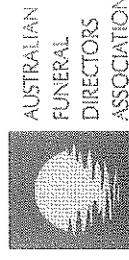


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Scene set for dirty weekend

The Gundagai Showground and surrounding area has once again been transformed into an obstacle course boasting sticky mud pits, freezing pools of ice and a myriad of tricky challenges as the team that brought the town Mud, Sweat and Beers last year returns on Saturday with the Gundagai Mud Muster.

Not a race but rather a physical and mental challenge, in April of last year the mammoth event attracted close to 2000 participants from all over the state and beyond, and while the Mud Muster will be a tad smaller in terms of entrants with 1300 signed up to take part, there will be no less thrills and spills according to event director Mark Stewart.

"Last year was a great success for the town of Gundagai. Lots of people got involved and it was a great community event," Mr Stewart said.

"We don't have as many entrants this year but it's still a very big event for Gundagai and people are coming from all over the place.

"One of the new things we've got for this year is a water slide, the only one of its kind in Australia. We had it at the Shoalhaven Mud Muster and everyone loved it. Participants can expect some of the same obstacles from last year as well as some other new ones. The ice bath is back but twice the size with 40 tonnes of ice."

Participants from last year will also notice that the course this year heads in the opposite direction.

Mr Stewart said an event of this size requires lots of hard work to be successful, and that the support organisers get from the community is what brings them back to Gundagai each year.

"We just couldn't do it without that assistance," he said.



Team Obstacle Racers Australia weren't afraid to get dirty at last year's Mud, Sweat and Beers. The action packed event returns to Gundagai this weekend under a new name - Mud Muster.

No merger talks just yet

Gundagai Shire Council (GSC) still has no immediate plans to talk mergers with Tumut, but are willing to listen in regards to their views on the benefits of a possible merge, as determined at last week's ordinary meeting.

Tumut Shire Council (TSC) requested a meeting with GSC late last year to discuss the state government's Fit for the Future reform, however Council has thus far held off meeting with the neighbouring Council. During a discussion at last Tuesday's meeting, Council resolved to consider meeting with Tumut, only after the neighbouring Council lets Gundagai know the benefits, as they see it, of a merge.

The government's Fit for the Future reform plan requires Councils

to indicate by June 30 whether they want to merge with neighbouring Councils (template 1), stand alone (template 2) or be classified as a Rural Council (template 3).

As part of Council's submission, it must demonstrate that it has consulted with neighbouring Councils.

In a report handed down by the Local Government Independent Review Panel, it recommended 105 of NSW's 152 Councils consider merging, including Gundagai with Tumut and Tumbarumba.

GSC general manager Phil Murray and director of corporate and community services Paul Luff attended an Office of Local Government seminar on February 17 where they were provided with in-

formation regarding the "new" Rural Council model via a presentation by acting head of the Office of Local Government, Steve Orr.

While previous discussions have seen Council lean towards the "stand alone" improvement option, following the presentations by Mr Orr, it is believed the best option for Gundagai is that of a Rural Council.

The Rural Council model is made up of nine characteristics, and while not all nine fit ideally for Gundagai, it is believed it is a good general fit.

Mr Luff told Council at the meeting, "We have to demonstrate that we've consulted with neighbouring councils, even if we go back to the original policy (Rural Council), in order to satisfy those who'll be re-

viewing our application".

Cr Peter Gain suggested TSC prepare a report for GSC before Council consider meeting with them.

"The advice Paul is giving is correct, we need to be able to demonstrate we've at least considered the merger option," he said.

"The way I'd like to see it done is we put it to Tumut to tell us what benefits they see for Tumut, Gundagai and Tumbarumba to merge. They need to tell us what benefits local government will get from that merger. Give us a report beforehand and we'll consider a meeting."

When Cr Mason Crane asked Mr Luff how much it will cost for Council to prove it is Fit for the Future, Mr Luff estimated the cost to

be "well over \$150,000".

Deputy mayor David Graham estimated the cost to be more in the vicinity of \$250,000, but said while it's "an expensive exercise", it will be "worth it if we remain as an individual Council".

Meanwhile, Local Government NSW (LGNWS) says the state government must come clean on forced Council amalgamations well before voters go to the polls on March 28.

LGNWS President Cr Keith Rhoades said the state government had not confirmed whether Councils across the state would be forced to merge under its local government reform package.

Continued page 3


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Candidates named in race for Cootamundra seat

Five candidates will be running for the seat of Cootamundra when Gundagai voters head to the polls for the upcoming state election on March 28.

Cootamundra is the new name for the seat of Burrinjuck, which shifted west to take in parts of the abolished seat of Murrumbidgee. The seat now covers Cootamundra, Gundagai, Young, Cowra, West Wyalong and Narrandera.

Burrinjuck has been held by the Nationals Katrina Hodgkinson since 1999, and she now holds Cootamundra by a 30.3% margin.

While the campaigns of Ms Hodgkinson and Country Labor's Charlie Sheahan have been well documented, another three parties have also put their hands up to contest the seat.

Philip Langfield of the Christian Democratic Party, Rod Therkelsen from The Greens and Elio Cacciotti representing No Land Tax are also battling to secure votes.

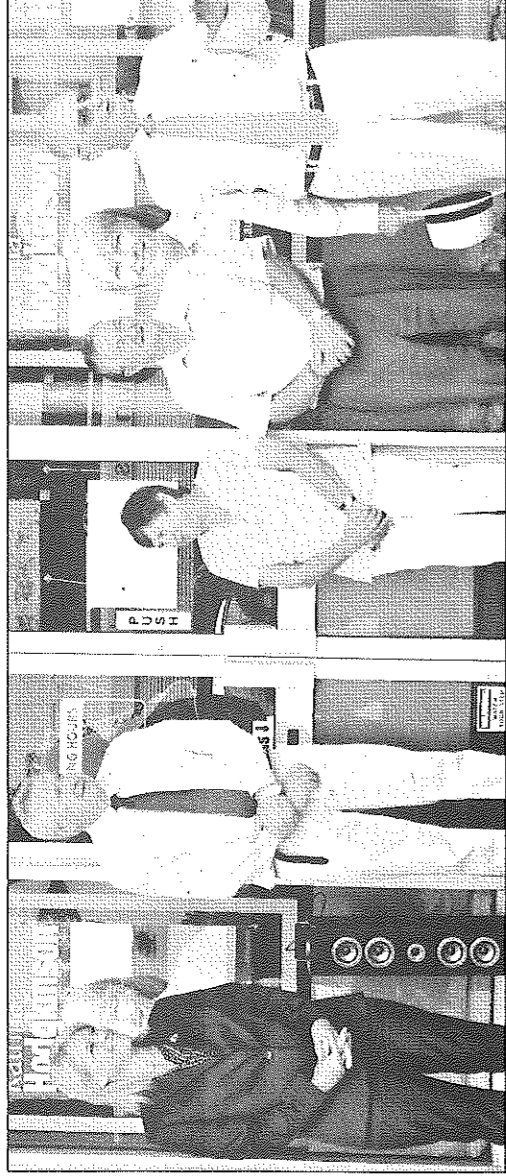
Mr Langfield has been on the edges of the political scene for more than 30 years and had been a supporter of the Christian Democratic Party since Reverend Fred Nile started up the party in the late 1970s.

"The Christian Democratic Party is particularly moral and we stand for Christian standards and values based on the bible," he said.

"We're also a party for the people."

His main focus throughout his campaign will be to bring more support to country areas.

"The main thing I am aiming at is to refocus our politicians, particularly those in the city, back on the



Katrina Hodgkinson (left) with the Hon Ian Armstrong (right) and members of her campaign team at the launch of her campaign for the seat of Cootamundra at Cootamundra on March 4.

system and get back to common sense.

"They have become so city-centered that they forget people exist west of the Blue Mountains. All of our politicians of all walks have neglected rural Australia, it's not just New South Wales."

Coming from a farming background, Mr Langfield said rural Australia is very important because many politicians are talking about Australia being the "food bowl" of Asia.

"To achieve that we've got to upgrade the bush and also we need more water," he said. "Anybody that has ever been to the Murrumbidgee irrigation area and can see the huge potential water can bring to a dry country."

"We are now carting half our grain crop to the seaboard in semi-trailers, which is crazy. We've got to upgrade our rail

standalone. "It's not an easy decision to make, because there's the potential for increased efficiencies versus the potential of additional costs - all these things must be taken into account, which is why any amalgamation must be a voluntary choice."

Cr Rhoades said amalgamations have been unpopular in Western Australia, and local communities were outraged when the Queensland Government forced Council amalgamations in 2007.

Council puts off talks, for now

via forced amalgamations.

"What happens after June 30 is less clear," Cr Rhoades said. "If Councils and communities want to voluntarily merge that's a great thing and it deserves 100 per cent support."

"But if communities do not want their Council to merge, then that decision should not be forced on them - and it certainly shouldn't be forced upon them by stealth."

Cr Rhoades said some LGNSW members had so far indicated they were keen to merge, while others believed they could better serve the people choose."

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Animal control figures questioned

Mayor Abb McAlister wants to know why \$1.888 has been spent impounding animals in the shire, while only \$152 has been collected in impounding fees.

The sum equates to 91 per cent of the 2014/15 budget. Cr McAlister said at a time when

years and his passion was Lighting Design, which has given him a love for the arts.

He believes regional areas of the state also deserve funding to ensure that everyone has access to the arts.

"When you vote Green, the most important thing to remember is that you are voting for an honest government, and an honest party," he said.

"The Greens are a party that does not have its hand in the till, a party with honourable men and women standing in Parliament."

"I am committed to work as a Greens representative to end the culture of political favours and corruption."

Mr Therkelsen secured the second spot on the ballot paper at last week's draw.

No Land Tax representative, Elio Cacciotti, is based at Balmmain in Sydney and his nomination for the seat of Cootamundra comes across as quite a surprise.

Having less contact with country New South Wales, Mr Cacciotti will likely have his work cut out to win votes in the electorate.

One thing which is in his favour, however, is the fact he will occupy the top place on the ballot paper come election day.

Ms Hodgkinson is placed fourth on the ballot paper, while Mr Sheahan is in third position.

Attempts to obtain comments from Mr Cacciotti by the Independent have so far proven unsuccessful.

Voting is compulsory for enrolled electors. The penalty for not voting is \$55.

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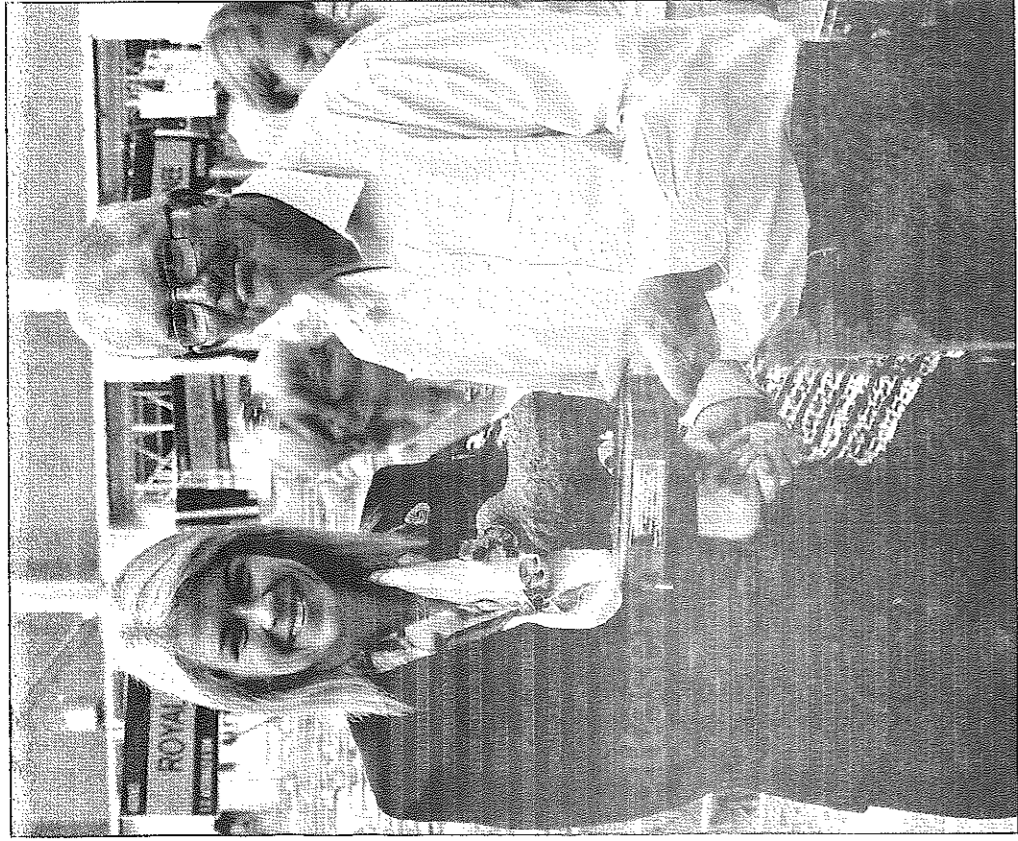
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Katrina Hodgkinson presents the Annual David Merriman Hodgkinson Memorial Trophy for Best Merino Fleece of the Show to Arthur Blewitt at the Royal Easter Show last week. Ms Hodgkinson now takes on the role of Parliamentary Secretary for Southern NSW after losing the Primary Industries portfolio in the recent Cabinet reshuffle.

New role for Katrina

As she takes on a new role as Parliamentary Secretary for Southern New South Wales, Member Elect for Cootamundra Katrina Hodgkinson has thanked the people of New South Wales for their support of her in her role as Minister for Primary Industries over the past four years, after losing the portfolio to Niall Blair.

Ms Hodgkinson was replaced by Mr Blair when the new Cabinet was sworn in at Government House last week. Mr Blair, a former National Party chairman from Goulburn, is also taking on the Water and Lands portfolio.

"It has been an honour and a privilege to serve the people of NSW as a Minister of the Crown," Ms Hodgkinson said.

"I now face a new challenge as the first dedicated government representative for Southern NSW."

Ms Hodgkinson said she had already identified a number of priorities to work on for Southern NSW, including upgrading and installing water infrastructure and improving access to health services.

"I'm also focussed on creating more job opportunities and improved telecommunications particularly to access online education," she said.

"We're fortunate in Southern NSW to have great local MPs and I'll also assist them as required."

Ms Hodgkinson reflected on the important reforms she had made as a Minister in her portfolios, to help people across regional NSW.

"It has been four years of great reform, that have delivered better regional services and restored the vision for the future of Primary Industries which had been lost," she said.

"Last year I released the highly anticipated NSW Agriculture Industry Action Plan, the first of its kind in the history of NSW agriculture, and this was developed in collaboration between industry and Government to ensure the future growth and global competitiveness of the \$12 billion

agricultural sector."

As Primary Industries Minister, she secured \$15 million over four years for Landcare, to renew the successful partnership between the NSW Government and Landcare NSW to improve and manage our natural environment.

"I've overseen drought reform in line with the Commonwealth's Inter-governmental Agreement and developed a package of \$327.5 million for emergency assistance measures for drought relief, providing funding for the popular Farm Innovation Fund, the Rural Support Worker Program, the Rural Financial Counselling Service and Transport assistance for animal welfare," she said.

One of the first things Ms Hodgkinson did as Minister was to establish the specialist 400-strong Biosecurity NSW division within the Department of Primary Industries to lead and coordinate the State's biosecurity activities.

"I released the NSW Biosecurity Strategy 2013-2021 which has led to the creation of a modern Biosecurity Bill. This Bill is ready for passage through the State Parliament when we resume Sittings, replacing 14 pieces of confusing and outdated legislation," she said.

"I oversaw the corporatisation of State Forests to create Forestry Corporation of NSW to improve commercial performance."

Ms Hodgkinson said having received two thirds of the primary vote in the recent state election has been "very humbling".

"I want to thank all residents of the Cootamundra electorate who have shown such strong faith in me," she said.

"I am now looking forward to serving my wonderful constituents in the seat of Cootamundra and representing Southern NSW more broadly."

NSW Nationals Leader and Deputy Premier Troy Grant last week thanked Ms Hodgkinson for her "dedication to the NSW Nationals and for her service to the people of NSW."

In the wake of Gundagai Shire Council's request that neighbouring Tumut provide them with a report outlining the benefits of a possible merge, Tumut has made the decision to continue on as a stand alone council.

Tumut's last ordinary meeting saw councillors resolve to go to the state government with a submission to stand alone, while still being open to merger talks with its neighbours.

Tumut general manager Bob Stewart said that with Gundagai and Tumarumba Councils wishing to stand alone, it left his council with little choice but to also lodge a submission to do the same.

Gundagai Council resolved at its last meeting to have Tumut explain the benefits of a merge in the form of a report rather than a formal meeting, as requested by Tumut late last year. However, at Tumut's March meeting, Tumut Councillor Scott Stevenson said it's not up to Tumut to explain the benefits of a merger to other councils.

"We're here to look after the best interests of the Tumut community," he said, a view echoed by Mr Stewart.

"It's not Tumut Shire Council's role to articulate the possible benefits," Mr Stewart said. "That should be determined following discussions between the merging local government areas."

He said there is no research that provides a strong case for or against mergers, and that it depends "on the specific circumstances and individual perception".

Mr Stewart went on to say that while research suggested mergers could work, the benefits weren't automatic and would depend on leadership. He said a case for not merging could also be made.

The GM dismissed talk of Tumut seeking amalgamation with Gundagai and Tumarumba, saying Tumut supported reform of the local government sector generally in the interests of creating sustainable councils.

In line with Gundagai Council, Tumut would seek to continue on collaborating and resource sharing with other councils.

All NSW councils have until June 30 to submit their proposals as part of the Fit for the Future reform program. A review

panel will then review submissions, with a final determination/recommendation due by October 31.

As part of its submission preparation, GSC this week sought community feedback in the form of a five-question survey, citing community consultation as an integral part of the submission process.

Meanwhile, according to modelling by the Independent Parliamentary Budget Office, a merger of Gundagai, Tumut and Tumarumba councils would cost residents \$10.8 million, and "significantly higher" if forced.

The Independent Parliamentary Budget Office's analysis is based on the Queensland Treasury's review of the cost of council amalgamations undertaken in Queensland in 2009.

The new analysis points to half the costs in changes to IT and communications systems alone.

Pre-election, Labor government candidates across the state described the Fit for the Future policy as a sham, with not one cent of the \$258 million promised to councils in the Coalition's budget or their election promise costings.

Tumut wants to go it alone

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To inspect or not to inspect

Uncertainty continues to surround whether or not the heavy vehicle inspection station at the Gundagai Shire depot will close, with heavy vehicle owners' claims being contradicted by the Roads and Maritime Services (RMS).

At Tuesday's ordinary meeting, Council resolved to turn to Member for Cootamundra Karina Hodgkinson to intervene on their behalf after a local heavy vehicle owner

was told by the RMS that while provisions will be made for an inspection in the short term, heavy vehicle inspections will no longer be carried out at the Gundagai depot.

For buses, inspections are required twice a year, while other heavy vehicles need to be inspected annually.

However, when contacted by The Independent yesterday (Wednesday),

an RMS spokesperson said while inspections at Gundagai are fully booked on May 1, sessions are still available for June 12 and October 9.

"The Gundagai Shire Council workshop facility used by Roads and Maritime Services is still open for heavy vehicle inspections," the spokesperson said.

"It has limitations for some larger vehicles such as stock floats, and

the recently upgraded facilities at the Tumut heavy vehicle inspection station offers a fully equipped facility for these vehicles.

"Roads and Maritime Operations Managers are working directly with local heavy transport and bus operators to help find suitable times to have their larger vehicles inspected at Tumut."

Councillors at Tuesday's meeting said operators having to travel to

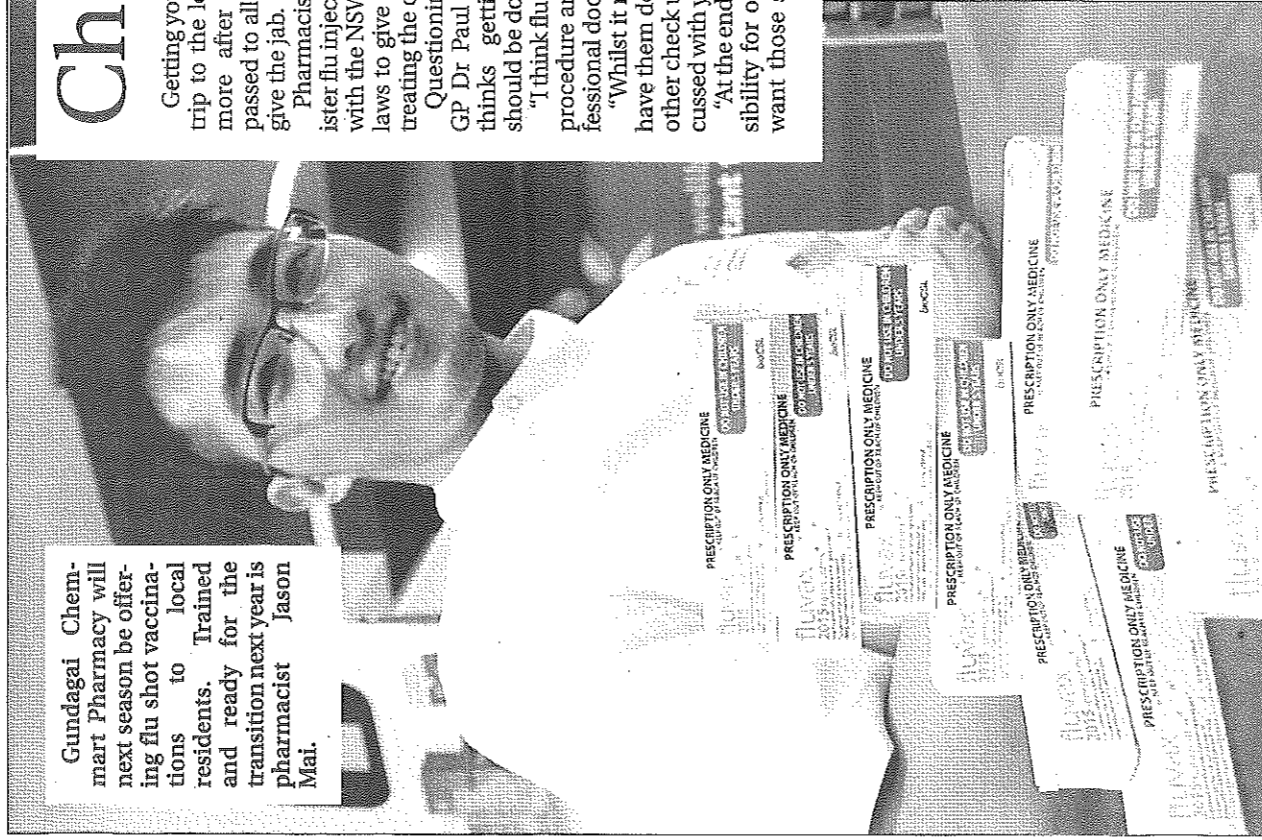
Tumut for inspections will incur increased costs and inconvenience.

"This will be a big burden for these people and a big cost to their businesses," said deputy mayor David Graham.

"We need to push to keep it (the Gundagai depot) open."

Mayor Abb McAlister agreed, saying: "It's just another example of these vital services being taken away from our community."

Gundagai Chemmart Pharmacy will next season be offering flu shot vaccinations to local residents. Trained and ready for the transition next year is pharmacist Jason Mai.



Getting your flu shot may not mean a trip to the local doctors surgery anymore after legislation was recently passed to allow trained pharmacists to give the jab.

Pharmacists are now able to administer flu injections to walk-in customers with the NSW government changing its laws to give chemists a greater role in treating the community. Questioning the new law Gundagai GP Dr Paul Mara said he personally thinks getting the flu vaccination should be done by GPs.

"I think flu vaccinations are a medical procedure and should be done by professional doctors," he said.

"Whilst it might seem a good idea to have them done by pharmacists it's the other check ups and issues that are discussed with your GP that won't be done.

"At the end of the day we take responsibility for our patients and if people want those services to continue they

need to support our doctors.

"If we don't support the number of doctors in our town we will lose them and then jeopardise the 24 hours a day seven day a week care that we currently have."

Although the new law has been passed this month Gundagai Chemmart Pharmacy will not introduce the flu vaccinations in store until next season.

Pharmacist Adam Walsh said they do currently have a pharmacist trained to give the injection but they need more time to get set up.

"We don't want to step on doctors toes but it is something we will be looking at offering our customers next flu season," he said.

"We will try and get to those people that the doctors miss, we want to complement the service doctors already provide.

"I think our service will be more con-

Chemists to soon offer flu jab

venient for people who work different hours as our hours are longer than those of doctors surgeries."

People will not require a script to have the flu vaccination and Mr Walsh said it will be done by fully trained professional pharmacists.

"The more we can offer our customers the better for the community," Mr Walsh said.

NSW Health Minister Jillian Skinner said the approval would ease the burden on local GP clinics where most flu jabs were administered.

Ms Skinner said appropriate accredited training courses have now been developed and consultation has begun to develop an agreed set of standards to support the new regulation.

"Allowing pharmacies to offer this vaccination service has the potential to enhance health outcomes and reduce the burden on NSW hospitals during peak winter periods," she said.

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Potential for user pays at sporting grounds

While Council will contribute to the cost of urgent lighting repairs at Anzac Park and Stan Crowe Oval, they will also investigate the potential for future 'user pays' at local sporting grounds as they continue to put together their case to prove to the state government that they are fit for the future.

At Tuesday's ordinary meeting, Council resolved to contribute one-quarter of the cost of the works with a limit of \$3000 to the Gundagai District Rugby League Football Club after being approached by the club for help in funding the repairs.

Council were told Anzac Park needs five bulbs replaced, while Stan Crowe Oval needs four new lights.

Bulbs, lights, supply and installation, plus crane hire for the Anzac Park lights installation will set the football club back \$12,000.

further \$4500, three extra LED lights, using 400W of power instead of the 1000W currently being used, be installed on the existing poles facing Owen Vincent Oval. Installation of these lights would result in a saving of over half the cost of running the lights.

The club's secretary/treasurer Martin Hay said the club is willing to contribute towards the cost of the repairs, as is Gundagai-Adelong Minor League.

Along with their contribution, Council will also suggest that Essential Energy be approached in relation to using a cherry picker for the installations, and that the soccer club also be approached for a contribution.

Gundagai Shire Council is one of very few councils in the region that currently does not charge for ground usage.

Neighbouring councils strike merger deal

The proposed amalgamation of Cootamundra and Harden shires could leave Gundagai with one less option to fall back on should the state government reject its current preferred option to become a Rural Council.

The merging of Cootamundra and Harden would spell the first unforced amalgamation in the Riverina since the state government provided templates in October last year for councils to review their positions as part of its Fit for the Future reform.

While investigating the possibility of a Cootamundra/Harden merge, both councils determined to invite Gundagai to also consider the possibility of joining them.

According to Cootamundra gen-

eral manager Ken Trethewey, an informal meeting between all three mayors and general managers left open the possibility of further talks after Gundagai had considered outcomes from a Rural Council workshop, and made a determination on which Fit for the Future scenario to aim for.

Cootamundra suggested a formal meeting between the three councils to talk mergers should Gundagai decide to vary its stance.

However after the workshop in February regarding the then newly-released Rural Council model, Gundagai chose this model as its best option.

Like Gundagai, Harden examined the Rural Council model but was not

optimistic that the model would fit the Harden community.

Mr Trethewey said both Cootamundra and Harden see merits in an amalgamation.

"We think that there is a need to increase the size of the council in order to increase the capacity of the council," he said.

"It will be a very large challenge, but I think in the long term it'll be a challenge that's well worth taking on. I think it's actually very exciting for us."

He pointed to a merger leading to more scope to get works done, and said it was not about reducing staff, but rather using staff more efficiently.

Mr Trethewey believes a voluntary

merger will be more beneficial than forced amalgamation.

Harden investigated but rejected a proposal to merge with Young and Boorowa, deciding to instead go with Cootamundra.

The Fit for the Future program aims to ensure the long term financial viability and improved strategic outcomes of the local government sector, with one third of NSW's 152 councils deemed to be in severe financial crisis.

Each council is requested to look at its current situation and consider the future needs of its community, to benchmark themselves against set criteria (sustainability, efficiency, effectiveness and scale and capacity) and to discuss ideas and options

with their community.

Gundagai Council recently sent out a questionnaire to gauge community opinion regarding the reform. The surveys were due to be returned on April 16.

Council says while it is of the view its preferred position is as a Rural Council, its final position will be greatly influenced by the views of residents and ratepayers.

Proposals are due by June 30 for determination by an expert panel and the Minister for Local Government.

If the panel considers that a council's proposal is inadequate, it will recommend to the Minister what actions would be needed to become Fit for the Future.

Westpac move not good news for Gundagai

It will be a huge blow for Gundagai residents' and businesses when the local Westpac in-store branch ceases trading from its current location early next year.

Last week Westpac announced it will pull 147 services from stores to enter a contract with Australia Post.

Gundagai's Westpac in-store branch is currently incorporated with Gundagai Real Estate offering services to customers six days a week.

Gundagai Real Estate owner John Morgan said their branch is owned and operated by them and the closure will be a huge detriment to not only the town but also his staff.

"Our Westpac branch would make up one third of our business, so it is definitely going to hurt," he said.

"The closure will mean a lot for us after only taking over the business 18 months ago.

"It also definitely has the potential to affect our staff numbers."

Although the closure will happen in February 2016 Mr Morgan said the branch will still be operating as normal until then.

"I was disappointed finding out about the closures but I was really disappointed with the fact Westpac didn't have the gumption to talk to their branches before Australia Post went live early last week," he said.

"I don't think they understand how it will affect the local community.

"This branch has been run and owned by locals for almost 16 years, we also support the local community through sponsorship money to local schools, organisations and events such as the show, rodeo and Battle on the Bidgee.

"Unfortunately all these are now going to be affected."

Mr Morgan said the new changes with Australia Post will mean fewer services can be offered to customers and Westpac customers will have only a \$7000 transaction limit and won't be able to ac-



Gundagai will lose its in-store Westpac Bank branch after Westpac last week decided to close 147 services from stores and enter a contract with Australia Post. Disappointed with the announcement was Gundagai in-store branch owner John Morgan and bank teller Sophie Armour.

regional areas, with a \$40 million investment set to upgrade 20 regional banks.

Albury is said to be earmarked for an upgrade next year and Wagga the following.

Mr Sandral said Westpac aligned with Australia Post because it remained a well respected service, which offered customers improved access to the bank's facilities.

Mr Morgan said Westpac's move will not only put a huge burden on their business but will affect many other major retailers in town.

"It will take a big chunk of

our cash flow out of the business," he said.

"Also our big customers such as McDonalds, Subway, KFC and Hungry Jacks all have their change done with us as Westpac customers, now they will have to find another way to get their change or have to look at moving to another bank so they are still able to do this locally.

"Our customers will also lose their Saturday banking service and the longer operating hours we offered throughout the week.

"This move affects not only us but the whole town."

While a number of crime related offences are on the decline for New South Wales Gundagai has bucked the trend with a number of crime figures on the rise.

Figures recently released by the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) showed NSW had recorded a state-wide downward trend in eight offences with only steal from a dwelling trending upwards.

Combing through the local figures Gundagai has recorded a number of increases with break and enter both from a dwelling and a non-dwelling were both increasing at a fast rate.

In 2013 just four cases of break and enter from a dwelling were reported to police while the 2014 number reported was 10 and break and enter from a non-dwelling also increased from six cases to 10.

The only state-wide trend to show a significant upward trend, which was steal from a dwelling, was also reported as an increase in Gundagai figures.

According to state-ment's released with the figures majority of the increase in steal from dwelling appeared to be due to an increase in offences occurring outside residential buildings, including thefts from yards, carparks, garages, verandahs, driveways and sheds.

It stated that common items stolen from these locations outside the house included parts of the house such as hot water systems, mail, letterboxes, bicycles, scooters, tools and garden accessories.

Commenting on the state wide findings, Dr Don Weatherburn said that it was reassuring to

see that only one of the top 17 major offences had increased over the last two years.

"However the continued growth in arrests for amphetamine-related offences is a matter of concern," Mr Weatherburn said.

"The rise in arrests for amphetamine use and dealing is consistent with drug survey data in suggesting a rise in methamphetamine consumption."

On a better note Gundagai's indecent assault and sexual assault numbers were both on the decrease from the previous years figures as was theft from a motor vehicle.

In 2014 eight cases of theft from a motor vehicle were reported to police, a huge drop from 18 cases in the previous year.

Although Gundagai figures didn't follow state-wide trends Member for Cootamundra Katrina Hodgkinson said as a whole the electorate was faring well in the fight against crime.

"There were no changes in the vast majority of offences committed in our local towns and cities over the last two years to December 2014," Katrina said.

"BOCSAR reports some of the most serious offences have remained stable, while some are also falling.

"In the Cootamundra electorate there are some impressive downward trends in crime. "This reduction is great news and I thank the community for looking after one another." Katrina continued to urge community members to assist police in the fight against crime by reporting incidents when they occur and remaining vigilant.

Crime Crises

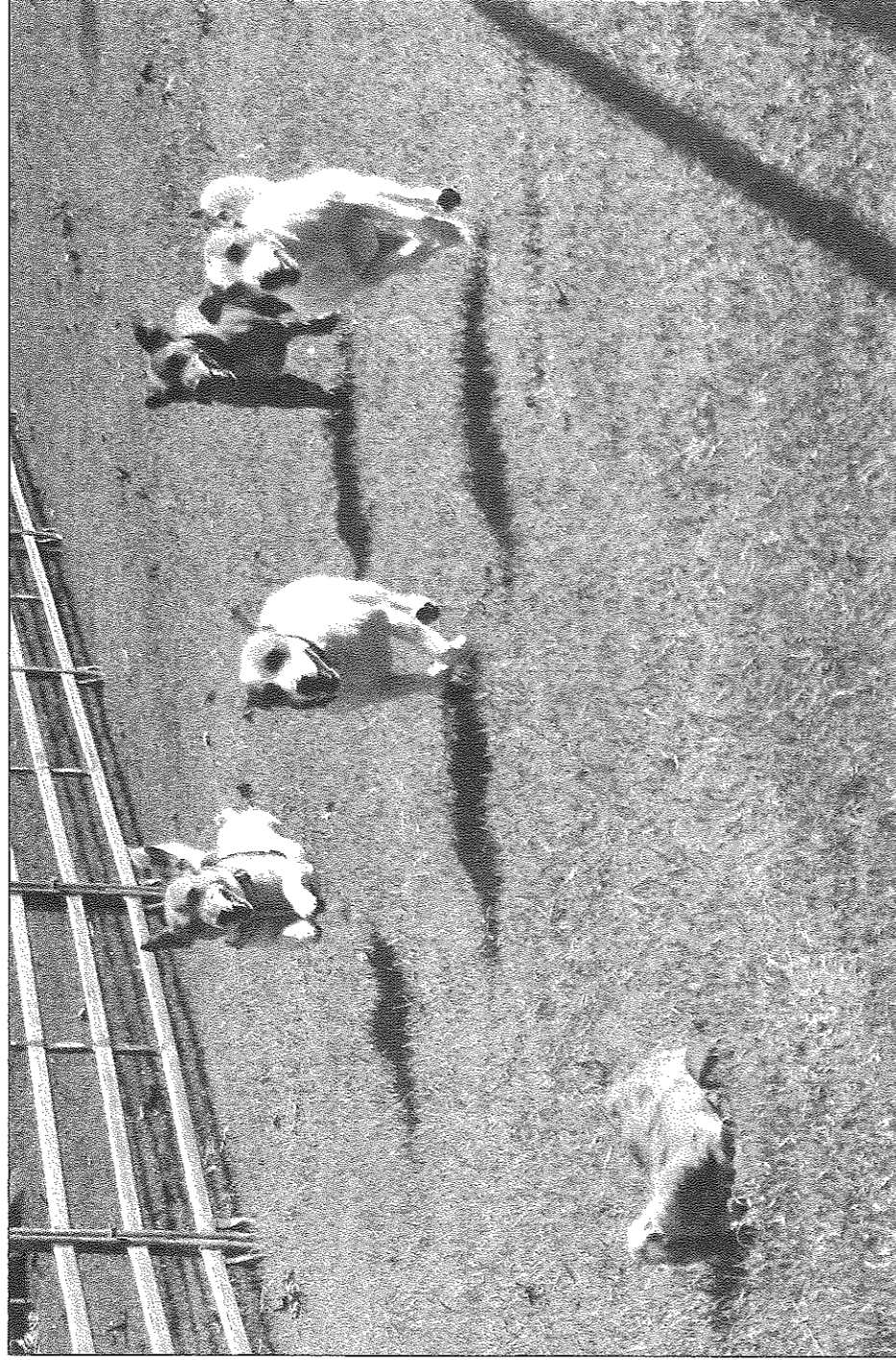
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Nugget retains Golden Bone

Joey Smart trained terrier Nugget has outshone rivals to take home the Golden Bone trophy for the second year in a row at the annual terrier races in Carberry Park last Sunday.

A good crowd turned out in the glorious autumn sunshine to watch the dogs compete in the popular Sundry in Gundy event, rounding off what was a great weekend in town for locals and visitors.

Organised by the Tumbalong Memorial Hall committee each year as a fundraiser, committee member Dan McDonnell thanked owners (and participants) for continuing to support the event. "It's a great family fun day and just good entertainment," said Dan.

Nuggett beat out Abbee Bethune, Penny Hourm and Keny Britt in the final to take home back to back trophies.

When asked if Nuggett will return next year to defend his title, Joey said, in the spirit of good sportsmanship, he might give him a year off to give another pooch a chance to win.

The money raised on the day will go towards the upkeep of the Tumbalong Hall.

LEFT: Return champion Nugget Smart comes home strong in the final ahead of Abbee Bethune, Penny Hourm and Keny Britt.

Are we fit for the future?

IPART appointed to assess council's submission

Gundagai Shire Council will have their Fit for the Future (FFTF) proposal assessed with "consistency, fairness and impartiality" according to Minister for Local Government Paul Toole.

The Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) has been appointed as the Expert Advisory Panel that will assess all NSW councils' proposals demonstrating how they meet the state government's FFTF reforms criteria.

IPART will be supported by South Australian local government expert John Comrie.

Mr Toole said IPART was appointed after careful consideration. "I am pleased that councils have been working hard on their submissions, examining their capabilities and opportunities to improve," Mr Toole said.

"NSW needs councils that are financially sustainable and able to deliver efficient and effective services."

"The Fit for the Future process is a chance for the state and local government to continue to work together to make these changes a reality."

The minister encouraged all councils to continue to prepare their Fit for the Future submissions and consult with their communities on proposals for change.

IPART is seeking submissions on its proposed approach and will hold public forums in four locations across NSW during May, including Wagga Wagga (May 21), before finalising the Assessment Methodology. Councils are then

required to submit their proposals by June 30, with further opportunities for community comment and additional information to be sought from councils before IPART makes its recommendations to the Minister in mid-October.

"Our methodology proposes that in cases where the Independent Local Government Review Panel (ILGRP) recommended a merger, councils not proposing a merger in their applications would need to provide a sound argument that it is not the best option in their case," IPART Chairman Dr Peter Boxall said.

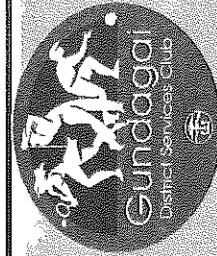
"We are also seeking feedback on how benchmarks should be assessed including what are reasonable timeframes for councils to improve their performance to reach these benchmarks, and how

we should consider the social and community context and the community consultation undertaken by each council.

"Our goal is to establish a transparent process where councils are aware of whether they are likely to be rated as either 'fit' or 'not fit' under the Fit for the Future criteria, and are consulting with their communities on that basis before they lodge their proposals in June."

The ILGRP in its findings recommended Gundagai either merge with Tumut Shire Council and Tumburumba, or become a Rural Council.

With council currently setting its sights on becoming a Rural Council, it says its final determination will be greatly influenced by community viewpoint.



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 Joe Lico - Secretary/Manager

Special meeting over merger

Mayor Abb McAlister and Cr Mike Kingwill met with Member for Cootamundra Katrina Hodgkinson at Parliament House in Sydney yesterday to express council's concern that the Fit for the Future (FFTF) benchmarks have changed at the last minute.

At Tuesday's ordinary meeting, general manager Phil McMurray told council he had "significant concerns that the goal posts have changed at the eleventh hour" with changes as to how group B councils (to which Gundagai belongs) might be assessed.

With the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) announced as the independent body to assess council's FFTF submission, Mr McMurray said council was previously told as long as they met the criteria of being a stand alone Rural Council, that's how they should submit their FFTF proposal.

"Now IPART want a lot more work done on the merger before we're even considered as a Rural Council," Mr McMurray said.

"Essentially, IPART want council to put together a business case at the eleventh hour as to why we don't want to merge."

Council resolved to put all of its efforts into meeting the changed criteria, and to let its state member Ms Hodgkinson know of its concerns, while asking her what she proposes to do on behalf of council.

The results of a recent community survey saw 78 per cent of respondents against Gundagai merging with a neighbouring council.

With council proposing to have its draft proposal nearing completion in early June, they say a public meeting will be convened to further engage the community in the preparation of a FFTF submission.



Local ladies (seated from left) Rhonda Sands, Helen Reid, Cecily Daley, Jenny Hoare and Shirley Brooke enjoy morning tea and a coffee served by Hope Cooper from Hope's Place while chatting about the recently released budget.

Tough budget had to happen

A group of Gundagai women believe they'll be largely unaffected by Tuesday night's federal budget.

Chatting over coffee yesterday the ladies said it was a tough budget but it had to happen if the government is to start reigning in its large deficit.

Well known Gundagai lady Cecily Daley said her thoughts on the budget were that it wouldn't impact too much on her.

"There's a lot that the new budget will affect such as families and self funded pensioners but for me there's no real upsets," she said.

"I think the budget needs to be tightened.

"I give them (the government) credit about what they're doing and I feel sorry for (the federal treasurer) Joe Hockey, whatever he does he is always put under the microscope."

Also pleased with the government's move to reduce its deficit was Jenny Hoare who said changes had to be made.

"They (the government) definitely have to do something as there is so much debt," she said.

Activist to attend ice forum

Kay Hull, Chair of the Australian National Advisory Council on Alcohol and Drugs, is set to attend the Gundagai community drug forum tonight.

According to the people behind the event, the Gundagai Dual Diagnosis Action Group (GDDAG), Mrs Hull's attendance is a measure of how seriously the issue is being taken by the government. It also confirms the commitment the government has to working with communities to put an end to the rise of the drug methamphetamine or "ice".

"Kay has agreed to speak generally about the drug at the forum and it will be great to have a representative from the National Drug Advisory Council there," said GDDAG member Cindy Smith.

Speaking at a council meeting on Tuesday, Ms Smith said since going public with the forum, the GDDAG has had a lot of interest from community members wanting to know what strategies they can use in tackling the drug.

"We are hoping that we can at least inform and educate the community so they can then go out with the tools to be able to talk to other people," she said.

Ms Smith said feelings of angst within some portions of the community regarding the forum should not undermine the event, which should instead be seen as being a positive step in dealing with a very serious problem.

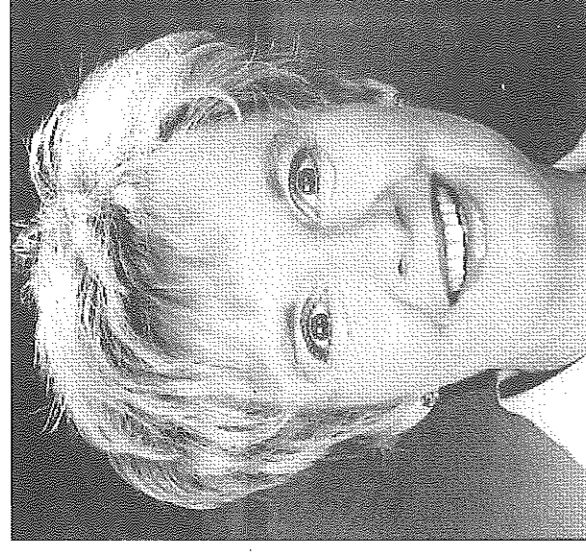
"We've had some comments that the forum is just making Gundagai look bad, look as if we have a huge drug problem," she said.

"We're not saying Gundagai has any bigger drug problem than anywhere else, but we are saying that we are a community that is standing up to fight this and are not sticking our heads in the sand."

Gundagai mayor Abb McAlister congratulated Ms Smith and the GDDAG on bringing such a forum to the community.

"It (the forum) was mentioned at a (recent) REROC meeting and I've had other shire mayors tell me what a great initiative they think it is," Cr McAlister said.

"I think we'll see other forums like this one popping up all over the region, taking Gundagai's idea and running with it which is great."



Chair of the Australian National Advisory Council on Alcohol and Drugs, Kay Hull, will speak at a community drug forum in Gundagai tonight.

Late last year the Australian Government tasked its reshaped advisory council on drugs and alcohol to examine as a priority the issues facing Australia from methamphetamine use, and in particular the rising use of the drug ice.

"Tackling the growing ice problem is a major priority for the government and as a first step I will be asking our advisory council to look at this issue as their first work priority," Assistant Minister for Health Fiona Nash said at the time.

"We are responding to community concerns and evidence on the ground that ice is causing widespread devastation and destruction, particularly affecting young people.

"It's destroying families, children and communities across Australia - we want this to stop."

The free forum commences at 6pm tonight (Thursday) at the Gundagai High School MPC.

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Fit for the Future “a farce” says MP....

The NSW Government has finally tipped its hand after the Minister for Local Government this week told Parliament the Government would not support a motion against forced amalgamations, according to Local Government NSW (LGNWS).

LGNWS President Keith Rhoades said the statement was the first time the Government had revealed its true intentions for the future of Local Government.

The admission came during a debate on a motion by Independent Sydney MP Alex Greenwich, that “This House opposes the amalgamation of councils that are financially sustainable and have the support of their communities”.

“That debate was crunch time, and Local Government Minister Paul Toole stood on the floor of the Parliament and stated unequivocally that the Government would not support a motion opposing the forced amalgamation of councils,” Cr Rhoades said.

“It really does suggest that the whole Fit for the Future process is simply tick-a-box, with the Government firmly committed to diluting local democratic representation for purely ideological reasons.”

MP Alex Greenwich described the Fit for the Future program as “a farce, so the Government can claim it consulted and assessed”.

“It was instructive to see the arguments trotted out against the motion, which included claims that amalgamations would “drive down rates”, that “bigger is better”, and that forced amalgamation is “a dead-set non-issue” for our communities,” Cr Rhoades said.

“It was also interesting how often speakers against the motion adopted a straw man argument, suggesting that the Local Government sector was opposed to any kind of reform.”

“I can assure the community and the Government this is not the case: Local Government welcomes reform that genuinely improves outcomes for residents and ratepayers.”

“What the sector does not support is amalgamations being forced on Councils who are able to show they are financially sustainable, and whose communities have stated clearly that they wish to continue to have grass roots representation via stand alone Councils.”

With the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) on Tuesday announcing 21 NSW councils successful in their applications for special rate variations, Minister Toole described the applications as further proof that local government reform is needed.

He said it was concerning that so many councils in both Sydney and regional NSW were struggling financially.

“Councils have told IPART that without significant rate increases they would not be able to provide essential services and reduce their infrastructure backlogs,” said Mr Toole.

“In the last two years alone, one third of the State’s councils have asked ratepayers to pay more. Councils are advising IPART these rate rises are to repair infrastructure and that they would be financially unsustainable without them.”

“This is not viable in the long-term.”

Minister Toole said the NSW Government had been working in partnership with councils on its Fit for the Future reforms.

“The Fit for the Future reform process aims to ensure councils are able to deliver more infrastructure, better services and put downward pressure on rates,” he said.

“We’re trying to strengthen the local government sector so we have a better system of local government and to ensure mums and dads and families don’t continually have to pay more for basic services.”

“The community deserves every council in NSW to be looking at its financial sustainability, scale and capacity and asking how we can deliver a stronger, smarter local government sector for NSW.”

....but Tumut still wants to talk

While Gundagai Council representatives met with Tumut counterparts last week for discussion regarding their shires’ futures, mergers were not on the agenda.

Gundagai Council, while happy to continue resource sharing with neighbouring councils, has made clear its preference to remain a stand alone council in the face of the state government’s Fit for the Future reform.

Tumut mayor Trina Thomson said while Tumut recognises and respects whatever decision Gundagai Council resolves, she also suggested there is still time ahead of the June 30 submission deadline for councils to “seriously consider” the independent report handed down that recommended Gundagai merge with Tumut and Tumbarumba, or become a (stand alone) Rural Council.

Ms Thomson said Tumut Council has always been amenable for the three councils to meet either individually or collectively to consider the options outlined in the independent review.

However Gundagai representatives general manager Phil McMurray, mayor Abb McAlister and deputy mayor David Graham preferred to take the meeting on the basis that discussion relate to resource sharing between the councils.

“Gundagai Council’s preferred position is not to merge and stand alone, this has been strongly articulated to myself at previous council meetings and through our community survey. Indeed template three (Rural Council) is the path we are heading down at the moment,” Mr McMurray said.

He said while Gundagai and Tumut Councils are looking at an opportunity to work together on the Gocup Road upgrade, there are also other possibilities where shared resources may provide better value and efficiencies for both councils.

“The outcomes from these arrangements, if any, may provide a very positive message to the state if included in both (Gundagai and Tumut’s) submissions to the expert panel,” Mr McMurray said.

The Gundagai Show will remain one of the town’s biggest and best annual attractions with a strong and passionate committee behind it.

Earlier this month it was announced Griffith, one of the Riverina’s biggest shows, was being canned for 2015, citing lack of volunteers and costs.

The Griffith Show was put into recess for 12 months and has been forced to cancel their 95th show, which was set down for October 4.

Despite the terrible news for Griffith, Gundagai is quite the opposite with their annual general meeting set down for late next month.

“We are really lucky we have a lot of interest and help from the younger generation,” Gundagai Pastoral and Agricultural Society president Dan Lindley said.

“In our society we have a lot of generations of families volunteering.

fair idea who will be the next president at the AGM as the Gundagai Pastoral and Agricultural Society instigated a program where the junior vice president is groomed for three years before stepping into the lead role.

“It’s a great program, we always know that we are going to host a show and the outgoing president then becomes the senior vice president to lend a hand to the newly elected president.”

“We definitely know that there will be a show for the next three years.”

The Gundagai Show is a great event for the town and would reign as one of the biggest annual events held at the showground.

“We live in a wonderful rural community, and that certainly reflects in our show,” Dan said.

“The show is a huge part of our community and we all work well together.”

“We have a lot of hard working volunteers and definitely for the next few years we are pretty safe.”



Gundagai Pastoral and Agricultural Society president Dan Lindley say they have a strong and passionate committee behind the Gundagai Show.

“At the moment the Lindley’s have three generations as do the Elliott’s and the McDonnell’s and Elworthy’s have two generations supporting the society.” Dan said they already have a

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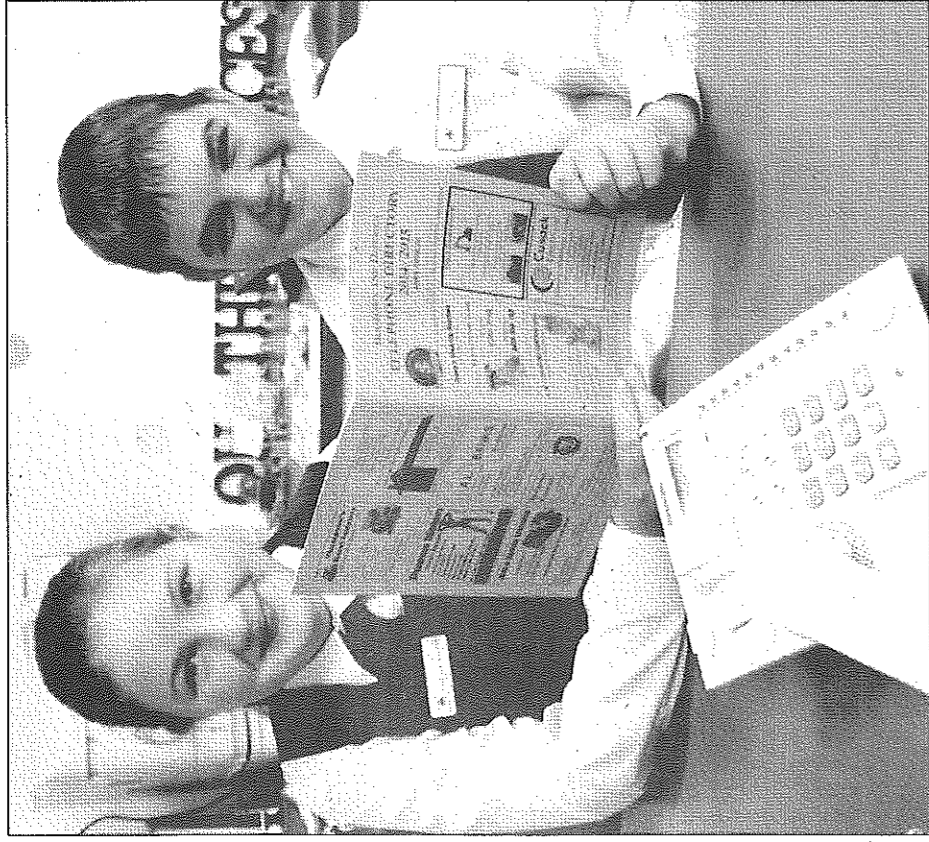
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Gundagai St Pat's school captains Josie Kingwill and Max Luff are encouraging all locals to get behind their latest school fundraiser, an updated local phone directory.

Get your number listed

A lot can change in five years and that's how long since the last local and district telephone directory has been updated.

St Patrick's Primary School is taking on the challenge to produce a new local phone book with up to date information on home phone numbers and business contacts.

As part of their 2015 fundraising program the new directory will be slightly smaller than previous directories but will be a nice compact size for your home or handbag at 16cm by 22cm.

Co-ordinating the new directory is St Pat's Fundraising Committee member Paula Cotterill who says the new directory will feature not only Gundagai's larger businesses but many of our smaller businesses such as fence contractors, computer experts and handy-men.

"The directory will include emergency services, community services, local businesses and residential contact details," Mrs Cotterill said.

"We will be sourcing details for the white pages section from the current NSW regional white pages directory. However, if your details have changed or you wish to add additional details such as your mobile number then people are urged to complete the directory form."

Mrs Cotterill said local residents should have received the form to update their details in the mail over the last week and urges anyone who would

like their updated information to appear in the new book to get in quick before the cut off date of June 19.

"Don't miss this opportunity to update your details in the 2016/2017 edition of

Gundagai and District Local Telephone Directory.

"Advertising spaces are now available to local businesses and those who service the Gundagai area for the new edition which is set to be printed by October.

"This is a great opportunity for local businesses, big or small, to promote their business and make sure they are at the fingertips of everyone who has a copy of this book in their home or shop."

Areas included in the telephone book are Gundagai, Brungle, Nangus, Coolac, Tumbalong, Adjungbilly, Juringong, Burra, Jackalass, Reno, Darbalara, Tarrabandra, Gocup, Muttama and Gobaralolong.

If you would like to place an advertisement in the local directory or would like to discuss your options further or have any questions please don't hesitate to call Paula on 0422 524 858 or email Paula at cottes5@hotmail.com

All personal information will remain the property of St. Patrick's Primary School and will only be used for the update to the telephone directory.

Information about how you can purchase the phone directory will be made available later in the year.

Police news

A 20-year-old Tumut man has received several fines after he was found in the possession of explosives whilst on land without permission in the Adjungbilly area.

His fines include handle explosives/precursors without licence/appropriate licence, possess knife in public place, trespass and use of unregistered/uninsured vehicle after the owner detected him on a property.

The offence occurred on May 26 and comes as police increase their presence in the area due to recent reports of illegal hunting and trespassing.

In other police news, officers attached to Cootamundra Highway Patrol stopped a 24-year-old man from Young on the Hume Highway at Gundagai where he failed a roadside breath test last Friday.

The man later produced a reading after breath analysis that placed him in the low range PCA and he was charged accordingly.

While Gundagai Shire Council continues to make its case to the State Government to remain a stand alone council, Harden mayor John Horton sees benefits in a three-shire merger between Harden, Cootamundra and Gundagai.

Cootamundra and Harden Councils are proposing to merge and would receive \$5 million incentive from the State Government to do so. A three-shire merge would see that sum raised to \$11 million.

Harden Council previously undertook an investigation of a merger with Cootamundra and Gundagai, with Gundagai thereafter indicating its intention to stand alone.

After considering the possibility of retaining its own stand alone status, Harden decided this would not be in the best long-term interest of the shire. A subsequent investigation of the potential to merge with Cootamundra resulted in their current stance.

Mr Horton said Gundagai mayor Abb McAlister has said Gundagai will stand alone "from day one", however he believes if Gundagai doesn't make a decision to merge and the State forces a merge, Gundagai could end up with Tumut.

"Which I believe is exactly what they (Gundagai) don't want," Cr Horton said.

Community consultation with Harden residents has reportedly been overwhelming in support of the idea of a merge with Cootamundra.

Cr Horton said a merger between Cootamundra and Harden has made sense for a long time, adding there are savings to be made in pooling resources.

He said the two communities don't need two mayors or two general managers.

Meanwhile, Shadow Minister for Local Government Peter Primrose has welcomed a parliamentary inquiry into Fit for the Future reform.

"This controversial process must be scruti-

nised," he said. "The Baird Government can no longer ignore the concerns of councils and local residents when it comes to amalgamations."

"The Liberal Government will have to finally listen to the community and address legitimate questions about the fairness of his process."

The enquiry will be chaired by the Hon Paul Green MLC of the Christian Democratic Party, and includes representatives of the Liberal Party, the Australian Labor Party and the Greens.

"The inquiry was established to closely examine the 'Fit for the Future' reform agenda for local government in this state, including the financial sustainability of the local government sector," Mr Green said.

"We are aware of real concerns relating to potential council amalgamations and further cost shifting, so this inquiry is timely and essential to give local government and communities the opportunity to discuss these significant reform proposals."

"The committee has identified a number of aspects of the Fit for the Future agenda that we wish to explore in detail. These include the potential impact of forced mergers on rates, as well as on local infrastructure investment and maintenance. We also wish to examine how any forced amalgamations may affect the needs of regional and rural councils and communities, especially in terms of the impact on local economies and the reality of having local issues addressed."

The committee will take submissions from interested groups, organisations and individuals until July 5, and anticipates holding public hearings in Sydney and regional New South Wales shortly thereafter.

For further information about the inquiry or to make a submission, please go to www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/gpsc6 or call (02) 9230 3534.

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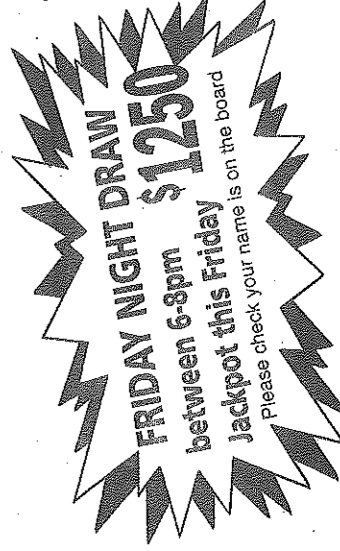
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GUNDAGAI SHIRE COUNCIL PUBLIC MEETING - "FIT FOR THE FUTURE"

THURSDAY, JUNE 18, 2015

An invitation is extended to all residents in the Gundagai Shire Local Government Area to attend a public forum to discuss Council's response to the State Government's reform agenda of Local Government titled "Fit for the Future".

The reform process is being guided by the review of the sector undertaken by the Independent Local Government Review Panel in 2012 and 2013. The Panel determined a preferred option for Gundagai Shire Council to "Merge with Tumut Shire Council". The Panel provided a second option to establish as a "Rural Council in the Riverina Joint Organisation".

This is your opportunity to listen and have your say regarding Council's future.

The Public Forum will be held at 6pm on Thursday, June 18, 2015 at the Gundagai District Services Club.

Phillip McMurray
 General Manager
 Gundagai Shire Council

Public Notices

COOLAC-TUMBLONG RAIL TRAIL Supporter's Group

Monday, June 15
 Lot's Family Hotel
 Meeting Room
 6-7pm

Public Notices

GUNDAGAI SHIRE COUNCIL INTENTION TO IMPLEMENT ALCOHOL FREE ZONE

The Council has received an application and intends to extend for a further four (4) years the alcohol-free zone over the following areas:

- Sheridan St between West and Virgil St;
- Middleton Drive, south to and on the Prince Alfred Bridge across the Murrumbidgee;
- All Tumut St;
- Mount St to Ridge St;
- Byron St from Sheridan St to Morleys Creek.

Representations and objections are invited from any person or group within the area listed and will be received by the undersigned up until 4pm, Tuesday, June 30, 2015.

The application may be inspected at the Council Chambers, Gundagai, during normal office hours.

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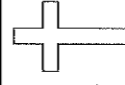
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Mobile Mat: 0419 449 202

Mobile Scott: 0418 474 904

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Church Services

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 11am, 2nd and 4th Sundays, St Paul's Nangus.

Sunday 5pm St James, South Gundagai.
 5th Sunday, T.B.A.
 10am, 1st and 3rd Wednesdays, St James South Gundagai.

The Parish is also available for Weddings, Funerals, Baptisms and other services.
 Phone the office: 6944 1063.

BAPTIST CHURCH

Family Service

9.30am Sunday Youth Group.
 1.30pm to 3.30pm Sunday Old School Centre.

CATHOLIC

Mass times for St. Patrick's Parish, Gundagai: Saturday Vigil 6pm.
 No Mass or Liturgy celebrated on a Sunday.

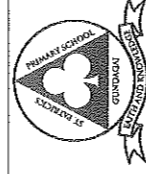
St James, Adelong: Mass 1st Sunday of the month 10am.

St John the Evangelist, Juglong: Mass 3rd Sunday of month, 11am.

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INVITATION TO ADVERTISE

Advertising spaces are now available to local businesses for the new edition of St Patrick's Primary School's Local Telephone Directory, which will be printed late 2015. It will include residential and business contact details.

Please see our website www.spg.nsw.edu.au for more details or call our coordinator, Paula Cotterill on 0422 524 858

All contact details and advertising forms must be submitted by Friday, 19 June 2015

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MONDAY, JUNE 15, 2015

\$1.10 (includes GST)



A gas heater is believed to be the cause of a devastating house fire in South Gundagai on Friday.

Fire devastates family

A South Gundagai family have been left devastated and homeless after fire completely destroyed their home on Friday morning.

Fire crews were called to the blaze in Tom Street, South Gundagai at about 9.45am and found the home already well alight.

No one was hurt in the blaze and with quick thinking from one neighbour, whose young daughter had noticed smoke coming from the house, had enough time to rescue the family's pet dog from the burning home before calling triple zero.

NSW Fire and Rescue Southern Highlands duty commander, Inspector John Andrews, said it was believed a gas heater was the source of the fire.

Mr Andrews said firefighting crews were forced into defensive mode to contain the fire from spreading to other houses.

Three NSW Fire trucks from Gundagai, Cootamundra and Tumut responded to the call out, as well as one truck from Tumut Rural Fire Service.



The house was totally destroyed in the blaze.

Also on hand to divert traffic at the scene of the fire were police and ambulance crews.

It took firefighters almost two hours to

Continued page 4

Have your say in shire's future

Gundagai Shire Councillors are urging residents to attend a vital community consultation this week, and have their say regarding the shire's future.

The forum will be held at the District Services Club this Thursday, June 18, at 6pm.

Gundagai Council has until June 30 to submit its proposal demonstrating how it meets the NSW Government's Fit for the Future reforms, with Fit for the Future methodology released last week. The submission will then be assessed by the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART), as the appointed Expert Advisory Panel.

The worst possible scenario for Gundagai is that it could face a merge with one or more neighbouring councils.

Speaking at Council's ordinary meeting last week, general manager Phil McMurray said community consultation on structural options for the Council forms a key part of the methodology that will be assessed.

"The consultation will be a good opportunity for the community to have their say, whether or not they think we're going down the right path, and that consultation will play a big part in the way we're assessed," Mr McMurray said.

Councils are required to consider the recommendations of the Independent Local Government Review Panel (ILGRP) as the first step of meeting the methodology.

In Gundagai's instance, the Panel determined a preferred option to merge with Tumut Shire Council, and a second option to establish as a Rural Council in the Riverina Joint Organisation.

To meet the scale and capacity criteria in the assessment, Council will need to merge or present a 'Rural Council Proposal' which satisfies the Rural Council characteristics, demonstrate that it considered the merger option but it was not a feasible option to pursue - supported by a business case - and clearly demonstrate strategies it plans to undertake to achieve real change.

"We're working towards that at the moment," Mr McMurray said while adding that scale and capacity is the threshold criteria councils must meet, prior to demonstrating how it meets the other three criteria - sustainability, effective infrastructure and service management, and efficiency.

IPART chairman, Dr Peter Boxall, said IPART will consider alternatives if councils can demonstrate that they will deliver benefits to the community that are at least as good as the ILGRP recommendations.


Within the Fit for the Future criteria are measures and benchmarks as set by the state government. There are targets which must be achieved around sustainability, effective infrastructure and service management, and efficiency.

Mr McMurray said IPART will make a holistic assessment whether councils have the capacity to deliver what their communities need in the future.

An extraordinary meeting of council has been set down for June 26 for Council to consider their Fit for the Future final proposal.

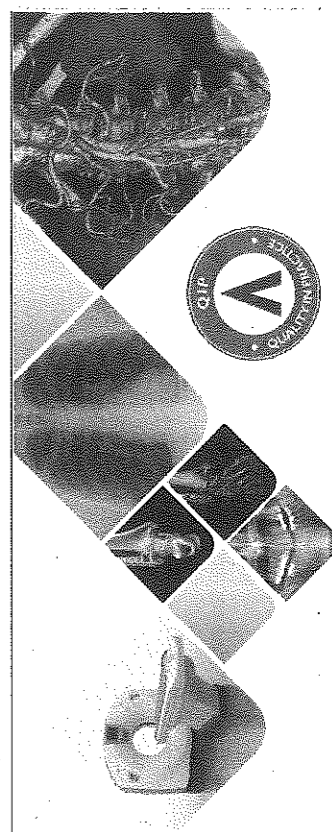
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Gundagai general manager Phil McMurray (left) and Tumut general manager Bob Stewart (right) watch on as Tumut mayor Trina Thomson and Gundagai mayor Abb McAlister sign an alliance agreement that will see both councils work together to bring the \$70 million Gocup Road upgrade to fruition over the next five years.

Councils join forces to take on Gocup

Gundagai and Tumut Shire Councils signed an alliance agreement in Gundagai last week that will see the two councils collaborate to deliver the \$70 million Gocup Road project.

Gundagai mayor Abb McAlister and Tumut mayor Trina Thomson met at the council chambers along with respective general managers Phil McMurray and Bob Stewart to sign the agreement on a project that is expected to generate an annual increase in revenue for Gundagai Council.

"Tumut is a valuable partner in terms of sharing resources, and the advantage of being part of the Gocup Road project is delivering funds back into our community," Mr McMurray said.

With both councils currently planning submissions based on retaining stand alone status in the face of local government reform, Mr McMurray said the collaborative arrangement should also send a positive message to the Expert Panel when deciding if councils are Fit for the Future.

In February, the NSW Government announced an historic funding allocation of \$70 million to complete the full upgrade of Gocup Road. The funding will be invested over five

years, starting this year, and is designed to improve safety as well as freight transport. Works will include some road realignments, major widening and strengthening works and may include climbing lanes.

The notorious road was declared a State Road in June 2010. Prior to this, as a Regional Road, both Gundagai and Tumut Councils provided capital and maintenance work to Roads and Maritime Services (RMS) specifications within their local government area boundaries.

Traffic counts issued by RMS in 2011 indicated the well-used road to have an annual average daily traffic of 2197 vehicles, with 20 per cent being heavy vehicles.

Mr McMurray said Gundagai and Tumut Councils have developed a strong working relationship over a number of years, and in line with improving the relationship, the neighbour councils have been looking for projects that are of a common interest.

With Gocup Road holding State Road classification, works can only be undertaken by organisations holding suitable accreditation and qualification with RMS.

Continued page 5

Residents' dead set against' merge

"Do what you like in Sydney and metropolitan areas but leave the country alone."

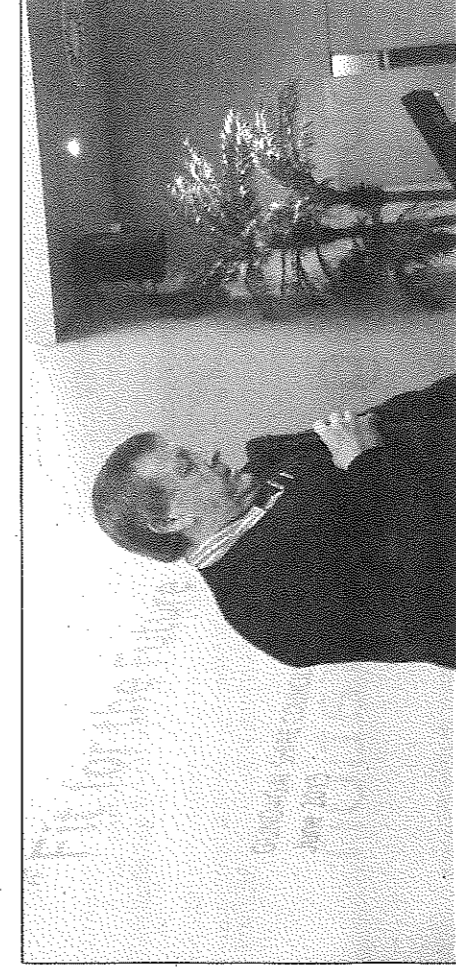
These were the sentiments of one resident that prompted a rousing applause at a community consultation last Thursday night, with the 60-strong crowd unanimously in support of Gundagai being a stand alone council.

Council has until June 30 to submit its proposal demonstrating how it meets the NSW Government's Fit for the Future reforms. The submission will then be assessed by the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART), as the appointed Expert Advisory Panel.

Councils are required to consider the recommendations of the Independent Local Government Review Panel (ILGRP) who spent two years looking at the performance of councils across the state.

In Gundagai's instance, the Panel determined a preferred option to merge with Tumut Shire Council, and a second option to establish as a Rural Council in the Riverina Joint Organisation (JO).

Gundagai has maintained its stance to go



Mayor Abb McAlister addresses a public meeting held last Thursday regarding the shire's future in the face of local government reform.

it alone and will endeavour to tell the State Government we are Fit for the Future as a stand-alone Rural Council.

Mayor Abb McAlister, director of corporate and community services Paul Luff and general manager Phil McMurray addressed the

amalgamation for local residents and indeed perceive a merger would result in increased rates with no increase in services.

Current average residential rates see Gundagai pay \$434.93, and Tumut \$697.47.

"There is the potential for increased rates," Mr McMurray said.

"History has shown that when two councils merge, your rates levy towards the highest."

He said Gundagai would also lose out on representation.

"We have eight councillors for a population of 3,750, that's one councillor per 468 people; Tumut has seven councillors with a population of 11,300, which is one councillor per 1,600 people. You would lose the ability to be properly represented and the majority of councillors would probably be Tumut-based."

Councils having different priorities was also seen as a problem.

"Priorities change and the money gets spent on the larger council," Mr McMurray said.

Continued page 5

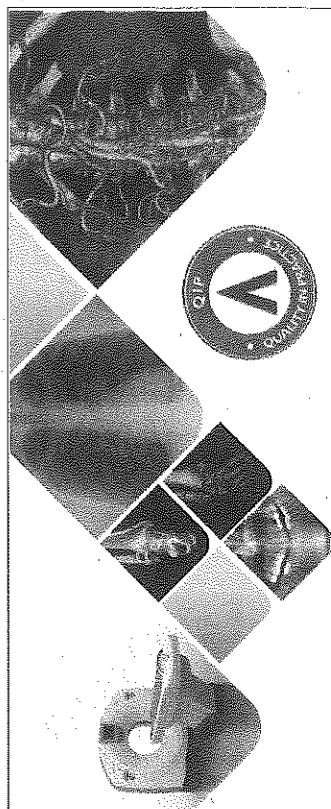
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Action, not words, needed on mental health

Mental health sufferers in rural centres such as Gundagai can't access the help they need according to a leading Riverina advocate.

John Harper from Stockinbingal has just returned from the country's biggest "Sharing Shed" talkfest which sells itself as making things happen.

The 13th annual rural mental health conference was held this year in May in Darwin where more than 120 policy recommendations were made by delegates.

But one of the more controversial suggestions made has frustrated the Riverina's own mental health advocate and depression survivor John Harper.

The suggestion was that men on the land are our country's biggest sufferers because they cannot access the help they need, when they need.

Mr Harper agrees saying that former Relationships Australia psychologist David Post was renowned for making a difference, not because he was helping people through their dark days, but because he was walking beside them in their own environments.

"I guess you need to think about when someone is in trouble; they don't know where to turn too. They don't want to try to Wagga or Griffith to see someone to get help," Mr Harper said.

"They need someone who will come and have a "yack" in the backyard or down in the paddocks."

Mr Harper admits he is often the one filling the void.

"I can't tell you how often I get phone calls from farmers or their wives telling me they need help."

"We don't need people to keep talking; we need people to take action."

Mr Harper says that action needs to be in areas it is needed most - areas such as Temora, Lake Cargelligo, and Gundagai and everywhere in between.



Mental Health advocate John Harper

While many health professionals deem regional and remote areas as metropolitan cities in a regional setting, such as Wagga Wagga, Griffith and Bathurst, Mr Harper said it is the small traps in between which are being neglected.

"We need action in these areas and I have not seen it for a long time."

"There is a lot of talk going on, but we need to turn that into action."

"Starting conversations is saving lives."

"We know that health workers in rural, regional and remote Australia are people of ac-

tion and innovation. They know what is needed and what will work," Gordon Gregory, CEO of the National Rural Health Alliance said.

"The Sharing Shed process is such a vital part of the National Rural Health Conference, because it provides a platform for delegates to have their voice heard on the best way forward for better health and wellbeing in rural and remote communities," Mr Gregory said.

"These proposals will describe some of the steps that can be taken to improve rural

and remote health. They will be evidence-based, programmatic measures from those at the coal-face who make such a difference to health and wellbeing in remote and rural areas. We will pass the agreed priority proposals to the Prime Minister, Ministers for Health and other people of influence as soon as the Conference in Darwin comes to an end."

Mr Harper says he will wait and see before laying praise to forums which discuss "great ideas" yet often fail to launch them.

Joint venture on notorious road



The celebrations at February's \$70 million announcement for works on Gocup Road.

From front page

While Tumut Shire holds this accreditation, Gundagai Council has never sought it. As a consequence, works undertaken on the road since its State Road classification have been undertaken by Tumut Council through Snowy Works and Services (SnowyWS) and recently by RMS Road Services for the realignment and intersection upgrades near Gundagai Meat Processors.

In light of the long-awaited funding becoming available, both councils saw an opportunity to form an alliance to undertake the work, utilising the provision of shared resources, bringing benefit to both councils and communities.

Under the agreement, Gundagai Council will work as a (sub)contractor to Tumut Council (SnowyWS) on various civil works associated with the maintenance and upgrade of Gocup Road.

Nominate Gundagai's Hidden Treasures

Local residents are encouraged to take the time and nominate Gundagai women volunteers to be honoured on the 2015 NSW Hidden Treasures Honour Roll.

Member for Cootamundra, Katrina Hodgkinson says women in Gundagai and the Cootamundra electorate play a huge role in giving our community its pulse.

"Our community wouldn't be what it is today without the hard work of many of these fantastic people," Katrina said.

"I am reminding anybody who knows of a woman who is volunteering and has given her time and energy selflessly for others to nominate her to be formally recognised in this year's NSW Hidden Treasures Honour Roll."

"This is our opportunity to say thank you to some outstanding women."

Katrina said that nominating someone for the honour roll is easy to do - simply complete the nomination online or download a nomination form and share a few paragraphs about why your nominee is worthy of recognition.

"Last year I was pleased that many women from the Cootamundra electorate were added to the Hidden Treasures Roll, but I am sure there are many more out there in the electorate, quietly working away to make our communities the wonderful places they are today," she said.

"Let's recognise their achievements and let them know we do appreciate all that they do."

All women nominated will be included in the 2015 roll, which will be launched at the annual NSW Rural Women's Gathering in Glen Innes in October.

For more information, contact the Rural Women's Network on 6391 3433 or email rural.women@dpi.nsw.gov.au, nominations close Friday July 31.

From front page

With Gundagai Shire Council currently the third biggest employer in Gundagai, a merger would inevitably also mean job losses.

"Our business and its employees form part of the fabric of our town and this is at risk, as the skill base tends to get pushed to the larger centre," he said.

A recent community survey resulted in 181 respondents, 76 per cent of which were against a merger, 24 per cent for it.

If Council were to merge, 71 per cent of respondents said they would expect nothing to improve.

Cr McAlister said Gundagai has a strong involvement with Riverina Regional Organisation of Councils (RROC) and already resource share with other councils, while pointing out that since its inception in 1994, RROC has saved its member councils \$45 million.

In a bid to remain an independent council, Mr Luff said council has worked very hard to ensure it presents the best possible case why we must remain as a stand alone.

Council on track to stand alone

"A huge amount of work has gone in over the past six months to get the green tick to say we meet the benchmarks for being Fit," Mr Luff said.

One long-time resident said he was "dead set against" a merger and did not see any advantages in Gundagai joining with Tumut, while a landholder said there was no way Gundagai could afford to lose its identity.

"If we lose staff, we lose all that local knowledge. If we amalgamate, we'll have less representation at our end, and that's less representation for higher rates," he said.

When asked if councils will be forced by the state government to amalgamate, Mr McMurray said there was still no clear answer.

"We've been asking that all along, and all we get is, 'We don't know,'" he said.

IPART will assess submissions and present a recommendation to the Minister by October 31.

The NSW Government will then consider the report and make decisions soon after to enable changes to take effect before the next general elections in September 2016.