



# Community Engagement Strategy

## Proposed Special Rate Variation

October 2015

# Great Lakes Council Community Engagement Strategy

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## *Proposed Special Rate Variation October 2015*

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## Introduction

Over the past seven years Council has made a concerted effort to develop, refine and improve information on the assets it provides to the community. This information is critical in informing important decisions on asset management planning, addressing backlog issues and the impact on the long term financial plan for Council.

During this time, in association with various Integrated Planning & Reporting (IP&R) activities, Council has also held numerous conversations with the community that have informed and guided Council in its decision making in regards to assets and in particular the level of service provided on key community assets.

Following the State Government led *Local Government Infrastructure Audit* in 2013, Council resolved to embark on a formal Asset Management Improvement Program including a statistically valid community survey focussed on asset management resourcing strategies and desired service levels.

The broad objectives of this consultation were:

- 1 To engage the community in the decision making process
- 2 To identify community support for a range of different long term resourcing options to fund the Council services and facilities into the future
- 3 To provide an avenue for feedback in order for residents to express their views on the proposed long term resourcing options

Results from this survey (from October 2014) indicate that 97% of residents believe it is important-very important for Council to implement plans and strategies to maintain and enhance infrastructure and facilities in the Great Lakes local government area.

As an outcome of this survey and the continuing conversation with the community on the provision of community assets and Council's long term financial position, Council included a Special Rate Variation proposal in the 2013-2017 Delivery Program and 2015-2016 Operational Plan. The community was invited to have their say on this proposal while it was on public exhibition during May - June 2015 prior to Council's adoption of the plan in late June 2015.

This Community Engagement Strategy has been developed to outline Council's intention for involving the community in a proposed Special Rate Variation (SRV) application which, if resolved to proceed with, would be lodged with the Independent Pricing & Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) in early 2016 for commencement in the 2016-2017 financial year (in accordance with IPART timeframes).

## What is community engagement


Community engagement is about ensuring the community has an opportunity to participate in the decisions made by Council. We are keen to tap into the knowledge, experiences and skills of our local people to ensure these decisions are as robust as possible.

We know that good community engagement provides the basis for strong relationships, effective planning and decisions, and in the end, better democracy.

Our community engagement activities are developed to support this objective and are based on the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum (see below) that defines the public's role in any community engagement program.


The Spectrum shows that differing levels of participation are legitimate depending on the goals, timeframes, resources and levels of concern in the decision to be made. The Spectrum also sets out a promise to the community at each level of participation. The Office of Local Government IP&R framework also identifies the same varying levels of community engagement.

The Strategy has been developed to deliver activities across the first three levels on the spectrum being *inform, consult and involve*.



### IAP2'S PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SPECTRUM

The IAP2 Federation has developed the Spectrum to help groups define the public's role in any public participation process. The IAP2 Spectrum is quickly becoming an international standard.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION 

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. We will seek your feedback on drafts and proposals.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work together with you to formulate solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

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In addition, over the past year Council has been focusing on an organisation wide Business Improvement Program to embed a culture of continuous improvement and business excellence across Council, using the Australian Business Excellence Framework as a guide. Two key principles from the framework support Council's focus on community engagement and decision making being:

- Understanding what customers and other stakeholders value, now and in the future, enable organisational direction, strategy and action; and
- Effective use of facts, data and knowledge leads to improved decisions

## Why is a special rate variation necessary

*Great Lakes 2030* is the community's long term strategic plan. It is about planning a sustainable future for the Great Lakes area and was developed as a collaborative effort between the community and Council. It describes the community's vision for the future of the area and includes four focus areas addressing environmental, economic, social and civic leadership in an integrated manner.

The Plan is Council's guide for informing the Resourcing Strategy, Delivery Program and Operational Plan to deliver the needs of our community over the long term, including the provision of transport infrastructure. Related objectives and strategies from the Plan include;

<b>Objective 7</b>	Provide transport infrastructure that meets current and future needs
<b>Strategy 7.1</b>	Identify transport network needs based on recognised asset management processes
<b>Objective 14</b>	Deliver Council services which are effective and efficient
<b>Strategy 14.1</b>	Set a strategic direction for Council that focuses on current and future customer needs and deploy plans to achieve those strategies

A specific activity identified in the adopted 2015-2016 Operational Plan under Strategy 14.1 states that Council will:

*prepare a special rate variation proposal for Council consideration based on updated asset data and costs including community engagement activities*

Council has placed considerable focus on refining and improving the data on our key assets, and has subsequently adopted robust Asset Management Plans for the majority of community assets.

The asset data contained in these plans indicates a gap between Council's current available funding and the community's expressed level of service for community assets. This gap was highlighted in the results of the 2014 community survey, particularly in regards to available funding for the areas' rural sealed road network.

The survey found that rural sealed roads were rated as very important to the community, with a moderate satisfaction level. In response to whether respondents agreed with Council's proposed investment plan to increase funding for this asset class, there was strong agreement with Council's suggested increase (63%), with 27% supporting a greater increase.

A key recommendation from the survey was that:

- *The community supports Council's suggested increased investment and proposed rate variation to address the requirements of the LGA's rural seal roads. Council should make application to IPART in order to seek a special rate variation*

This finding led to the inclusion of the SRV proposal in the 2015-2016 Operational Plan. The survey also found that:

- *Residents generally want Council to invest more across a broader range of assets, which suggest that Council should explore increasing the scope of their planning in order to address the needs of the community*

Council therefore has decided to include several other items in the special rate variation proposal, including increasing asset maintenance funds for playgrounds, swimming pools & public amenities and replacement of the roof on the Council administration building. Other items include investment in modern information technology systems to provide more efficient services for ratepayers.

## Previous community engagement

In March 2012, in association with the introduction of IP&R, Council committed to undertaking a bi-annual community engagement program with the General Manager, senior staff and Councillors providing face to face community updates around the Great Lakes local government area in Forster, Tea Gardens, Stroud and Bulahdelah.

These sessions provide an opportunity for Council to inform the community on a number of big picture topics, and importantly have provided the community with a regular means of contact with Councillors and senior staff. At the same time, our focus has been on involving the community and bringing them along on our journey of becoming a sustainable organisation, providing services to our communities that assist in delivering the community's vision for the future of the area.

A quarterly newsletter is also provided all ratepayers so that they keep abreast of Council activities.

Prior to this time regular community engagement was undertaken as appropriate, with a more issue specific approach. This included community engagement surrounding Council's long term financial, asset and service sustainability review undertaken by Review Today (Professor Percy Allen) in 2007/2008.

A summary of previous community engagement regarding Council's financial sustainability and asset management service levels follows:

Date	Activity	Focus areas
May 2015	6-month community meetings	6-month community update, current/long term financial position, draft DPOP, SRV, local update
November 2014	6-month community meetings	6-month community update, current/long term financial position, community satisfaction survey, future SRV, Fit for the Future, local update
October 2014	Community survey	Asset service levels & overall community satisfaction
May 2014	6-month community meetings	6-month community update, current/long term financial position, asset management, DPOP, way forward, local update
July 2013	6-month community meetings	6-month community update, Independent Review Panel & Treasury Corp, current/long term financial position, LG infrastructure audit, asset management, improving our assets, service level review, local update, constitutional recognition of LG
November 2012	6-month community meetings	Community Strategic Plan review & Enviro rate continuation, current/long term financial position, SRV and LIRS, review of current SRV, service level review, community survey, Enviro rate, community strategic plan, local update)
November 2012	Broad community	Community Strategic Plan review & Enviro rate continuation,

Date	Activity	Focus areas
	engagement activities	current/long term financial position
September 2012	Community survey	Community satisfaction survey
March 2012	6-month community meetings	6-month community update, current/long term financial position, SRV, service level review, what's ahead for Council, what's ahead for local government
Feb/March 2011	Broad community engagement activities	Planning a sustainable future & special rate variation proposal
Late 2010	Broad community engagement activities	Seek feedback on a discussion paper focussed on GLC's current situation (assets, finances etc); what the community desires (Great Lakes 2030); funding options to address asset maintenance and backlogs as well as financial sustainability
Late 2009	Community strategic plan engagement	Community leaders forum and community workshops for input into Great Lakes 2030 (community strategic plan)
Late 2008	Community survey	Community satisfaction survey
Mid 2008	Financial sustainability & assets	Review Today report - long term financial, asset & service sustainability

## Proposed community engagement activities

Activities proposed for this round of community engagement have been designed to build on the extensive consultation already undertaken with the community on asset management service levels and Council's long term financial position. Specific activities will include:

Date	Activity	Description of activity
November 2015	6-month community meetings	6-month community update to focus primarily on proposed SRV, and also provide the current/long term financial position, Fit for the Future and a local update
November 2015	Community newsletter	Broad distribution of information regarding the proposed special rate variation
Nov/Dec 2015	Special interest group meetings	Special interest groups invited to have the General Manager address their group as appropriate
November 2015	Council website/social media	Community invited to 'have a say' on Council's website and via social media

## Stakeholders

The stakeholders for the SRV include (but are not limited to) the following key groups.



## Evaluation

We will undertake an evaluation of the engagement activities to assist us in gauging whether the engagement program was successful. This evaluation can then also be used when developing future engagement activities. Measures to include numbers of attendees at community meetings compared to previous, and brief feedback form for attendees to provide feedback.