

Community Engagement Strategy

Proposed Special Rate Variation - 2017/2018

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Introduction

What is community engagement

Community engagement is about making sure that our 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 foundation for strong relationships, effective planning and decisions, and in the end, better democracy. The ultimate goal of community engagement is to strengthen trust between Council and the community and build confidence in Council's ability to plan and make decisions that will respond to present and future needs of the community.

Our community engagement activities are developed to support this goal and are based on the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) participation spectrum. The spectrum shows that differing levels of participation are needed depending on the goals, timeframes, resources and levels of concern in the decision to be made. The Office of Local Government Integrated Planning & Reporting (IP&R) framework also identifies the same varying levels of community engagement.

This Strategy has been developed to deliver activities across the levels of *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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Principles of engagement

MidCoast Council is committed to the social justice principles of access, equity, participation and rights and has used these as guiding principles for the development of this engagement plan. Council also took into account the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal's (IPART's) community awareness and engagement guidelines when developing the plan. These guidelines identify the need to ensure that the community is aware of the need for and extent of a rate rise; and that an appropriate variety of engagement methods are used to ensure ample opportunities for community awareness and input to occur.

Why is a special rate variation necessary

MidCoast Council is faced with the challenge of making sure we have enough funds to look after our infrastructure, programs and services into the future.

From the many community engagement activities we have undertaken since the merger, and from the engagement undertaken by the three former Council areas, we know that our community places a high priority on infrastructure, and in particular, our road network.

Since the merger we have integrated and reviewed asset data for sealed roads and bridges from the 3 former councils, with the assistance of asset experts Morrison Low. This has helped us develop a proposed way forward. With roads and bridges representing 76% of the total value of our \$3.3 billion asset base, they are our greatest challenge.

The current asset backlog of work on sealed roads and bridges is between \$150-\$180 million. The recent assessment by Morrison Low has also found we currently have an annual shortfall in renewal funding for roads of \$5 million. Unless we can fund this gap, the backlog of works on MidCoast's sealed roads and bridge network will continue to increase and the community dissatisfaction with the road network will increase.

Since the merger, Council has achieved a number of efficiencies that will contribute to long term financial sustainability, with an initial focus on merging and 'right-sizing' our organisational structure, and implementing efficiency improvements. The focus on effectiveness and efficiency will continue.

In spite of those efforts, there remains a structural issue in the budget for funding our asset renewal works of \$5 million per year ongoing. Without addressing this, the condition of assets will decrease and our backlog will increase. Council has identified that a Special Rate Variation (SRV) is a necessary solution to address this to become "Fit for the Future" and to be able to maintain and manage our community's current and future infrastructure needs.

In order to make an application to the IPART for an increase in rating income, it is essential that Council works with the community to ensure that they are aware of the need for a SRV, the implications of the options being considered and the extent and impact of the possible rate increase on ratepayers.

Council has been open with the community about the challenges we face in relation to our merger and the resultant infrastructure backlog. This has been discussed with the community in a range of community consultation activities since the merger.

Community engagement activities

In 2012, the former Great Lakes 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 local government area. Earlier this year, following the merger of Great Lakes, Gloucester and Greater Taree councils, the engagement program has been continued and extended to include a total of ten areas throughout the new MidCoast Council local government area.

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 the Local Representative Committee 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.

Council also has an online engagement facility to make it easier for those who find it hard to get to meetings to participate in discussions. The "Have Your Say" portal encourages people to submit their views without leaving home. A regular newsletter is also provided to all ratepayers so that they keep abreast of Council activities.

Ongoing dialog and capacity building with our community is a priority for Council. People who participate in the community update program build a solid understanding of the financial position of Council, the language and processes involved with local government financial planning, and have the capacity to participate in robust discussion not only around operational matters but also around long term strategic and financial issues.

Community engagement undertaken

Council began engaging with our community immediately following the announcement of the merger in May 2016. A strong commitment was made to bringing our community along on the journey toward a resilient and sustainable merged entity.

A summary of broad community engagement activities already undertaken in regard to MidCoast Council's priorities, financial and asset position and future sustainability follows:

| Date | Activity | Focus areas |
|----------------|---|---|
| July 2016 | Council newsletter sent to all ratepayers | Introduction to MidCoast Council, message from Administration and Interim General Manager, 'business as usual' messaging |
| June/July 2016 | Community update meetings in 10 locations | Current/long term financial and asset position, merger progress, DPC Roadmap, business frameworks, local area updates |
| September 2016 | Community satisfaction survey | Overall community satisfaction across the newly merged council area |
| October 2016 | Council newsletter sent to all ratepayers | Stronger Communities program, MidCoast identity workshops, community update meetings, recent accomplishments, rates and potential SRV |

| Date | Activity | Focus areas |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| October/November 2016 | "What is MidCoast" project | Identifying the overall identity, vision and priorities for the merged council area through community and staff focus groups, surveys and discussions |
| October/November 2016 | Community update meetings in 10 locations | Consolidated current and long term financial and asset position, merger progress, DPC Roadmap, SRV proposal |
| November 2016 | Business Sector update | Consolidated current and long term financial and asset position, merger progress, DPC Roadmap, SRV proposal |
| November 2016 | Community survey - assets, environment and SRV | Broad community survey to review community assets service level preferences and support for a SRV and environmental levy. Statistically valid phone survey and parallel online survey |

Community Engagement to be undertaken

Further activities are proposed to build on the consultation already undertaken with the community regarding Council's proposed way forward. Specific activities will include:

| Date | Activity | Description of activity |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| December 2016 | Kitchen Table Discussion program | Guide to facilitate and document informal small group discussions based on a Discussion Paper that focusses on MCC's current situation (assets, finances, activities etc) to seek feedback focussed on MCC's current situation and priorities |
| January/February 2017 | Special interest group meetings | Special interest groups invited to have the General Manager address their group as appropriate |
| March/April 2017 | Community update meetings in 11 locations | Update on long term financial and asset position, merger progress, SRV update, 2017/18 Operational Plan, community vision and priorities |

Key Messages

It was identified during the planning phase of the engagement strategy that the need for a SRV and how this will impact the community is a complex topic to communicate. As a result, a number of key messages were developed to convey essential information about the SRV proposal being considered.

The key messages used through the community engagement strategy include:

- Council is committed to informing and consulting the community about the need for a SRV
- Council is working hard to find options around efficiency savings, priority services, service levels, funding sources
- Council knows that our community places a high priority on infrastructure, in particular roads and on the environment
- Council understands that rate rises of any kind are never welcome but believes that a SRV is a necessary course of action to meet our infrastructure backlog and that smaller scale SRVs are more acceptable than larger one off amounts
- A SRV is an crucial step toward maintaining roads and bridges at a satisfactory level and to stop the decline in condition
- The environmental program in Manning and Great Lakes region is funded through a special levy and that program is made possible through the continuation of the levy
- Council is committed to continuing to build relationships with our community and government agencies to ensure our community's priorities and aspirations are understood and addressed as appropriate

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.

| Key outcome | Measure | Source | Target |
|--|------------------------------------|--|--|
| Participation in update meetings | Number of attendees | Attendance sheets | 5% increase on previous round of meetings |
| Attendee satisfaction with community update meetings | Level of satisfaction | Hard copy survey | 80% satisfied with how information presented |
| Level of service preferred by community identified and whether SRV supported | Number of phone surveys completed | Service provider | 450 survey participants |
| Level of service preferred by community identified and whether SRV supported | Number of online surveys completed | Service provider & Council | 200 online surveys |
| Participation in off line discussion | Number of submissions received | Discussion paper and Kitchen Table Discussion guides | 50 submissions received |