

Report on Pre-Consultation Engagement with Stakeholder Groups

20th May, 2024.

Professor Drew met with the Howlong Progress Association, Federation Ratepayers Association, Mulwala Progress Association, Urana Progress Association, and the Corowa Business Chambers. These meetings were conducted independently of council or council staff.

Open and detailed discussions were had with all groups between Tuesday 14th May and Friday 17th May. Most groups took around 90 minutes, although one meeting extended for 170 minutes.

At the conclusion of the meetings Professor Drew asked all members a series of 'standard' questions. In the Table below we set out the aggregate answers.

Do you understand the need for additional revenue?	Yes (13) No (0)
Do you agree that turning the Temporary SRV into a Permanent is required?	Yes (13) No (0)
Do you understand the errors in the previous work (last SRV) regarding the comparison of average rates to try to gauge capacity to pay?	Yes (13) No (0)
Do you think the community has capacity to pay?	Yes (9) Don't know (4)
Given our plight, do you think the SRV is about right, too little, too much?	About right (9) Don't know (1) Too much (2) Too little (1)
Do you agree with the plan to ask for less than we need now whilst we finish with efficiency measures, negotiating down service levels, advocating for fair grants and compensation?	Agree (13) Disagree (0)
Do you understand that under this proposal we would be coming back in around four years' time to start consultation for another SRV (in around five years)?	Yes (13) No (0)
Would you prefer more upfront, over a longer period, about what we are suggesting?	About what we have proposed (11) Longer (2)
Do you think we are doing enough about potential hardship cases?	No (7) Don't know (6)
What do you think about the Mayor and Councilor's efforts leading the sector on advocating for reform?	Agree but surprised (12)
Do you understand the need to invest more on roads – especially with respect to the potential for implicit liabilities to get out of control?	Yes (12) Abstain (1)
What do you want the SRV spent on?	Roads (10) Footpaths (2)

	Drains (8) Community support programs (3) Spraying weeds (1)
Do you think the Guidelines for speakers are fair?	Yes (12) Abstain (1)
Any other comments?	Enjoyed (2) Council doing a great job (1) Council doing a poor job (4)

In general, it seems that most people agree with the proposal when presented with appropriate information.

However, there are a small number of people who showed little interest in engaging with the facts and made it clear that they just didn't want to pay more local tax. These people also continue to hold significant misconceptions.

Indeed, some farmers' disputed capacity to pay even when presented with ABARES data. They claimed the cost of production should have been taken into account. However, the comparative revenue effort data for farmers also did not include the production costs for farmers in other local government areas. Thus, the argument proposed was flawed unless the people making the assertion believe that Federation farmers are less efficient than farmers elsewhere.

All groups were unaware of council's strong efforts on advocacy regarding grants and compensation. When made aware of these efforts, people reacted in a very positive manner. We encourage Council to make these efforts better known.

Some people continue to cling to the belief that all of the problems currently faced have materialized in the last four years and can be attributed to this particular group of Councillors and management. I have asked for photos to help further dispel this misapprehension and will be specifically redressing same in the public forums.

There were some concerns regarding hardship. However, it was notable that most were unwilling to contribute to alleviate this hardship. It seems that self-interest may be more important to some of these people relative to their expressed concerns about the plight of others.

After considering the feedback from these pre-consultation meetings we recommend that council respond by reducing the proposal from 20%, followed by 13% to instead 19% followed by 11.80%. We also recommend that Council sets up a process to look at the effect of applying SRVs (previous and proposed) to the base rate and encourage Council to desist from doing so in the future. In addition, we emphasize the importance of the review of the Hardship policy currently work in progress.