

(23/07/2015)

**Response to IPART
Regarding the submission by Bellingen Shire Council for the Fit for the Future program**

Dear IPART,

I am writing this letter in response and support of the Bellingen Shire Council's submission to the Fit for the Future program.

The information provided in Council's submission clearly outlines the challenges we as a shire have to face, in servicing the Bellingen community.

I am a member of the board of the local Chamber of Commerce plus a member of 4 other community groups.

I also work in an industry which brings me into contact with the public on a regular basis and makes me aware of sensitive personal information relating to their financial situation, so I feel somewhat aware of the current situation of social pressures and economics in the shire.

I am strongly concerned about the continued cost shifting policies and consistent implementation of new legislation from state and federal government and how this has had an escalating impact on our council. I live in a low socio economic area considering the average for Australia, so this impacts us even more so than a shire with deeper pockets.

To meet the proposed increases in rates I feel our shire will be pushing away more of its valuable resource – people – when we need them most to cover the costs, hence exacerbating a death spiral for our community. We already struggle to retain youth and employment within the shire and at the moment there is a decline in commerce across the region – it's truly worrying.

I support the following key impacts which council has submitted, please see below:

The key factors in Council's submission that presented strongly include:

- 57% of the Shire's land is non-rateable – I should add that the main client who utilises road and bridge maintenance (state forests) pays no rates for the privilege is currently engaged in an aggressive campaign to force upon the shire a system of helicopter based spraying for weed control with products that are banned in other countries. Couple with this the prospect of reintroducing cable logging of slopes over 25 degrees and the devastating environmental impact that we have experienced with this practice 40 years ago I am genuinely offended.

I am considering starting a social media campaign against the state government to show our support for council to impose rates on these and other users of our shire who are doing damage, costing our shire money for access and all the while hurting us in other ways.

- The impact of storms and floods on our roads and bridges, and this impact will be exacerbated by climate change over the coming decades
- Cost shifting from the State Government without compensation over a long period – there is no 'Fat' to be trimmed to begin with.
- Council's infrastructure and maintenance (145 bridges including the fourth highest number of timber bridges in the State; 26 times the length of road per person compared to that of Sydney City Council)
- The freeze on Financial Assistance Grants and the financial impact of this – these are a lifeblood for small communities

- The imbalance in the distribution of Financial Assistance Grants – those councils that are the biggest don't necessarily need the most assistance.
- Disadvantage factors (8% unemployment rate, 44% people aged 50 years or older, 61.7% of employed persons earning less than \$600 per week)

All these factors put a significant strain on the financial sustainability of Council versus the services and infrastructure it is expected to provide and maintain. It is a hard pill to swallow when the community is asked to willingly take a rate rise when there appears to be a number of considerations that could be undertaken by the State Government to alleviate the pressure on Council and its community.

My recommendation is for Bellingen Council to stand alone for the long term, it would be a great injustice to the community if Council was not considered Fit for the Future and we endured an amalgamation where a larger council would be even less sensitive to our unique set of circumstances.

Taking all things into account, I believe Council has put forward a valid and intelligent response to the State Government in identifying how it intends to become and remain sustainable into the future.

I trust that IPART and the State Government take an informed, realistic and balanced approach to assessing Bellingen Council's submission considering the above issues I have raised.

Regards,

Geoff Tosio

