

PUBLIC MEETING WITH TERRY BRANDSON MAYOR OF PALERANG

7.30pm Wednesday, 17 August 2005

COMMUNITY HALL, CAPTAINS FLAT

MINUTES

Approximately 20 residents attended, despite the short notice of the meeting and limited publicity.

Representing the Council were Mayor Terry Bransdon, Councillors Mark Horan and Murray Harrex, and General Manager Peter Bascomb.

The meeting was chaired by Alex Wells, President of the Captains Flat Community Association.

1. Increases in water and sewerage charges

Alex noted that a petition presented to Council earlier this year had not been responded to. The General Manager (GM) responded to the issue:

Sewerage funds in Palerang had a \$706,000 deficit last year, and this year were budgeted for a \$124,000 surplus to allow for investment in infrastructure.

This year in Captains Flat (CF) there would be \$21,000 additional expenditure on the water system which would not be covered by the \$44 increase. These costs relate to Occupation Health and Safety improvements on the reservoir, and the regular safety survey of the dam.

The water charging regime is required by the State Government, and the high charges in CF are a result of the small population – there are no economies of scale. The GM agreed to make the figures he was quoting available to the residents. In response to a comment from the audience he agreed to investigate using unfiltered water for Council trucks and other bulk uses.

Alex noted that vacant properties now pay much less than in 2003-4. The GM responded that this was also a consequence of the Best Practice guidelines. Alex questioned the marginal costs of the water, i.e. were usage charges actually covering usage costs, and availability charge covering fixed costs.

The GM agreed to provide the relevant figures. Some residents queried whether meters were always being read.

2. General rates increase

The Mayor explained the rates increase as a consequence of:

- the amalgamation, which resulted in the need to rationalise the large number of different rate categories, and also
- the increase in valuations.

It was also noted that some residents had not received notification of their increased valuations, and were therefore unable to appeal them, due to errors by the Valuer General's Office.

In response to a question the Mayor noted that Farmland rates are generally higher than residential rates, but are structured differently.

The GM explained that the 3.5% increase was on the overall rate yield, and consequently individual ratepayers did not incur a 3.5% increase. He also explained that village rates had been set higher than rural because of greater access to services such as pools, parks etc. But Farmland has a base rate of \$410 whereas there is no base rate in the village [there is, however, a minimum rate in the villages]. He also explained that the names of the different rate categories were largely arbitrary and did not relate to any other meaning (e.g. for development purposes).

The audience questioned who was experiencing a decrease in their rates, if so many were incurring large increases. The GM noted that while Majors Creek had increased, Mongarlowe had increased, the rural areas around Nerriga had decreased. The audience remained sceptical that the increases and decreases balanced out, given the small population of the areas reported to be experiencing decreases. The GM noted Council's total rate yield is audited to ensure that it doesn't exceed the total allowed and mentioned that this year that had to deduct \$5,000 raised in excess last year. Further, the GM indicated that the Department of Local Government inspectors would soon uncover any errors in the Council's rate model.

An audience member asked who decided which properties fell into which category. The response was that staff made the determination and it was based on size (under and over 80ha) and predominant use (farming, non-farming).

An audience member asked if road gangs could be used on general duties when unable to work on the roads. The GM responded that Council was trying to increase the efficiency of its outdoor workers, so as to obtain more days' work per year, including by competing for contracts, but this had to be carefully balanced against Palerang's own needs to have workers available at short notice.

In response to a question, the GM explained that the State Government covered 55% of the cost of pensioner rebates on rates.

An audience member asked why Council no longer published annual statement information routinely in the Queanbeyan Age. The GM responded that he would investigate this – Peter I don't remember making this statement re doing rate burden / benefit analysis for each area. I argue against such analysis because it is based on the false assumption that rates are a user-pays charge, which they are most definitely not. [Note: Few CF residents buy the Queanbeyan Age, and the monthly and weekly local papers have erratic distribution within the village, and are generally not distributed to the surrounding properties.]

The GM went on to outline planned capital expenditure in CF this year, which was not covered by income. Operating costs in CF (excluding water and sewerage and tip) would be \$192,000 and there would be capital expenditure of \$140,000. Examples included major expenditure on the Community Centre, pool, hall and painting the park toilets.

An audience member noted that most of the infrastructure in CF was provide by the mine company, but Mark Horan responded that though this was the case, the council now had to maintain and run this infrastructure. Further, much of the infrastructure provided in other centres was either paid for by grants, developers or direct community fund raising. This means that in effect CF is no different to anywhere else in that the source of the facilities was not from Council's rate revenue.

3. Re-categorization of rural/farmland properties, to Residential
Covered earlier.

4. Council's Fire Brigade Maintenance Responsibilities

It was noted that the Council was not fulfilling its maintenance and upgrading responsibility with regard to the fire shed, which lacked a wash basin for the toilet, hot water in the kitchen, and had not been painted. Applications for grants had been knocked back because it was widely understood, except by Palerang Council, that maintenance is a Council responsibility. Councillors responded that they did not know this was occurring and said they would raise the issue at a Council meeting. The GM also responded that issues like this could be tackled by reprioritising expenditure. Alex and audience members responded that the local community has never been consulted about local expenditure and looked forward to this welcome change.

It was also suggested that Council could establish a formal timetable of inspections of its assets. The GM responded that a plan was being developed to do just this, but first to establish a register of Council properties and assets.

It was suggested that Council could save money by the use of local contractors, discounted and volunteer labour for local repairs and maintenance. The GM responded that he was establishing a Community Development Division which would be identifying local sources of expertise.

5. B-Double approval for Braidwood-Captains Flat, Wild Cattle Flat and Harolds Cross Rd

There was a substantial discussion about the Palerang Traffic Committee's recent recommendation that B-doubles be permitted to use the backroads East and South of Captains Flat, for transporting logs. Murray Harrex was well-informed as he represents Steve Whan on that Committee. He told the meeting that independent advice obtained by the applicant indicated that the Captains Flat to

Queanbeyan Road was suitable for B-doubles, the RTA member had agreed (despite the RTA's own earlier advice) and the Committee feared that an outright refusal to allow B-doubles in the area would result in a legal challenge. The Committee viewed the backroads option as non-ideal but less disruptive and dangerous than using the busier sealed roads. The Committee had also tried to reduce the safety concerns by banning B-doubles during the hours of school buses and the police representative had assured the Committee that this would be enforced. Palerang is unable to impose such restrictions on the regular logging trucks, and there was a point of view that B-doubles meant fewer truck movements. It was pointed out that State Forests (now Forests NSW) view Wild Cattle Flat Road as unsuitable for regular logging trucks, yet the Committee has recommended it for B-doubles. It was also noted that Forests NSW do not pay rates, even though their operations are commercial and do not make a significant contribution to the upkeep of the roads. [Wild Cattle Flat Road is largely in Cooma-Monaro Shire]. It was commented that Palerang, with such a preponderance of Forests NSW sites, might be in a position to argue for compensatory funding from the State Government.

Alex summed up the community's views in saying that the community did not want B-doubles on the sealed road, nor on the unsealed roads, and expected Council to represent the community's wishes.

6. Swimming pool committee/swimming lessons

It was noted that since the dissolution of the Section 355 Swimming Pool Committee, there was no longer a formal mechanism for the community to be involved in decision-making about the pool, such as entry charges, opening hours, days and season, staffing, facilitating lessons and planning improvements. The GM asked if the Community Association would be prepared to take on this role and Alex suggested that it might be by way of a subcommittee.

7. Oval and Tennis court lights

There was some debate over who owned the tennis courts and pool, as this infrastructure had been provided by the mining company. Alex noted that Council had the opportunity to apply for grants for improvements but had not done so. Expenditure on the pool, courts, oval etc. could effectively be doubled through applying for Department of Sport and Recreation grants. The GM accepted this, noted that there were some indications that Palerang was not applying for as many grants as other councils, and also offered to reprioritise capital expenditure in CF in consultation with the community.

8.

Other items:

- Waste – A resident asked when the tip would be closing and why rubbish collections were dropping to fortnightly. The GM clarified that collections would remain weekly, recycling collections would be fortnightly. The days of collections would also be different. The tip would likely not be replaced with a transfer station until late in the financial year. It was still not clear what form the transfer station would take and where exactly it would be located. He assured the meeting that the community, through the Community Association, would be consulted and its local knowledge tapped into. It would be costing \$600k to close and rehabilitate the tip and \$140k to construct the transfer station..
- On the same topic, it was suggested that as the tip is over capacity, it might be prudent for the waste from the weekly kerbside collection to be taken to one of the Council's other tips.