

Council Elections of December 2008

In December 2008, there were new elections for council. Two more councillors were added to the original five, thus making the new total of seven. Three councillors were re-elected: Crs. Booth, Hayes, and McClenaghan. The other four councillors are new, although Cr. Rod May from Birch Ward did contest, unsuccessfully, the 2004 election. There is another very important new factor, and that is the new Chief Executive Officer, Kaylene Conrick. Given the new councillors and the new CEO, it may be some time before we can get a real feel for how the new HS Council is going to manage.

The Year's First Ordinary Meeting of Council, 20 January 2009 in Daylesford

The year's first meeting of the new council was, unfortunately, marred by controversy and conflict. The new council had met once before, in December '07, and adopted a resolution that a number of residents are finding controversial, even unpalatable. This was the decision to require the public to submit all questions put to council at the ordinary meetings, in writing and submit them by midday on the date of the meeting. This is a marked change from the old policy of allowing the public to pose "live" questions to councillors at meetings. This motion was brought in by a vote of 4 – 3. There is a widespread sentiment, especially among members of the public who have regularly attended council meetings, that this move was designed to help councillors evade challenging or embarrassing questions, by giving them extra time to prepare the answers. The ordinary meeting of 20 January was the first time that this procedure was put into place, and as mentioned above, proved very controversial.

Ejection of ratepayer. Mr Kirby was ordered to be ejected from the public gallery after loud protests against the new public question restrictions were ruled by the mayor, Cr. Bill McClenaghan, to have passed the bounds of propriety. Mr Kirby stood up at the beginning of the meeting and walked up to each councillor, while carrying a sign objecting to the new procedure. The meeting was adjourned for 10 minutes while the police were summoned. After the meeting resumed, Mr Kirby was ejected by two Policemen carrying capsicum spray, a number of other attendees also protested and chose to leave the meeting with Mr Kirby and Mr Eyeles, some returning later.

Petition. A petition from Gary McIntosh of Bullarto, an office holder in the Daylesford Region Landcare group, was presented to the council at the meeting, which also had the support of a local pro-conservation group, Wombat Forestcare Inc. (of which I am a member). In the petition, the clearing of large, old-growth trees was mentioned and objected to. In 2007 and 2008, the HSC had ordered the removal of some large trees near public roads in the shire, and this decision had caused concern among some residents about whether this tree removal was actually warranted by safety concerns, or not. Apparently, there has now been a change in policy (whether at the local or state level, I know not), which empowers the local councils to order the removal of trees that line public roadways, if the trees are considered a safety hazard. Previously, the council had to get confirmation from other official bodies, such as the Department of Sustainability and the Environment (DSE), before proceeding with such removals. The new regulations also permit the removal of trees which are within 4 metres of a fence line, and from what I can understand, the choice and course of a new fence is entirely up to the landowner in question. This will inevitably result in some conflict between the pro-conservation section of the shire, and those landowners who wish to erect fences on their properties, without any constraint or interference from others. The HSC will consider the petition and report on it at its next meeting in February.

Other (boring!) business. Most council meetings consist of fairly mundane matters that, except for those directly concerned, are somewhat tedious, even boring. A good example at this meeting were agenda points such as item 9.1, renaming Ballarat / Maryborough road to Goldfields Highway, and 9.2, Trentham Spudfest. At this point, yours truly decided that better things beckoned than remaining at the meeting, and so departed.

In summary, it is probably too early at this point in time to get a clear sense of the direction of the HS Council. Hopefully, it will be a better and more productive body than the previous Council, which was marred by infighting and a significant split between the two council factions. Already, it is clear that a certain segment of the public are really unhappy about the requirement to put their questions in writing to the council. Only time will tell whether the public will “adjust” to this new ruling, and we can avoid unpleasant scenes such as the one at the year’s first meeting, or such scenes will become commonplace.

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