

# REPORT ON HEPBURN SHIRE COUNCIL MEETINGS AND BUSINESS FOR 2009

## *Fourth Ordinary Meeting of Council, 21 April 2009 in Trentham*

**Statement of Commitment:** *We the councillors of Hepburn Shire declare that we will undertake on every occasion to carry out our duties in the best interests of the community and that our conduct shall maintain the standards of the code of good governance so that we may faithfully represent and uphold the trust placed in this council by the people of Hepburn Shire.* This statement now replaces the old prayer that used to open council meetings, and it is recited aloud by all the councillors at the opening of each meeting. From the view of this reporter, this statement is a really good declaration of intent, and a more than adequate replacement of the prayer. It would especially appeal to persons who don't have a strong religious background.

Unfortunately, given what I witnessed at the April meeting, it is my sad conclusion that the Hepburn Shire Council (HSC) has some way to go toward the actual manifestation of this vision and these goals. I do believe that there are some very good councillors on the HSC, and I think that the Mayor, Bill McClenaghan, is doing a good job as well, at least within the framework and constraints that he believes he must honour. My suspicion is that the real problem in the HSC lies with the bureaucrats, those individuals who are not elected but appointed and paid by HSC. I cannot state this with great certainty, as I am not privy to what goes on in their minds or in their offices, but I get the distinct feeling that most of these employees are simply interested in putting in their hours and getting their paycheques, and don't really care all that much whether the services they are paid to perform are really in the best interest of the public or the shire.

**Notices of Motion.** These are basically statements or formal requests made to the entire HSC, that highlight a matter of importance or concern to an individual councillor. I found these notices to be very interesting, for various reasons.

**Motion 1.** Improved Mobile / Digital telecommunications for Hepburn Shire, put forward by Jon Barrell. This motion called attention to some inadequacies of the current mobile and digital telecommunications networks in the shire. As someone who does not own a mobile phone and is basically against mobile phone towers, given their EMR emissions, I do not think that installing more mobile towers in the shire is a good thing. But of course there would be many others who might disagree. **Motion 2.** TV take back scheme, proposed by Jon Barrell. Councillor

Barrell's second motion struck me as far more sensible. He wants the shire to support the introduction of a national TV recycle scheme, given that many are switching to digital television and the old sets are becoming redundant. He proposes writing to the state and federal environment ministers for advise on this.

**Motion 3.** Groundwater management, proposed by Rod May. I found this motion to be very timely and quite important in its implications. Cr. May, himself an organic farmer, is acutely aware that as surface water becomes more scarce, a greater burden is being placed on groundwater for irrigation, stock animals, domestic supply etc. He mentioned that he knows of one groundwater system that has receded or "dipped" by over 20 metres. In Clunes, the water recharge to their groundwater supplies is only 50 mm. per annum. He also mentioned the role that climate change plays in this cycle, which threatens further drying and reduced recharge. Well done, Councillor May! However, I am not sure that asking the DSE for advice on the situation, as he proposes, is the best idea.

**Motion 4.** Container deposit scheme, by Rod May. Another excellent idea and proposal by Cr. May. This is a proposal to introduce a Container Deposit Scheme (CDS) in the shire, so that when a consumer pays a deposit on certain beverage containers when purchasing the item, when the container is returned the deposit is refunded. Cr. May spoke of the success that the CDS has had in South Australia. He quoted the research modelling from Victoria Greens MLC Colleen Hartland (based on a 10 cents per container deposit), which according to her would decrease landfill costs by 483 tonnes and return savings in council rubbish and recycling costs of up to \$47,819- per annum. Another excellent idea from Cr. May.

**Motion 5.** The final motion was to send a thank you to the Clean Up Australia team from Trentham, moved by Cr. Sebastian Klein.

**Councillors Reports.** The meeting continued with brief reports from each of the councillors, starting with the Mayor, Cr. Bill McClenaghan. Most of them dealt with local matters and were mildly interesting.

**Public Question Time.** Generally speaking, all of the public questions allowed at this council meeting expressed frustration, ranging from mild to extreme, with the policies or activities of HSC. The 6 or 7 persons who had submitted their written questions prior to the meeting were permitted to stand up and deliver them orally to the council, then ask some follow up questions. The questions fell into two general categories: 1) The rationale behind the decision by HSC to disallow spoken questions from the public during a council meeting, which was the previous policy; 2) Specific undertakings or tasks that had been asked of HSC which had not been started or addressed. It was during this question time that the frustration, even resentment and anger of the public toward the HSC became fairly evident. One questioner asked whether the policy not to allow "live" questions

from the public wasn't a breach of the Charter of Human Rights, as well as the Australian Constitution. The answer was that the HSC doesn't believe it is in breach of either document, as it has the power to enact local laws regarding such matters. One of the questions was about the state of a particular footpath in Trentham, which was in a bad state. The answer was that the shire is always "playing catch up" on infrastructure projects, and may get to repair the footpath this year, or next. In fact, I did not observe one questioner who was satisfied with the answer that he or she received. One questioner was advised that the written answer they had received to a question at a previous meeting was in contradiction to the verbal answer they had received at a later meeting. To me, this indicates confusion, poor communications, and uncertainty on the part of HSC.

**Monthly Report on new Daylesford depot.** This was a progress report on the New Daylesford Depot located on the Daylesford-Trentham road. This is a 1.45 million dollar project, which council plans to fund mainly from raising the property rates. I should note that I have registered a formal non-consent notice to the council in regard to having my property rates raised during the next several years to fund this.

**Creswick Tourism and Interpretive Centre.** This is a project costing over \$900,000-, far too high a price to pay for this venture in my opinion. Building commenced in November 2008 and the building has been completed as of April 2009. The official opening of the facility will be in May of this year.

**Central Highlands Regional Library Corporation Draft Budget 2009 – 10.** HSC wishes to increase staffing at the regional libraries (Daylesford, Creswick, and Clunes) and also open longer hours. The total costs for these increases will be \$382,164 for financial year 2009 – 10.

**Monthly financial report.** This was the next item on the agenda, but at this point, as the meeting ended its second hour, your faithful reporter chose to depart. I remain convinced that the HSC has a long, long way to go to deliver satisfaction to the residents and ratepayers of this shire. While there are some bright spots in the new council, from this perspective I cannot see it achieving success or acceptability among the residents and ratepayers of Hepburn Shire, unless some major changes are introduced.