

# FAIR GO RATES SYSTEM

Assessment of Application  
for Higher Rate Cap

Community Engagement  
West Wimmera Shire Council

*June 2017*



### **Limitations of Use**

This report has been prepared by MosaicLab on behalf of and for the exclusive use of the Essential Services Commission (ESC).

The sole purpose of this report is to provide an assessment of the community engagement undertaken by the West Wimmera Shire Council for their application for a higher rate cap.

This report has been prepared in accordance with the scope of services set out by the ESC. In preparing this report, MosaicLab has relied upon the information provided in the Council's application form and attachments. The ESC can choose to share and distribute this report as they see fit. MosaicLab accepts no liability or responsibility whatsoever for or in respect of any use of or reliance upon this report by any third party.



# 1 SUMMARY - CONTENTS AND COMPLETENESS

---

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

West Wimmera Shire Council (the Council) is applying for a rate cap variation to raise an additional income of approximately \$98,000 above the 2% rate rise over the next 4 years. These additional funds will enable the Council to continue 'ensure renewal requirements are met'.

MosaicLab have used the information provided by Council to assess the level of engagement undertaken and the alignment with the key engagement principles and best value principles as outlined in the *Fair Go Rates System - Reference Material Community Engagement*.

## 1.2 CONTENTS

Council provides limited reasons for their choice of engagement approach namely 'the demographic of the community being older, and.....the lack of strong online communication infrastructure'.

Council does not provide reference to any existing engagement frameworks or guidance materials that might inform the approach for this particular community conversation or other engagement activities in the shire.

The Council stated that they ran two workshops in different locations in the Shire (Kaniva and Edenhope) and they took comment and discussion on their Facebook page.

Limited information was provided about the way these workshops were delivered (other than a presentation and general conversation) and it appears as if these sessions were predominantly presentation with questions rather than a robust 'trade-off' conversation.

## 2. INFORMATION AND TIMELINESS

---

### 2.1 WHAT COUNCIL DID TO ENGAGE

Council held two 'information sessions' across the shire. There is no information of the level of attendance at these sessions. The format for these sessions appears to be a strong focus on providing information ('outlining councils reasoning behind the variation application') and then time to answer questions and have a 'general conversation'. The amount of time given to each of these tasks is not outlined in the application.

No or limited evidence is provided of:

- Opportunities to be involved other than attending two workshops
- Information provided to participants
- How this information was presented
- Discussion about trade-offs between services and rates
- The feedback from participants about the proposed rate rise variation

#### 2.1.2 PRIOR ENGAGEMENT ON A RANGE OF COMMUNITY PLANS AND STRATEGIES

Limited information was provided about prior engagement activities other than quarterly 'community forum and dinner' sessions and that there are 'other' regular activities.

#### 2.1.3 CONCLUSION

There were limited engagement activities undertaken, within a short notice period and during a difficult time of year for the local community. These circumstances coupled with the low level of engagement (inform-consult) indicates a limited level of engagement planning and implementation.

### 2.2 WHAT INFORMATION WAS PROVIDED DURING THE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

It was only stated that information was presented. A PowerPoint presentation has been provided which outlines the main points presented.

---

## 2.3 HOW WAS THIS INFORMATION PRESENTED

There is limited information about how this information was presented. It can be assumed that it had a strong focus on traditional presentation and Q&A.

## 2.4 HOW FEEDBACK WAS GATHERED AND WHAT THIS FEEDBACK WAS

It is not known whether participants had time to discuss and fully understand complex financial information and trade-offs, as no information was provided on the length of the session and amount of discussion time in comparison to presentation time.

There is no information about how feedback was gathered and only general indications of what the feedback was.

It appears that feedback about the session itself was collected. This feedback indicated that participants were unhappy with the amount of notification and the timing of the sessions.

## 2.5 ASSESSMENT

In setting up the community forums, Council provided limited engagement opportunities. These limited opportunities were poorly timed and were formatted in a way that may not have helped participants learn about the dilemmas and subsequently provide more informed feedback.

It is not certain how the feedback was gathered and how council is using this information to inform this application, other than Councillors having changed their minds.

# 3. TAILORING OF ENGAGEMENT

---

## 3.1 WHY COUNCIL ENGAGED IN THE WAY IT DID

Council provides some information about the reasons for the choice of engagement approaches. These reasons were that the demographics (dispersed and aged population) and limited digital connectivity in areas of the Shire were the main drivers for the engagement approach chosen.

Council provided no reference to those with different language or physical barriers, nor young people, people with young children (etc.) in their assessment of appropriate methods.

## 3.2 HOW THIS WAS TAILORED TO COMMUNITY NEEDS

Council indicated the locations of each of the two meetings as the main tailoring approach. The fact that the sessions were timed during sowing (although we understand that there are constraints around Council timing) activities or meetings and with limited prior notification would suggest very little tailoring of the engagement approach. No other information was provided.

## 3.3 HOW THE ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM WAS DESIGNED TO ACCOMMODATE THE COMPLEXITY OF TRADE-OFFS REQUIRED

From the information provided, it appears that there was no information or discussion around the complexity of trade-offs required in order to accommodate different service levels and potentially a different rate rise. Although it does appear that questions were asked about which services to reduce, without a broader context of community values and relative impact of reduced or increased funding, it makes this conversation limited or, at the least, the questions difficult to answer.

## 3.4 HOW PREVIOUS ENGAGEMENT INFORMED FUTURE, PLANNED ENGAGEMENT

Council provides no information in its application in relation to this question.

## 3.5 ASSESSMENT

Council outlined an aged population and limited digital connectivity as the main drivers for the engagement approach chosen. Tailoring of their approach would be enhanced through reference to prior engagement feedback, further analysis of demographics, understanding the needs of different stakeholder groups, and evaluation data from previous projects or rate capping/council budget conversations.

# 4. PRIORITISING MATTERS OF SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPACT

---

It appears that the Council outlined their reasoning for the rate rise as per their application at each of the two community information sessions.

No information is provided on

- How the scale of the higher rate cap was discussed
- Whether Council included the issues of short term or long term financial needs in its engagement program or how the engagement was conducted in the context of these issues.
- How it assessed different community views.

## **ASSESSMENT**

The engagement program provided limited scope for discussions around significant service level and rate rise issues. The Council did present information about their reasoning but it appears as if no alternate options were presented.

Council provides limited information about the format and content of the engagement activities so it is difficult to assess: whether the community was given information about the short and long term financial needs, how the tradeoffs were presented and how council assessed different community views.

# 5. BUILDING INFORMED COMMUNITIES

---

The Council do not provide information about this in their application.

In addition, Council provides no evidence of:

- Evaluating their community engagement programs and specifically the engagement for this rate cap variation application
- How feedback was gathered
- How the engagement influenced Council's decision to apply for a higher cap
- How council is dealing with unmet community expectations in relation to rate increases and/or service provision

## **ASSESSMENT**

Council needs to develop their approach and skill in terms of gathering feedback at engagement activities, evaluating engagement programs, documenting how engagement influences council's decision making and how council is responding to the community issues and expectations.



## 6. RATEPAYERS AND COMMUNITY VIEWS ABOUT THE RATE INCREASE

---

The only information provided about rate payers and community views about the rate increase was a very brief summary of the feedback. This feedback stated that significant numbers of participants did not want a rate rise as it was a burden financially (especially for older community members) and some participants being pleased with the provision of aged services. It is very hard to judge this further with the level of information provided.

## 7. VIEWS CONSIDERED BY COUNCIL IN MAKING THEIR DECISION?

---

Other than a short statement that “after attending the meetings and listening to the community’s views, all Councillors agreed to make an application to vary the rate cap’ there is little evidence on how Council took these views into account in making its decision. A more detailed listing of the feedback and how Council considered it would have assisted the evidence in this section.

# 8. ENGAGEMENT GAPS AND REMEDIES

The following table lists the key gaps in the engagement process in our view, based on the evidence provided. Alongside these gaps, we have listed what we believe would assist the Council in further applications.

Engagement Gaps	Remedy
Providing tailored opportunities for involvement in the budget and rate capping engagement.	Although the Facebook page, direct contact with Councillors, a submission process, and two community forums were used, other options including an online survey, hard copy survey and small group discussions with 'hard to reach' groups would be beneficial. Even if this has proven difficult in the past, this can still be offered as an option.
Implications of tradeoffs not being fully understood	Provide clear information about the impact of different choices this will help people make more informed decisions around service levels and rates. You can do this through some simple indicators of change or through providing two workshops (1) which outlines the issues and get initial ideas and the second (2) outlining the implications of this (based on work done by council in the interceding weeks).
Providing evidence of the results/data from the information sessions on key issues and tradeoffs.	A simple 1-2-page document outlining the key feedback themes, the response from Council, and why they will undertake changes based on the feedback or not. An outline of the total number of attendees across the sessions would be helpful. Alongside a percentage of people who supported the different services (in this case how many people supported road renewal and aged care services). Please note, collecting data does not mean people's names need to be recorded.
Limited information on whether council adapted its budget in relation to community feedback	Council to document community feedback, whether that feedback has been incorporated into the council plan and budget and report to the community on those elements not incorporated and why. A simple narrative of the change does not provide a full picture.
Limited avenues for collecting feedback or input provided at activities	Participants at forums were unable to write down their comments it was only through verbal conversations. Although this appears informal it also excludes the quieter participants and limits the amount of data collected. Provide a simple feedback form or workshop template during the session to enable more anonymous feedback to be provided.
Effective presentation of the options going forward	Although complex, the process needs to provide examples of the types and amounts of services which would equate to the budgetary difference suggested through the rate cap and/or the rate cap variation. This sort of activity then leads well into a discussion about priorities and values and how the current or proposed budgets might service these needs. This is an example of a trade-off discussion rather than a 'wish list' conversation. The addition of an agenda or workshop runsheet would help this assessment.
Views may not be representative of the whole community	Different recruitment strategies can be undertaken – reaching out to new groups by going to meet people where they already meet e.g. at schools (for young families) or at sporting events (for young people) or people can be randomly selected to match the demographics of the community.
Sufficient time to understand complex information	Hold longer workshops, hold multiple meetings or incorporate more discussion time in workshops.
No evaluation	Commence a simple evaluation process after each engagement activity and compile and share the results to enable continuous improvement.
Poor timing and notice for engagement events	Plan well in advance and give people extensive notice of important shire-wide conversations. Place advertisements of these events in local shops, at community halls and elsewhere to ensure notification is dispersed through an area with poor digital connection. A longer notification period may well mitigate the difficult seasonal timing but where possible, find a way to avoid intense work periods on properties.

## 9. COMMENTS ABOUT THE IMPACT OF THESE GAPS

---

These gaps are significant and it appears as if there has been very limited scope for local community members to take part in this important discussion. In particular, the timing and notification issue has meant a significant proportion of the community has been excluded. Finding ways to run more workshops or discussions with groups that already meet regularly in the Shire (agribusiness or school councils example) would be more inclusive into the future.

## 10. LIST ANY ITEMS IDENTIFIED FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

---

Information on the following matters would assist in the assessment of this application:

- More data from the community forums – what was the agenda and how was data collected
- More information on how council used the data from the engagement process to make its decision about the rate cap
- A summary of the consolidated feedback and the response from Council about how they will use that data

# 11. CONCLUSION

---

The level of engagement outlined in this application is limited. It appears to have excluded community members through both the timing and the notice period for only two information sessions. Broader feedback through online and hard copy surveys or meeting local groups through regular meetings would have assisted this process significantly.

The major gap in this process was that the process appears to be information based with very limited opportunity for increasing understanding of the different options for balancing service levels with rates.

We commend the attempt to run sessions geographically, however given the significance of this issue for the whole community more sessions across the shire would have been a better approach.

In our view this application does not meet the basic tenor of the engagement principles as outlined in the Commission's community engagement guidance and reference materials.