

2012 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

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INQUIRY INTO THE 2012 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

SUBMISSION NARRABRI SHIRE COUNCIL

Narrabri Shire recognises itself as the heart of the North West. Narrabri Shire has a resident population of over 14,000 people across 13,065 square kilometres. The Local Government area also consists of the towns Wee Waa and Boggabri and the villages of Baan Baa, Bellata, Edgeroi, Gwabegar and Pilliga.



Narrabri Shire consists of approximately 75% of agricultural land which produces Wheat, Barley, Soya Beans, Sunflowers, Citrus, Beef, Pork as some example primary products. There is also an extensive mining industry in the Shire with currently coal mines in operation and coals seal gas wells currently in operation and in construction, therefore the population also swells with transient workers on a regular basis.

SUBMISSION

(a) The Cost Of The Elections.

Council engaged the Electoral Commission of NSW Electoral Commission (NSWEC) to conduct the Elections for Council on 23 May 2012 after the approval of the Minister for Local Government and a change of Regulations. Narrabri Shire Council originally endeavoured to conduct the election “in-house” however due to the resignation of a returning officer close to the commencement of the election preparation, Council was successful in applying for a change to the Election Regulation to engage the Electoral Commission to conduct the Election and a Referendum on behalf of Council.

Council had allocated \$110,000 towards the cost of conducting the election and referendum “in-house”. The Electoral Commission final costing with limited costs associated directly at Council was under \$80,000. Therefore the cost of conducting the election and referendum through the Electoral Commission was financially beneficial to Council.

(b) The Expense Of Councils That Conducted Their Own Elections.

Narrabri Shire Council allocated an amount of \$110,000 to initially conduct the election and referendum “in-house”. After a review of the minimum requirements to conduct the voting and sorting there is a concern that the cost would have exceeded the funds particularly in providing a program to ensure that the vote counting was recorded within requirement.

(c) Possible Legislative Changes To Improve The Efficiency Of And Participation In Local Government Elections.

Issues identified are the restrictions on who may be or may not be a returning officer. Within Section 269A of the Local Government Act, 1993 the following is stated:-

“(4) An employee of a council for an area cannot be appointed as a returning officer or substitute returning officer for that area. However, an electoral official may be an employee of the council.

(5) A general manager cannot be appointed as a returning officer, substitute returning officer or electoral official for any area.”

This was identified as an issue when Council’s appointed Returning Officer resigned and another staff member was unable to carry out the position.

(d) Non-Residential Voting In Local Government Elections.

To increase the numbers of Non-Residential voting and ensure further management Internet and Telephone voting should be considered as an option. This service was made available at the NSW State Elections in 2011 with the electors who were physically or visually handicapped; those electors interstate on Election Day; or those claiming to be in excess of 20 kilometers from the nearest polling place, were permitted to register for and to vote by Internet or Telephone.

A form of "remote" Internet Voting was used. Some 51,000 electors applied to be "electronic" voters and ultimately just short of 47,000 electors used these electronic systems. About 95% of those who did vote electronically used Internet Voting and not Telephone Voting and just fewer than 2,000 electors, who were physically or visually impaired, used the systems. The great bulk of electronic voters were those electors travelling interstate or living in remote areas.

This is clearly a successful medium for managing Non-Residential Voting in Local Government.

(e) The Impact Of Requirements Under Election Funding, Expenditure And Disclosures Act, 1981 On Participation By Candidates In Local Government Elections And Possible Legislation Changes To Remove Any Barriers To Participation.

The consideration to remove the requirement for candidates to appoint an agent where there is no intention to raise funds or spend over \$1,000. This will remove extra red tape in the nomination and candidature for Local Government.

(f) Other Related Matters.

The possible provision of a Division of Local Government supplied program to assist Local Governments in managing the voting count for each election. This process is complicated and can cause conjecture. A program approved and supplied by DLG would assist Local Governments in conducting “in-house” elections.

Campaigning and encouragement of young generations to enroll to vote and take part in Local Government Elections which could mean the promotion of postal voting electronically using scanned documents with a coded screen password only available once for each enrollee, and promotion of per election polling.

Provision of a notice board controlled by the returning officer or their staff enabling each candidate to place their how to vote card at the pre polling location.

Narrabri Shire Council would effectively reconsider the possibility of conducting the 2016 election in house with the assistance of vote counting management system and possible changes to ensure that should a returning officer be removed from the election there were less stipulations in replacing that position.

There have been trials and developments in ways to further develop the services in remote and regional areas for Local Government Elections and Narrabri Shire Council is willing to assist in furthering the provision of services to its residents in ensuring that all registered voters have the opportunity to participate within the Election process.