

## **INQUIRY INTO 2008 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS**

**Organisation:** Port Stephens Council

**Name:** Mr Peter Gesling

**Position:** General Manager

**Date Received:** 13/05/2009

---

Ms Cherie Burton MP  
Chair  
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters  
Email: [electoralmatters.commmmittee@parliament.nsw.gov.au](mailto:electoralmatters.commmmittee@parliament.nsw.gov.au)

Dear Ms Burton

## **SUBMISSION INQUIRY INTO 2008 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS**

Council at its meeting on the 12 May 2009 resolved make a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters.

As the Committee would appreciate most NSW Council are concerned about the rising costs to the ratepayers to conduct the Local Government elections. Port Stephens Council recently received the final costs for the 2008 Local Government Election for our local government area which totalled \$308,200, over double the cost of the 2004 election. The cost to conduct the 2004 election was \$151,350. This costs was much lower when the elections were conducted "in-house".

Whilst Council appreciates the NSW State Government, through the NSW Electoral Commission has endeavoured to improve the system and make it more open and transparent, this has come at a high cost to the ratepayer and has had a major impact on local government services.

Council also raises concerns in the following areas:

**Delay with election results** – Under the current system Councils are waiting up to 2 weeks after the election to receive an outcome (this occurred with Port Stephens). In past under the system of Councils conducting the election in-house, the results were available on the Sunday or Monday after election day at a lower cost.

**Group Voting** – The move away from the "House of Representatives" style voting to the Group Voting (above or below the line) has created a great deal of misunderstanding for the electors. This method of voting also increases the cost to the elector. Port Stephens Council had the second highest number of candidates in the last election due to candidates being of the belief that they had a better chance of being elected under the "group ticket" method. It has been proven in past election that this is not necessarily the case.

**Electoral Office/staffing** – In the 2008 election the NSW Electoral Commission implemented a number of new processes and procedures. A number of Councillors have raised concerns with the experience and knowledge of the returning officer and how difficult it was to be certain from the advice given that they were complying totally with the Act and Regulations.

The introduction of the "Hotline" telephone service was not well received by the community and Council received large number of complaints with respect to the hotline. Electors were



concerned that they were not able to have direct contact with their local election office and where they may have been able to contact them it was via a mobile telephone number, hence additional costs to the caller.

**Electoral Funding Authority** – At the 2008 election the requirements for candidates changed significantly, in particular, the requirement for an agent to be appointed, candidates required to have their account audited by suitably qualified persons and the on going requirement to lodge 6 monthly returns for expenditure. This has added to the on-going cost as a candidate/councillor and may be seen as a barrier for some people who would otherwise seriously considered standing for council and actively participated in local government as a councillor.

Further to the issue surrounding the requirement to have the candidates accounts audited is the fact that in some instances it is difficult to access a suitably qualified person to audit the accounts – this again adds to the overall costs for candidates considering standing for Council.

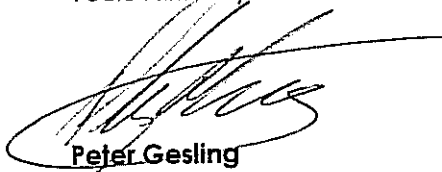
**Funding** - The issue of equity across all levels of government is of concern to Council. Both the Federal and State Government candidates received funds to conduct their campaign through the "Public Trust Fund", however this form of funding is not available to candidates for local government.

A number of Councillors also raised concerns with respect to the cost of advertising for candidates during the campaign for the election. Examples given by Councillors indicated that the price for standard advertisements in local newspaper were more than double of the same size advertisement on other issues. It would appear that the media industry are taking advantage of the election at the cost of community members wishing to represent their local areas.

Council would like to see a whole of system review conducted to improve not only the process for the elector but also the candidates. The major factor for this Council and indeed all NSW Councils is the increasing costs on the ratepayer to conduct the elections.

Council looks forward to the report from the Committee.

Yours faithfully



**Peter Gesling**  
**GENERAL MANAGER**

Date: 13 May 2009