

**Submission
No 23**

2012 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

Organisation: Lismore City Council
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Lismore City Council submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters Inquiry into the September 2012 Local Government elections.

Lismore City Council engaged the NSW Electoral Commission to conduct our election on September 8, 2012.

There were three votes taken:

1. Mayoral election
2. Councillors' election
3. Poll question on CSG

The Council's submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry is set out under the Terms of Reference:

(a) the costs of the elections;

1. While Council had some ability to reduce costs through negotiating the number of booths, use of Council officers and offices for pre-poll, the cost remains an unreasonable burden on our Council. While Council sought alternative providers for the conduct of election but costs were equally high and the perceived risks were judged by Council to be excessive. In addition, as part of our Council's contract with the Electoral Commission, we are locked into using them for any bi elections, polls or referendums up until the next general election. Council would request further guidelines to assist us in our decision making for future elections.

2. The breakdown of the account received from the Commission is aggregated in such a way as to make it difficult to analyse. In our case there were no separate costings for the Mayoral Election or Poll question.

(b) the experience of councils that conducted their own elections - *not relevant.*

(c) possible legislative changes to improve the efficiency of and participation in Local Government elections;

Above the line voting

The greatest impediment to participating in the democratic process is the need to form a group, to have your "square" above the line and thus have a realistic chance of getting elected. Currently the group stands at half the number of Councillors to be elected, thus a single vote above the line is a formal vote.

While groups provide an opportunity to get like-minded people elected and spread the cost, an alternative could be that a group be reduced to two, with a single vote above the line being formal.

Another alternative supported by some of our Councillors is to eliminate group voting. The current system creates a bias to the Mayor's group because it effectively gives that group one more representative than they are entitled to.

While there is some preference in our Council for first past the post voting, it is not widely supported and there is acknowledgement that Australia has preferential voting for its elections at State and Federal elections.

Pre Poll

Two weeks of Pre-Poll is excessive and would appear to encourage voters to vote prior to election day for convenience only. One week of pre-poll is regarded as sufficient. As more people now appear to be voting Pre-Poll, the choice of the Pre-Poll venue and additional staffing will need to be considered for future elections. There was some concern expressed that Council staff should not have been involved in any role at Pre-Poll.

Some Councillors suggest having HTVs available inside the booth at Pre-Poll and no handing out of HTVs outside. There have been further suggestions of a standardised form and size of HTVs available at Pre-Poll.

Postal Voting

A number of voters reported that they did not receive their voting papers before the election. Postal voting papers needed to be sent out earlier. The lack of Absentee voting at LG elections disadvantages voters hospitalised or otherwise unexpectedly out-of-area. The lack of voting on the day at the hospitals in Lismore also may have disadvantaged some Lismore residents.

Electronic Voting

This issue needs to be pursued for the general public to vote on line. The community is increasingly operating on-line and, as we understand that this is option is currently available for remote locations, it is time that on-line voting be introduced for LG elections.

Voter Understanding

Candidates report that many voters remain unaware that voting in Council elections is compulsory, that there is no Absentee Voting (except at Sydney

Town Hall) and on how voting Above the Line works. Most voters have no understanding of how an optional preferential system works and there is confusion between the mayoral poll and the Councillors' poll. There is an apparent need for more voter education.

(d) non-residential voting in Local Government elections;

There appears to be a lack of awareness by many property owners that they are entitled to vote in LG elections if they live elsewhere but that they need to apply to Council to do so.

(e) the impact of requirements under the *Election Funding, Expenditure and Disclosures Act 1981* on participation by candidates in Local Government elections and possible legislative changes to remove any barriers to participation; *The need to have candidates' financial expenditure and income audited by registered company auditors is excessive. A registered accountant should be sufficient.*

(f) any other related matter.

The fact that the Electoral Commission and Electoral Funding Authority require almost identical forms to be submitted from candidates without reference to each other is totally absurd. There should only be one set of forms required. The burden of paper work on small teams/parties in the election is extraordinary.

Thank you for considering this submission

Jenny Dowell
Mayor
Lismore City Council
February 6, 2013