

INQUIRY INTO 2008 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

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Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

Inquiry into 2008 Local Government Elections

Penrith City Council Submission



Introduction

Thank you for this opportunity to talk about Penrith City Council's concerns regarding the cost and conduct of the 2008 local government elections.

Firstly may I just say that we appreciate the challenges and timeframes faced by the NSW Electoral Commission. We understand the scale and complexity of local government elections and the technological and legislative changes being embraced.

The NSW Electoral Commission has addressed most of the seven key issues raised by Penrith City Council as per our submission of April 8, but there are some that require further discussion.

We appreciate the responses received directly from the Commissioner in December 2008 and March 2009, and the discussion of some of the issues in the NSW Electoral Commission's *Report on the 2008 Local Government Elections*.

Submission

Our major concerns are the time taken for the count to be processed, and the cost of the 2008 elections compared to previous elections.

- 1. Our Council would like counting for the Penrith LGA to be done locally in future, at a central venue under the direction of the appointed Returning Officer for the Penrith LGA**

This is due to the delay in processing our ballot papers at the Centralised Counting Centre in Riverwood. The results for our local government area were declared 12 days after the election in 2004 and 10 days after in 2008.

When the elections were conducted by councils results were generally known in four days.

The NSW Electoral Commissioner has advised that the ballot processing software is intended to be further developed and may be deployed to more localised counting centres in the 2012 elections.

We strongly hope this happens, and happens in Penrith.

2. With regard to costs:

We are concerned about the increase in costs to Council between the 2004 and the 2008 elections. In 2004, the overall cost to Penrith City Council of the local government elections was around \$400,000 compared to \$627,000 in 2008. Firstly we would like to commend the NSW Electoral Commission for providing such a detailed breakdown of the costs for the 2008 elections.

We appreciate that the lack of a detailed breakdown in 2004 makes a direct comparison difficult. However there do seem to be some areas where costs have increased dramatically.

In 2008 for example Council paid the NSW Electoral Commission:

- \$61,280 in Administration fees compared to \$11,547 in 2004
- \$43,630 for Materials compared to \$6,132 in 2004
- \$29,100 for Returning Officer wages compared to almost half that, \$15,891 in 2004

If it is going to cost us that much, Council wants value for money for our residents in terms of an efficient and timely election service.

- 3. We are concerned that some polling places actually ran out of ballot papers, and are not satisfied that steps have been taken to ensure this does not happen again at the 2012 elections.**

We note the Electoral Commissioner's advice on how voting numbers were projected for each polling place, and accept that it is not an exact science.

However, in our local government area it seems the difference between projected and actual numbers at some polling places was as great as 80-150%.

We are not satisfied that the Electoral Commission has properly identified why this happened, in order to ensure it is avoided in future.

This needs to be addressed and processes put in place to ensure this does not occur during the 2012 elections. In Council's experience, the previous practice of providing specific staff positions of Polling Place Liaison Officers to act as "ward runners" on election day worked well to ensure the constant supply of materials and ballot papers to polling places.

- 4. We would also like it to be a requirement for future elections that all How to Vote material include the Ward name where a council area is divided into wards.**

The NSW Electoral Commissioner has advised that he will refer our comments on this matter to the Commission's legal officer "for possible amendment when the regulations are being reviewed in the future".

We hope this change occurs before the next elections, as voters have a right to be clear about the ward to which the How to Vote material applies.

Additional Concerns

In addition to the issues raised in our original submission, we would also like to draw attention to the following two concerns regarding the 2008 local government elections:

5. A lack of absentee voting.

In both Federal and State elections, a resident has the opportunity to cast their vote in other electorates, however, under current legislation, there is no provision for absentee voting in local government elections.

I have been advised by Polling Place Managers that a large number of residents attempted to cast absentee votes in different local government areas on election day. When they were advised they had to cast their vote in their own local government area, a number of residents became agitated.

I understand a limited amount of advertising took place before the elections advising residents that absentee voting would not be available in local government elections. However, the large amount of people who attempted to cast absentee ballots on the day would indicate the message was not communicated widely enough or simply not understood. Hence, a large number of residents were disenfranchised during the election as they were unable to cast their vote in their place of choice.

We understand that in its submission, the NSW Electoral Commission has touched upon this issue, indicating there is no provision in the current legislation that allows for absentee voting. The submission states that it would be “prohibitively expensive and logistically very cumbersome to provide absentee voting at each polling place throughout NSW.”

Given the fact that electors have the opportunity to cast absentee votes in both the Federal and State Government elections, a substantial awareness program alerting residents to the lack of absentee votes in local government elections is needed to communicate this message to the community.

Without the establishment of such a program, we request the Standing Committee give consideration to amending the current legislation to allow for absentee voting in local government elections. A possible concession might be to provide absentee voting for residents in adjoining local government areas.

Additionally, the NSW Electoral Commission could consider providing a process where at least at key locations throughout the state the individuals can vote absentee.

- 6. We would like polling place staff provided with information about other polling places within our three wards, as well as adjoining local government areas.**

I have been advised by Polling Place Managers that there was some confusion regarding the exact venues of polling places on election day. As Penrith City Council is divided into three wards, residents are required to cast their vote at polling places within their own ward.

However, some residents living close to ward boundary lines unknowingly attempted to cast votes at polling places outside their ward area. Similarly, some residents living close to local government area boundary lines were confused about where they could cast their vote.

Polling place staff could not provide these residents with the exact details of available polling places in adjoining wards or local government areas, which led to confusion and agitation for a number of electors.

The same situation occurred with pre-poll voting, as polling place staff were not informed of pre-poll voting centres for adjoining local government areas.

We submit that polling place staff be provided with detailed information of all polling venues within the three wards of our own local government area, as well as adjoining local government areas so we can efficiently direct residents to their correct polling venues, including details of pre-poll centres.

Further Information

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Standing Committee.

Contact:

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