

INQUIRY INTO 2008 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

Organisation: Eurobodalla Shire Council

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EUROBODALLA SHIRE COUNCIL

Good Government, better living

13 May 2009

Ms Cherie Burton MP
Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament House
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Dear Ms Burton

Eurobodalla Shire Council appreciates the opportunity to present the following comments on the administration and conduct of the 2008 Local Government Election in the Eurobodalla Shire Council area.

Electoral Costs

Eurobodalla Shire Council is aware that by law, the NSW Electoral Commission is required to conduct Local Government elections and by law, each council is required to pay the costs associated with their election.

Prior to 2008, Council worked closely with the Returning Officer and provided at no cost to the Electoral Commission: administrative support in the time leading up to the election, on the election day, and for counting after the election; office space including office equipment for the Returning Officer and staff; use of Council buildings as polling booths; and paid for election advertising, etc. In addition Council used its facilities to pay all polling officials and clerical assistants who were engaged by the Returning Officer. Council's provision of these services enabled costs to be contained.

The cost to Council of the 2004 local government election was approximately \$98,000.

For the 2008 elections the Electoral Commission announced they would undertake all activities associated with the election and charge the costs back to Council on a full cost recovery basis.

At the suggestion of the Electoral Commission in an effort to contain costs, it was agreed that Bega Valley Shire Council and Eurobodalla Shire Council would share a Returning Officer. Accommodation for the Returning Officer was provided at an office separate from the Council Administration building and furniture and equipment for the Returning Officer and his staff were leased.

The NSW Electoral Commission initially provided a detailed indicative budget estimate of \$227,000 for the conduct of the 2008 Local Government election in Eurobodalla Shire.

In September 2008, following pressure from local government, the Commission reviewed its charging model and advised Council that the election cost estimate for Eurobodalla Shire was \$187,900, excluding GST.

The final reconciled cost for the 2008 election was \$199,900, excluding GST.

Council Staff Workload

As in the past, Council staff were required to prepare the Non Resident Roll, including advertising and writing to all non resident ratepayers, telephone advice, receiving nominations and data entry for the roll. Eurobodalla Shire has approximately 37% non resident ratepayers, therefore compilation of the roll is a time consuming task and a cost in addition to the Commission's charges.

In all local government elections, considerable staff time is spent liaising with the Returning Officer and his staff. In 2008 extra time was taken up dealing with a Returning Officer who had no previous experience in running an election and whose office was located away from the Council Administrative building.

Conduct of the Election

There was much confusion from the public, candidates and the media as to the conduct of the 2008 General Council elections. Much of this confusion would appear to have been as a result of wrong or poor information being provided by Electoral Commission officers or polling officials.

Council's staff were continually asked questions by the above groups and were sought to clarify many of the instructions given to the candidates on a regular basis.

The election itself seemed to occur fairly seamlessly, although there was some delays and confusion as to the counting of primary and preferential votes. Council accepts that this may have been due to the fact that Eurobodalla Shire Council had an election of the popular election of mayor as well, although some resources may also have been drained due to a single polling official for both Bega and Eurobodalla and the pressures imposed to publish results simultaneously. Council contends that although masked as saving resources and costs, this may have in fact increased time, resources and ultimately costs to Council.

Conclusion

The NSW Electoral Commission has determined that local government elections should be conducted at "arms-length" from councils to ensure that elections are conducted with impartiality and independence. The Commission believes that in the past the full cost of elections was not captured as councils provided some election services "in kind" and as a result in 2008 the Commission would undertake all activities associated with the election and charge the costs back to Council on a full cost recovery basis.

The end result for Council's ratepayers of complying with the Commission's vision for the conduct of elections was an increase in costs of approximately 100% with a considerable impact on Council's budget for 2008.

There was no perceivable change in the "impartiality and independence" of the election process.

Council staff still spent a similar amount of time compiling the Non Resident Roll and liaising with the Returning Officer and his staff, with the only time savings being in the payment of wages.

If considered appropriate, I would be pleased to provide oral evidence before the Committee on the issues raised in our submission. I can be contacted on [REDACTED] if you require any further information.

Yours faithfully



PAUL J ANDERSON
GENERAL MANAGER