

2012 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

Organisation: Mid-Western Regional Council
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6 February 2013

The Chair
Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament of NSW
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

ATTENTION: Mr Jai Rowell, MP

Dear Mr Rowell

INQUIRY INTO THE 2012 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into the 2012 Local Government Elections. The attached submission was endorsed by the Mid Western Regional Council at its meeting on Wednesday 6th February 2013.

Council wishing to make the following comments in regard to the terms of reference for the Committee:

1. The cost of the elections

Submission: The Mid Western Regional Council believes it's appropriate that the management and administration of the election process remains independent from the Council bureaucracy. This Council sought two prices to undertake the management of the 2012 election process, one from the NSW Electoral Commission and the other from a private company. The estimate supplied by the Electoral Commission was very competitive. Thus Council is of the opinion that if private enterprise cannot undertake the election process at a lesser cost then the amount Council paid must be reasonable.

However in saying that Council does have very real concerns at the ever increasing cost of running elections. Mid-Western is an undivided area (with all Councillors representing the entire local government area rather than one Ward) so the cost of any bi-election for just one Councillor is almost the same as the four year election. It is considered that there needs to be put in place a mechanism to reduce the costs to Councils and the communities for bi-elections.

In this regard, it is worth noting that each year, Council sets aside \$60,000 in its Election Reserve to fund the General Election every 4 years as well as any bi-elections that may be required.

2. The experience of councils that conducted their own elections

Submission: The Mid Western Regional Council used the services of the NSW Electoral Commission for the 2012 election..

As indicated above, Council believes that the electoral process should be kept independent of the Council. Accordingly, Council is of the opinion that the some action needs to be taken to further disassociate those councils which chose to use the services of a provider, other than the NSW Electoral Commission for the process. The changes to the legislation in 2012 to enable councils to contract out the electoral process also still made the Council, through the General Manager responsible to some degree. This situation needs to change.

3. Issues arising from non-residential voting

Submission: The Mid Western Regional Council had makes the comment about the need to encourage more people to take an active interest in the democratic electoral process.

There is a longstanding perception that Australian are generally apathetic when it comes to elections. While at Mid-Western we generally get a good residential voter turnout, the number of non-residents who have interests in property in the region and who have sought inclusion in the non-residential roll of electors, has been traditionally been low.

Whether this is because they were unaware of the election or have little interest in local politics is an unknown but any action that might be taken to encourage a greater interest can't be a bad thing.

4. Possible legislative changes to improve efficiency of and participation in Local Government elections

Submission: Council would like to offer some brief comments about

- The use of technology;
- Better use of postal voting;
- Options for pre polling; and
- Better remuneration for Councillors.

The Mid Western Regional Council strongly believes that the electoral legislation needs a major rewrite to allow the usage of modern technology in the process . Technology can play an important part in the way we vote. Most of our lives revolve in some way shape or form with the use of technology - except voting. It is Council position that voting should be able to be done on line, such as at eftpos outlets, at voting kiosks or utilising some similar technology process. If we trust technology to purchase and pay for goods anywhere in the world, withdraw cash, buy a house, then surely we can be trusted to vote using modern technology.

This Council does not wish to go into lots of detail on this matter as it needs research. That research is not difficult as many countries around the world use technology for the electoral process.

Communities should also have the option to elect to use postal voting as an alternative to the current system.

While those voters who will not be actually in the respective local government area on polling day can elect to make a postal vote, there is the argument that if you provided

entire electorate with the opportunity to vote by mail rather than have to physically attend a polling place then you would get a better voter turnout.

The use of pre poll voting is another area that needs reviewing.

There are two sides to this.

On one hand, there is the argument that, at present, there is too much time for pre polling. At the most recent election in Mid-Western, more people voted pre poll than attended the largest polling place in the region on polling day. This has been the trend for some time now. If candidates have any chance of winning an election then they must be available through the pre polling phase of the election. The current process is that pre polling is open for two weeks. If a candidate who does not have the time or the resources (particularly financial) to spend two weeks of their lives outside the pre polling booths then their chance of getting elected and participating in the democracy of Council are reduced enormously. The current process would have an effect on a small business operator, a candidate on a low or medium wage as well as a mother with a young family.

Also Council makes the point that currently, Councillors are remunerated at levels that certainly discourages people with limited financial and time resources from representing their community. A Councillor at Mid-Western currently gets paid in the order of \$10,000 per year plus at cost reimbursement of expenses. No young person bringing up a family or working to get their family ahead could ever afford to become a Councillor at these pay scales. This Council is experiencing unprecedented growth of around 5% per annum. It takes considerable time and effort for elected representatives to understand all the issues, consult the community, discuss with staff and colleagues, read numerous reports to deal with this type of growth - all for \$10,000 per year. Any community spirited person with limited resources could never have a chance to fully participate in Council and local democracy if they are not adequately compensated for their time and effort.

5. The impact of requirements under the *Election Funding Expenditure and Disclosure Act 1981* on participation by candidates in Local Government elections and possible legislative changes to remove barriers to participation

Submission: The Electoral Funding Expenditure and Disclosure Act 1981 needs to become less bureaucratic. Candidates should have a limit of election expenditure without filing large amounts of paper work. This Council would recommend that that limit be set at \$5,000. It is also Council's submission that this same limit should apply to candidates on groups. That limit should also be \$5,000 applying to electoral tickets. Then a simple statutory declaration at the end of the election process to indicate the levels of expenditure and where the money was generated from - i.e. by own money or donations.

On the ticket system each candidate and group is required to appoint an Official Agent. Again this Council submits that such a position is an unnecessary bureaucratic imposition for small campaigns and need to have a financial limit placed upon that need for such a role.

6. Any other related matter

Submission: The Mid-Western Regional Council would like to see the issue of "campaign tickets" being an optional issue for elections with the individual council's being able to determine whether or not to have above the line voting. Council is fully aware of the background of the campaign ticket system, but it is only valid in Council's opinion where party politics play a dominate role in the council political system. In most regional and rural councils, it is contended that party politics are very seldom part of the

council process. It's all about community people who believe they have the best skills and attributes for the role as a Councillor. However, candidates are forced into a group system because a large portion of the voting population vote above the line. That will always mean that the large portion of candidates have no chance of being elected and, indeed, often the majority who stand in groups don't want to be. They just go on the group as a favour to the candidate to make up the number of candidates required on a group to permit above the line voting. In other words if a community through the public consultation process does want the ticket system and vote for candidates directly then it should have the option to do that.

Should you have any queries in relation to this matter please contact me on 637802850.

Yours sincerely



WARWICK L BENNETT
GENERAL MANAGER