

## **2012 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS**

**Organisation:** Bega Valley Shire Council  
**Name:** Name Suppressed  
**Date Received:** 8/02/2013



6 February 2013

Mr Jai Rowell MP  
Chair  
Committee on Electoral Matters  
Parliament of New South Wales  
Macquarie Street  
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Mr Rowell

## **Inquiry into the 2012 Local Government Elections**

Bega Valley Shire Council appreciates the opportunity to make a submission concerning the conduct and administration of the 2012 Local Government Election in the Bega Valley Shire Council area.

### **Electoral Costs**

The Bega Valley Shire Council elected to have the NSW Electoral Commission (NSWEC) conduct the election in the Shire on behalf of the Council. The Council is required to pay to the NSWEC the costs associated with its election.

Council has just received the final invoice for the costs incurred to conduct the election, dated 29 January 2013. The total expense to Council to conduct the election, exclusive of GST, is \$178,924.00, and presumed to include the cost of a poll question.

As in 2008, the Bega Valley Shire Council and the Eurobodalla Shire Council again agreed to share a Returning Officer. The accommodation for the RO and staff, was arranged in Bega by the NSWEC. It is unclear from invoicing, to what extent the anticipated cost savings of sharing an RO and office were realised.

The cost to Council to conduct the 2008 election was \$144,200 exclusive of GST.

The invoice summaries accompanying the 2008 and 2012 invoices are set out differently and do not enable a simple comparison of the election deliverables to be easily made.

Provision of estimates by NSWEC, for Council budget purposes, would be appreciated.

### **Possible legislative changes to improve efficiency of and participation in Local Government elections**

As has been reported by recent Standing Committees on electoral matters, particularly at State level, suggested changes to improve the process of, and participation in, local government elections include:

- the opportunity for on-line or smartphone application voting, subject to suitable controls;
- the introduction of an automatic or electronic enrolment system using existing data sources to identify eligible electors;
- removal of the 'close of roll' cut-off date and permit enrolment up to the close of the election on the day of the election.

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## **Non-residential voting**

Prior to the 2012 election, Council identified in excess of 1000 ratepayers with out-of-shire addresses, being potential non-residential electors.

In view of the costs associated with a general mail-out or advertising by Council, it was decided to send the 2012 non-residential roll material and application forms to the electors listed on the 2008 Non-Resident Roll (43 electors).

In addition, because the NSWEC conducted non-resident roll advertising within the state, it was decided to undertake a small mail-out focusing on interstate potential non-resident electors.

The 2012 Bega Valley Shire Council Election Non-Resident Roll dated 2 August 2012 listed seven (7) non-resident electors.

Council received a small number of applications after the closing date. Council also received a small number of application forms completed by persons who apparently misunderstood the process, e.g. local residents renting accommodation in the Shire who were not ratepayers, but believed they would be unable to vote unless they enrolled as a non-resident elector.

It is proposed that for future local government elections, in order to reach as many potential non-resident electors as possible, the option to send out material with rates notices be explored. However, this would necessitate the relevant application form and related material being made available by the NSWEC earlier in the year in order to meet deadlines and timeframes for the mail-out of annual rates notices.

Alternatively, it is suggested that individual Councils be permitted to prepare their own non-resident roll materials and have them approved by the NSWEC earlier in the process for use in accordance with a Council's individual circumstances.

A further suggestion to improve the efficiency of the non-resident roll process and to maximise voter participation is to permit eligible electors to enrol and vote on-line or by postal vote.

### **Impact of requirements under *the Election Funding, Expenditure and Disclosures Act* on participation by candidates and possible changes to remove barriers to participation**

The comment has been made that there be inserted a specific provision in the legislation dealing with self-funded independent candidates. In rural areas, candidates are often self-funded. Such a provision may assist to reduce paperwork and encourage more candidates to stand.

## **Other matters**

### **Council staff workload**

Council staff were required to prepare the Non-Resident Roll, including writing to potential non-resident electors, providing telephone, email or other written advice, receiving applications and data entry for the Roll. Preparation for, and compilation of, the Roll is a time consuming task, and a cost in addition to the costs charged by the NSWEC.

In addition, considerable staff time is spent liaising with the staff of the Returning Office in relation to a variety of issues in the lead up to the election and afterwards.

## **Conduct of the election**

There was some feedback after the election concerning the lack of public awareness of the election taking place and confusion surrounding the inclusion of the poll question concerning the retention of the Pambula hospital. Comment was to the effect that a lack of awareness and/or advertising contributed to the lower than anticipated voter turnout and failure to vote.

Suggestions received following the election included a general mail-out to be carried out, to ensure that all potential electors, not just ratepayers, were aware of the election. A further suggestion was that better use be made of local ABC radio to increase awareness of the election.

The decision by the NSWEC to not place a polling station at Bimbimbie Retirement Home in Merimbula, as had occurred in the past at elections for all levels of government, was called into question and numerous local residents indicated they were inconvenienced by this decision. However, on balance, the costs saving associated with this decision may prove to outweigh the level of inconvenience.

In the lead up to the election, Council staff fielded many enquiries, particularly in relation to pre-polling and opening hours of the three pre-polling stations in Eden, Merimbula and Bermagui, and as to the location of the Returning Office in Bega. There were comments that there needed to be greater awareness of the actual location of the Returning Office in Bega.

The election itself appeared to have taken place smoothly and the declaration for the Shire occurred promptly, particularly given the resources of the Returning Office were also directed to the conduct of the Eurobodalla election which involved the popular election of Mayor.

However, this process of sharing a Returning Officer, whilst claiming to enable costs and resource savings, may in fact increase time, resources and costs to Council and review of the process may be warranted to ensure it is of benefit to stakeholders.

## **Polling booths**

As mentioned above, the decision was made in 2012 to not place a polling booth at Bimbimbie Retirement Home in Merimbula. Whilst this may ultimately represent a cost saving, the decision appears to have been made without reference to the Council. It may be of value to consider the position of Council in future in such matters, on the basis that local staff are more aware of community needs and sentiments than staff based in Sydney.

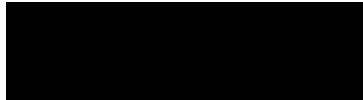
There was also confusion and a perceived lack of communication between the NSWEC and site owners/managers in relation to the hire arrangements for polling booth sites and confirmation of same. The week of the election, Council staff were required to assist to confirm arrangements for the Eden Community Centre for pre-poll and polling.

Feedback has been received in relation to the polling booth at the Bega High School. Electors were apparently confused as to where to go. On previous occasions, the polling booth was at the School itself whereas for this election, it was located in the Hall which is somewhat out of the way. The candidates had set up outside the school and not the hall. The hall itself was stated to be inadequate for use as a polling booth, as there were no kitchen facilities.

## **Electoral Boundaries**

Again, residents remained confused regarding the difference in electoral boundaries for a state and local government election. Bamboka and environs is within the Bega Valley Shire Council area, while it does not fall within the Bega state electorate. It is suggested in the review of electoral boundaries and local government under Destination2036, a better alignment of council and electorate boundaries should be contemplated.

Yours faithfully

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