

**Submission
No 62**

2012 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

Organisation: Albury City
Name: Mr Michael Keys
Position: Acting General Manager
Date Received: 28/01/2013

24 January 2013

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

Dear Mr Rowell

AlburyCity Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters Inquiry

Further to your invitation of 20 December 2012, and in accordance with the Terms of Reference, please find attached AlburyCity's submission to the Committee on Electoral Matters Inquiry into the 2012 Local Government Elections.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission and we look forward to the Committee report.

Yours faithfully



Michael Keys
Acting General Manager

Attach

AlburyCity Submission to

**The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Inquiry into the 2012 Local Government Elections**

(FIL11/01566)

18 January 2013

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TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters is to inquire into and report on the September 2012 Local Government elections with particular reference to:

- (a) the costs of the elections;
- (b) the experience of councils that conducted their own elections;
- (c) possible legislative changes to improve the efficiency of and participation in Local Government elections;
- (d) non-residential voting in Local Government elections; and
- (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; and
- (f) any other related matter.

The Committee is to report on the outcome of its inquiry by 30 June 2013.

INTRODUCTION

On 20 December 2012 the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters invited Albury City Council to make a submission addressing the specific terms of reference in order to assist the inquiry.

AlburyCity is pleased to make this submission in relation to the 2012 Local Government Elections facilitated by the NSW Electoral Commission.

BACKGROUND

Albury City Council contracted the NSW Electoral Commission (NSWEC) to administer the 2012 election on their behalf.

Following the September election the NSWEC circulated a survey to general managers seeking feedback from all election stakeholders who chose the Commission to conduct their election. AlburyCity's General Manager lodged a survey return.

This survey and consultation with local stakeholders forms the basis of this submission. A number of concerns were raised including the cost of the election and barriers to candidate participation.

The 2012 Local Government Association Annual Conference in Dubbo also raised matters relating to the local government elections including the pre-poll period and the cost to local government organisations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

Introduce a universal postal voting system as per *Recommendation 11 of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters Report on the 2008 Local Government Elections (June 2008)*:

- a) *The Local Government Act 1993 be amended to allow elections with universal postal voting for those councils who opt to use that method of election, in time for the 2012 local government elections*
- b) *The Government undertake consultation on the best method for councils to use to decide to opt into a universal postal voting system*
- c) *The NSW Electoral Commission provide advice to the General Manager of local councils interested in universal postal voting as to the costs involved in taking up this option.*

Recommendation 2

Dispense with the current grouped candidate voting system and give councils the option to choose their own voting method.

Recommendation 3

The Election Funding Authority to increase the awareness of the opportunity to register through more effective advertising and promotion, including through websites and social media.

Recommendation 4

- a. Reduce the pre-polling period to a maximum of one week; and
- b. The Election Funding Authority to simplify the guidelines and process to assist candidates.

Recommendation 5

- a. Increase the reach and frequency of promotion and advertising campaigns prior to the election.
- b. Tailor advertising campaigns highlighting the importance of "having your say".
- c. Introduce a universal postal voting system as an option for Councils.
- d. Seek the provision of disability car parking in close proximity to the polling place well ahead of the scheduled election date.

KEY ISSUES

a. The Cost of the Election

Albury City Council contracted the NSW Electoral Commission (NSWEC) to administer the 2012 election on their behalf.

In November 2011 the NSWEC provided an indicative quotation of \$214,280 to conduct the 2012 elections. This quotation was based on their estimated cost recovery. In addition, AlburyCity was responsible for the advertising costs of \$4,904 that is, a total cost of \$219,184. Final costings will not be available until mid-February 2012.

Payments to the NSWEC for the 2008 election was \$196,360 and other costs were \$2,424 that is, a total cost of \$198,784. Therefore the estimated cost increase between the 2008 and 2012 elections is \$20,400.

In October 2012, the NSWEC circulated a survey to Councils who chose the Electoral Commission to conduct their election.

AlburyCity's response to the survey included the following comments:

- the NSWEC did not provide adequate consultation on key aspects of the election and there was little discussion or opportunity for negotiation with regard to costs; and
- initial 2008 costs and with the CPI increases, the 2012 costs are higher than other options such as postal voting.

AlburyCity has 33,100 enrolled voters and the neighbouring City of Wodonga in Victoria has 27,078 enrolled voters. The City of Wodonga conducts its elections as postal voting. For the 2012 election the quotation from the Victorian Electoral Commission was \$166,978. It consisted of two contracts:

- a. Contract one: roll preparation and conduct of the general election for \$153,594. This includes all advertising, a shop front in Wodonga and information sessions for potential candidates.
- b. Contract two: compulsory voting enforcement for \$13,384. The money received under voting enforcement is returned to council – likely to be between \$30,000 and \$50,000.

Therefore, AlburyCity's 2012 election cost of \$219,184 compares to City of Wodonga's 2012 postal voting election cost of \$166,978 (less the voting enforcement funds returned to council – between \$30,000 and \$50,000).

Recommendation 1

Introduce a universal postal voting system as per *Recommendation 11 of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters Report on the 2008 Local Government Elections (June 2008)*:

- a) *The Local Government Act 1993 be amended to allow elections with universal postal voting for those councils who opt to use that method of election, in time for the 2012 local government elections;*
- b) *The Government undertake consultation on the best method for councils to use to decide to opt into a universal postal voting system; and*
- c) *The NSW Electoral Commission provide advice to the General Manager of local councils interested in universal postal voting as to the costs involved in taking up this option.*

b. Experience of Councils conducting their own elections

Not applicable to AlburyCity.

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

The current system disadvantages candidates standing as individuals. It is AlburyCity's experience and candidates' view that voters are confused and unsure about 'above the line' and 'below the line' voting.

There is no opportunity for councils to decide on the voting method to apply for their local government area, including 'preferential' or 'first past the post'.

Recommendation 2

Dispense with the current grouped candidate voting system and give councils the option to choose their voting method.

d. Non-Residential voting in Local Government Elections

It is noted that for the Albury LGA there were only four registrations for the non-residential roll. Council did receive feedback after the closing date that some people were not aware of the opportunity to register.

Recommendation 3

The Election Funding Authority to increase the awareness of the opportunity to register through more effective advertising and promotion, including through websites and social media.

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

- a. Candidates experienced a need for significant resources to be applied for the two weeks of pre-polling at considerable personal cost. An alternate voting method such as postal voting could encourage greater participation and reduce the pre-poll demand.

The 2012 Local Government Association Annual conference in Dubbo adopted the following motion (Motion 54):

"That the Local Government Association call on the State Government to change legislation to allow Councils to reduce the two week pre-poll for Local Government elections to a maximum of one week prior to polling day."

- b. Candidates also found the Electoral Funding Authority process complex and onerous.

Recommendation 4

- a. Reduce the pre-polling period to a maximum of one week; and
- b. The Election Funding Authority to simplify the guidelines and process to assist candidates.

f. Any other related matters

- a. There appeared to be a lack of interest or awareness of the local government election with only 79.28% turnout in the AlburyCity electorate.
- b. There is a need to ensure more people register a formal vote as AlburyCity electorate tallied 8.39% informal votes. (Wodonga 5.43%)
- c. There needs to be more flexibility in the system to encourage maximum voter participation. Providing Sydney Town Hall as a polling place for electors out of the council area was of no value to the AlburyCity electorate.
- d. More consideration and planning needs to be given to disability access to pre-poll and polling place venues, particularly access to car parking.

Recommendation 5

- a. Increase the reach and frequency of promotion and advertising campaigns prior to the election.
- b. Tailor advertising campaigns highlighting the importance of "having your say".
- c. Introduce a universal postal voting system as an option for Councils.
- d. Seek the provision of disability car parking in close proximity to the polling place well ahead of the scheduled election date.

End.

