

**Submission
No 9**

2012 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

Organisation: Nambucca Shire Council
Name: Mr Michael Coulter
Position: General Manager
Date Received: 24/01/2013

23 January 2013

Mr Jai Rowell MP
Chair
Parliament of NSW
Committee on Electoral Matters
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 200
EMAIL: electoralmatters.committee@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Mr Rowell

**COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS INQUIRY INTO THE 2012
LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS**

Thank you for your letter of 20 December 2012 addressed to Council's Mayor inviting Nambucca Shire Council to make a submission addressing the specific terms of reference in order to assist your Inquiry.

Nambucca Shire Council considered your invitation at its meeting on 16 January 2013. Please find enclosed a copy of the report considered by Council.

Nambucca Shire Council has resolved that the Committee be requested to carefully investigate the potential for compulsory "postal" voting at New South Wales council elections in lieu of "attendance" voting as a means of reducing the cost of elections and that this include reviewing the practice of the Victorian Electoral Commission.

It was also resolved as follows:

- The time made available for pre-polling be reduced so as to minimize the length of time Candidates, their friends and relatives had to commit to distributing How to Vote information
- The income from fines from not voting be distributed to the councils who paid for the conduct of the election
- The requirement in smaller rural areas to appoint an official agent and to open a separate campaign account is unnecessarily onerous and a disincentive to prospective candidates.
- The threshold for the requirement for external auditing for campaign expenditure in excess of \$2,500 is unnecessarily onerous and a disincentive to prospective candidates.

Council would be pleased if you could consider these matters in your review of the elections.

Yours faithfully

Michael Coulter
GENERAL MANAGER

MAC:ms

Enc Copy of report to Council's meeting on 16 January 2013

GENERAL MANAGER'S REPORT

ITEM 9.13 SF1668 160113 COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS INQUIRY INTO THE 2012 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

AUTHOR/ENQUIRIES: Michael Coulter, General Manager

SUMMARY:

The Parliament of NSW Committee on Electoral Matters will examine matters relating to the 2012 Local Government elections including their cost and possible legislative changes to improve the efficiency of the election processes and remove any barriers to candidate participation.

It is recommended that the Committee on Electoral Matters be requested to carefully investigate the potential for compulsory "postal" voting at NSW council elections in lieu of "attendance" voting as a means of reducing the cost of elections and that this include reviewing the practice of the Victorian Electoral Commission.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Committee on Electoral Matters be requested to carefully investigate the potential for compulsory "postal" voting at NSW council elections in lieu of "attendance" voting as a means of reducing the cost of elections and that this include reviewing the practice of the Victorian Electoral Commission.

OPTIONS:

There is no restriction on the matters which Council may put to the Committee on Electoral Matters. It is suggested that any recommendations or comments which may be put to the Committee come within the terms of reference.

DISCUSSION:

Council has received the **attached** letter from the Parliament of NSW Committee on Electoral Matters.

The Committee will examine matters relating to the 2012 Local Government elections including their cost and possible legislative changes to improve the efficiency of the election processes and remove any barriers to candidate participation.

The terms of reference is to inquire into and report on the September 2012 Local Government elections with particular reference to:

- (a) the costs of the election;
- (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;
- (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.

Submissions are requested by Friday 8 February 2013.

ITEM 9.13 COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS INQUIRY INTO THE 2012 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

The budget estimate which the Electoral Commissioner provided to Council in June 2012 was \$114,856 plus GST. This essentially equates to the 2008 election cost with CPI indexation. The Electoral Commissioner's letter (**attached**) indicates that Councils are not charged for the maintenance of the electoral roll nor for the capital equipment (mainly IT systems) required to run elections.

The nature of NSW elections have changed over the years with the introduction of "above the line" voting; pre-poll voting for those who will not be in their local government area on election day and finally with additional accounting and disclosure obligations under the Election Funding, Expenditure and Disclosures Act 1981. Equally because of the fairly labour intensive nature of elections their cost has proportionately increased.

This report primarily concerns the management of cost for local government elections and not the impact of requirements under the Election Funding, Expenditure and Disclosures Act 1981. Councillors will have first hand experience of the latter and it is suggested that any concerns they have with the Act be either added to the resolution or be the subject of separate submission direct to the Parliament of NSW.

The cost of conducting an election is not only the cost to Council but also the cost to candidates, their friends and families for the time in attending pre-poll voting centres and polling places and finally to the community who also have to travel to a polling place.

Whilst the system of requiring voters to generally cast their ballot in front of an election official minimises the potential for fraud or manipulation, it does come at a significant cost.

There are other systems of voting which can substantially reduce the cost of elections, albeit with increased risks.

For example in Victoria, local elections can be conducted by postal voting or attendance voting. Each council chooses the method that will be used. However in most cases, Victorian councils use postal voting. The electoral rolls close 57 days before election day, nominations close 32 days before election day and then 17-19 days before election day ballot packs are distributed via post to every enrolled person in a random order over three days. No more than 35% of the ballot packs can be distributed on any one day. Ballot papers must then be returned by post so as to be received by the electoral commission no later than 6pm on the day before election day.

The cost savings of a postal voting system to Council, the candidates and the community would be substantial. There would be a significant reduction in the staffing required; the cost of hiring venues, providing voting booths and all of the other costs associated with "attendance" voting.

It is beyond the resources of this Council to quantify the potential cost savings and also to investigate the problems, if any, which arise out of the Victorian system of postal voting at council elections. However the fact that the Councils have the choice of either "postal" voting or "attendance" voting, and that most choose "postal" voting suggests they are satisfied with the trade-off between cost savings and risk.

There is also the more general debate as to whether voting should be compulsory and in the alternative whether it should be compulsory for all three levels of government. This may also potentially reduce cost, however it is a fundamentally different approach to current practice.

It is recommended that the Committee on Electoral Matters be requested to carefully investigate the potential for compulsory "postal" voting at NSW council elections in lieu of "attendance" voting as a means of reducing the cost of elections and that this include reviewing the practice of the Victorian Electoral Commission.

CONSULTATION:

The matters discussed in the report were raised with the Returning Officer for the 2012 election.

ITEM 9.13 COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS INQUIRY INTO THE 2012 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

SUSTAINABILITY ASSESSMENT:**Environment**

Compulsory "postal" voting will have less environmental impact (transport, use of resources etc) than "attendance" voting.

Social

It is unknown how the public would receive a change in voting arrangements. Given the increasing popularity of pre-poll voting it is likely that the public would be receptive to any new arrangements which make voting more convenient. More convenient arrangements for voting may also mean higher participation with fewer people being fined for not voting.

Economic

There are no significant economic implications.

Risk

The risk issues are discussed in the report.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:**Direct and indirect impact on current and future budgets**

The report concerns a submission to an Inquiry. There is no budgetary impact.

Source of fund and any variance to working funds

There is no impact on working funds.

ATTACHMENTS:

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| 1 | 100/2013 - Committee on Electoral Matters Inquiry | 0 Pages |
| 2 | 13669/2012 - Nambucca Budget Estimates for September 2012 Election | 0 Pages |