

NSW Government Grant Programs - Post-hearing Responses - Hearing 26 April 2021

In response to your invitation to submit additional material to the Inquiry, I have also attached a PDF copy of a 19/5/21 item from the Eurobodalla Beagle (a local online news website) which raises significant concerns about Eurobodalla Shire Council's expenditure of grant funds from the NSW Bushfire Community Recovery & Resilience Fund (BCRRF), with special focus on the devastated village of Mogo. This item further supports the concerns we raised in the ABE submission to the PAC and during our appearance on 26th April 2021.

Yours sincerely,

Brett Stevenson
Co-convenor
A Better Eurobodalla

The Beagle 7 hours ago

Council asked to explain spending Disaster Recovery funding in Mogo

Alarm bells in regards to Council's spending of **bushfire recovery funding** into Mogo came in February 2021 when the Eurobodalla Council Mayor revealed, in response to public outcry that Mogo's bushfire recovery was taking too long, that:

"The village deserves well-planned facilities for residents and visitors. To that end, **we're spending bushfire recovery funding on town planning**, collaborating with Mogo's community to find the best results for the whole village, including infrastructure like toilets, parks, parking, picnic tables and barbecues."

The statement came after Council was heavily criticised on social media by Mogo Lolly Shop owner, Theresa Matthews, saying her long list of grievances was shared by other Mogo businesses and landowners, and included a weed-choked local creek, degraded pathways, and delays in building a second public toilet block which had been approved before the bushfires.

"Mogo Creek is full of weeds and burned plants which are choking the creek. Where is our missing community barbecue facility that the council removed and promised to return? Where's the central toilet block in John Street Reserve that was approved in December 2019 which would give access to the elderly and disabled?"

"There are issues with the footpaths which don't have proper access for disabled people."
[Theresa Matthews](#).

Ms Matthews also said in February 2021 that requests to council to rebuild houses and businesses had been stonewalled and no reasons have been given as to why their requests and DAs have been ignored.

Visits by both the Premier and John Barilaro revealed their surprise that there appeared little achieved by way of recovery on the ground.

The Mayor's revelation that the Council was spending **bushfire recovery funding** on The Mogo Village Place Activation Plan, conducted by a consultant, came as a major disappointment to those in Mogo who have long been pressing Council for a town plan.

It isn't clear if the intention of the Bushfire Recovery Funding was that it be spent on "town planning", especially given that the proposed Mogo Village Place Activation Plan will be in addition to the Mogo Rebuild Study undertaken in 2020 and the [Mogo Village Commercial Centre Development Control Plan \(DCP\) of 2018](#) that identified back then a need for a vision (and action) for a town plan for Mogo.

Council had already earmarked on its own ToDo list that it must work on a plan for Mogo, at its own cost. Then along came the bushfires and Council decided that it wouldn't put down any recovery infrastructure but instead use the money to do a plan that will still take a further six months to reveal being a full two years after the event.

Meanwhile Mogo gets nothing on the ground. The temporary shops provided in the rear carpark were not paid for by Council and were donated. So what happened to the intention of putting **bushfire recovery funding** immediately to work for the community?

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The Bushfire Resilience and Economic Recovery Fund had been offered to affected councils to provide "immediate" and "locally-lead" community and economic recovery activities during the 2019/20 bushfires.

ABC reports that the interim administrator of near neighbor Wingecarribee Shire Council said it "inappropriately" allocated state bushfire recovery funds to a project unaffected by fire after dozens of homes in the shire were destroyed during the Black Summer disaster.

Wingecarribee Shire Council interim administrator, Mr Viv May said instead the Wingecarribee Council spent \$100,000 of the funding on developing a plan to grow the agribusiness and equine industry in the shire, in partnership with Destination Sydney and surrounds.

"While I understand agribusiness and equine industries are emerging in the shire, in my opinion, there is no evidence that this industry was significantly impacted by the fires," he said.

"In addition, the project that was funded had a 12-month duration which raises concerns around the immediate response and focussed on very niche local businesses.

"I've also reviewed the project brief and there appears to be no focus on bushfire recovery and, in my view, this project was inappropriately funded using bushfire recovery funding and as such should have been funded out of the council's general fund.

He said while the project itself was "credible" and "very important to the future of the shire", he did not support the use of bushfire recovery money to fund it.

Drawing parallels with Mogo the business section of the town makes up only a small percentage of the township while the entire town and adjacent community were all heavily impacted.

Clr Innes said in her media release of February 2021 that Council had also put a lot of resource into fast-tracking Development Applications (DAs) when they are lodged.

"From the 246 DAs bushfire rebuilds submitted we've approved 205, with an average processing time of 36 days – more than ten families have moved back into rebuilt homes," she said.

"We've also worked with Mogo businesses and organisations to assist the village recovery overall, helping set up the temporary mall – **provided rent-free by Biz Rebuild** – to enable business to continue trading while they rebuild.

"Many fire affected businesses chose to work with the specialist planning consultants we engaged, resulting in changes to our building codes for car parking and building set-backs and making development applications simpler. This culminated in a workshop for businesses to support them in preparing DAs.

"As far as we're aware, these businesses are very happy with the help they've received from us."

Clr Innes said the fires had provided an opportunity for Council to reassess Mogo's infrastructure.

The funding for the Bushfire Community Resilience and Economic Recovery Fund (BCRERF) was provided through the joint Australian and NSW Government Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangement. Funding was made available to bushfire affected Local Government Areas in NSW following the unprecedented bushfires from August 2019 onwards.

An allocation of \$250,000 was made available to Eurobodalla Shire Council. Phase One of the BCRERF is focused on delivering immediate, small-scale funding to local councils that was intended to start the community and economic recovery following the bushfires.

The funds were specifically to deliver locally-led recovery activities led by councils in partnership with other organisations.

The objectives of Phase One of the BCRERF was to deliver quick, flexible and small-scale grants to local councils for immediate, locally led community and economic recovery activities.

The purpose was to support local business recovery and assist communities overcome the economic and social impacts of the bushfires.

Phase One funding was meant to be quick and flexible in order to meet the immediate recovery needs of local communities. Councils were asked to undertake activities in two categories:

Economic Recovery - events or initiatives to support local business and industry recovery
Community Resilience – events or initiatives to support community recovery and wellbeing.

Eurobodalla Council drafted a list of projects that it recommended to assist the Eurobodalla businesses and community in the recovery process That list was forwarded to the NSW Government for consideration and approval.

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Proposed projects	Value	Comments
Support café and retail businesses through outdoor licensing fees exemption for six months	\$87,000	Waive fees from 1 January to 30 June - 59 businesses affected
Encourage existing & additional events by waiving Council event charges	\$30,000	
Assist food retailers through waiver of food premise inspection fees	\$80,000	67 Businesses affected
Support accommodation providers through waiver of public pool inspection fees	\$12,000	58 businesses affected
Support whole of community through provision of free internet at libraries	\$20,000	Currently approximately 20,000 sessions per annum
Business Chambers	\$25,000	Provide \$5000 per business chamber to fund event or program to benefit whole of business community – currently approx. 300 members

Above: total \$254,000

Then along came Covid:

At its meeting on 10 March 2020, Council resolved how the \$250,000 for Bushfire Community Resilience and Economic Recovery Fund would be spent. A number of those projects could not be undertaken in light of COVID-19 restrictions. Approval was granted for those timelines to be extended.

The NSW Government made a series of regulatory changes to ensure council resources continued to be focused on frontline COVID-19 response and recovery efforts and allow councils to provide financial relief to businesses and residents. Councils were to be compensated by the State Government for their lost revenues.

Savings #1 - Council recompensed for waiving fees for services such as food premise inspections. Regulations were made under section 747B of the *Local Government Act 1993* to temporarily modify the application of the Act in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. - saving \$87,000

Savings #2 - Existing and future events ground to a halt so the waiving of fees was irrelevant - saving \$30,000

Savings #3 - The NSW Government has made a series of regulatory changes to ensure council resources continue to be focused on frontline COVID-19 response and recovery efforts and allow councils to provide financial relief to businesses and residents and enabled councils to immediately waive or reduce fees for services such as food premise inspections. - saving \$80,000

Savings #4 - Libraries closed their doors to Covid - saving \$20,000

In all, a savings of unspent Bushfire Community Resilience and Economic Recovery Fund of \$217,000

Where did those savings go? Our councillors might like to advise.

At its meeting on 7 April 2020, Council allocated \$1,416,667 to a number of projects under the 'Disaster Recovery Funding – Commonwealth Government, Councils Affected by Bushfires' funding provided by the Australian Government through the National Bushfire Recovery Agency.

The allocation of \$1,416,667 was made available to Eurobodalla Shire Council and this is allocated subject to an approved Program of Works, being submitted to the Office of Local Government and a report back to the Commonwealth in twelve months time.

Councils were able to spend their payments on projects and activities that they deem essential for the recovery and renewal of their communities, including:

- Rebuilding damaged or destroyed council assets such as key local roads, bridges, and community facilities;
- Employing additional local staff to take on specialist recovery or planning roles to help coordinate and plan the rebuilding effort;
- Hosting new public activities and events to bring communities together and attract visitors back to affected regions; and
- Immediate maintenance and repairs to relief and evacuation centres.

Of the \$1,416,667 Eurobodalla Council decided that they would earmark \$150,000 to a Mogo Plan "Supporting and facilitating rebuild of directly impacted shops, whilst looking for an overall improved outcome for Mogo as a town and community." In doing so they acknowledged the fact that the DCP work undertaken by strategic planning in 2018 identified a need for a vision and town plan for Mogo. This plan was decades overdue.

They also identified \$33,000 of the \$1,416,667 as the pathway from Princes Highway to the Mogo playing fields.

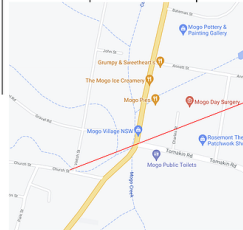
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The Mayor, in her [Mayoral Minute](#) of March 2021, fast tracked the Medium ranked Mogo pathway to a high priority allocating **\$115,000** of the Disaster Recovery Funding – Commonwealth Government, Councils Affected by Bushfires’ funding provided by the Australian Government through the National Bushfire Recovery Agency.

This amount is four times higher than the estimate (\$33,500) given to councillors four years ago in the [Eurobodalla Pathway Strategy 2017](#) and four times higher than the estimate of April 2020.

Locality	Street	Location	Type of Facility	Approx. Length (m)	Approx. Cost (\$)	Priority	Map Ref
Mogo	Church Street	Princes Highway to Park Street	Footpath	190	30,500	Medium	12
Mogo	Park Street	Church Street to Queen Street	Footpath	210	33,500	Medium	12
Mogo	Princes Highway	Princes Highway to Charles Street carpark	Footpath	80	24,000	High	12
Mogo	Charles Street	Carpark to Annett Street	Footpath	160	25,500	High	12
Mogo	Annett Street	Princes Highway to Charles Street	Footpath	80	13,000	Low	12
Mogo	Princes Highway	Annett Street to Batman Street	Footpath	105	15,500	High	12
Mogo		Annett Street to Batman Street	Footpath	95	15,000	High	12



Recommendations (Item 10)

- A footpath for providing connecting the Charles Street, Mogo car park to the Princes Highway via Newton Road and Annett Street.
- All new commercial developments facing the Charles Street car park be required to provide a footpath to their entrance to Charles Street car park (B&B).
- A footpath be provided along the east side of the Princes Highway, Mogo from intersection Street south to the existing footpath.
- Any development on the Princes Highway, Mogo be required to provide a footpath along its frontage and where appropriate, a connection to the existing footpath network.
- Should be continued to progress to the MRO for completion in making the design and construction of additional work on park and footpath along the Mogo Day Centre.

A footpath be provided along Church Street/Park Street, Mogo to link the public school.

In all there appears to be a justification of criticism of the Mayor and her Councillors of doing nothing in Mogo as there is no evidence on the ground of any works undertaken by Council. It is of little wonder then that both the Premier and John Barilaro looked around Mogo on their visit and heard first hand from locals their anger and frustration the there had been nothing **"immediate"** and **"locally-lead"** achieved.

Hopefully the footpath will be completed sooner than later. And being concrete it is hoped that it will represent the **"immediate"** and **"locally-lead"** resilient solution the Mogo community were hoping for of the millions of dollars that were made available for bushfire recovery.

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