



MAYORAL COLUMN: MARCH 2023

CUMULATIVE IMPACT AND SOCIAL LICENCE

Two weeks ago our Acting General Manager, Phil Hood, and myself met with representatives from Energy Co, NSW Department of Planning & Environment (DPE) and the Honourable Matt Kean, Treasurer and Minister for Energy. This was in conjunction with the Coalition of Renewable Energy Mayors (CoREM) – Mayors and General Managers from a group of Councils heavily impacted by the State Government's Renewable Energy Zones (REZ). Walcha sits at the bottom of the New England REZ and has the potential to be heavily impacted by the renewable energy push due to the projected transmission infrastructure and the renewal projects themselves.

The purpose of this meeting was to continue to advocate for agreeable outcomes for communities that are at the centre of the renewable energy revolution. Small Councils like Walcha really struggle to resource both finance and staff time to protect our assets and the community so we must stay ahead of the amount of projects that are being scoped for our region. CoREM is not a group that takes a stance on renewable energy, we are pushing for better rules, regulation and early engagement from prospective proponents.

From this meeting we gained a commitment for a social, environment and economic impact assessment for the full life in each REZ. Their commitment is to complete this assessment in the 2023 year. There was also commitment of suitable funds over multiple years to bolster our resources through this process. With this, Walcha Council will investigate collaborating with other councils in our REZ to employ engineers or other technical experts to assess infrastructure before, during and after any project at no impact to our budget or the ratepayer. This assessment will form the foundation of the binding agreement to maintain these assets to a standard with any proponent.

Three main expectations for these projects are 1.5% of build cost to come to effected councils (this is on top of any infrastructure financing agreement), a decommissioning bond to be implemented and better and early local community engagement. Changes to rating of land used for renewable energy projects are also being explored.

Much of the division that has been seen in our community over the last year or so is the result of poor engagement, information sharing and rumour. While the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Winterbourne Wind sits with DPE at this time, the flyer in the Advocate a couple of weeks ago for the larger Ruby Hills project has the angst simmering within the community again. As I have said before the Australian Energy and Market Operators Report from last year points out that renewable energy projects are coming. Love them or hate them Council's role is to help shape them to fit our community expectations and we must do this well as they will be here for at least 30 years. The aforementioned assessment, and promise by the



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DPE that projects that do not have community support will not be forced onto them, shows a shift in the way that these affected communities are being engaged with by Government.

General Manager

I mentioned our Acting General Manager Phil Hood earlier, and Phil holds this role while we recruit a new General Manager following the resignation of Barry Omundson. Barry is off to Tasmania for family reasons, and while we will miss his no nonsense and professional approach we wish him and his family well at this challenging time. During his tenure Barry has led Walcha Council through some tough decisions leading to rebuilding the foundations of a modern Council. There is still plenty of work to be done, but I am confident Council is on the right path to a sustainable future.

EVENTS

The truck and machinery rally in Walcha two weeks ago was certainly a spectacle. The street parade and day at the Showground was extremely well supported. Congratulations to all involved. Many memories and much reminiscing that day. On events, it's only a few days until the Walcha Show. Always a spectacle we wish President Daniel Kermode and his team all the best for another successful show.

FUNDING

The Honourable Adam Marshall was in town last week to announce what is probably the last of the funding announcements for the current State Government as they have now entered caretaker mode. He brought the Honourable Paul Toole MP, Deputy Premier, Minister for Regional New South Wales and Minister for Police, with him and inspected the now completed Off Creek Storage embankment.

The funding of a sewerage pipeline from John Oxley Oval to connect the oval amenities to our current system, while not being "pretty" will increase the usability and hygiene of this facility. The Golf Club was the recipient of funds to refurbish their clubhouse. An excellent facility in a great setting, these sort of funds are impossible to gain without government assistance.

Passion to engage an Occupational Therapist (OT) to "*access screenings, plans and support for kids in need for free*" saw Karen Barnes' vision to bring this service to Walcha fully funded for three years. I never realised the role an OT played in helping children who have challenges in some areas until I read the application, and after speaking to an OT realised there was a feeling that Walcha historically sat in no mans land in relation to this service. Not only is this service coming this year but as stated earlier it is now free. I understand if you contact your education provider if you would like access to this service they can facilitate a way forward.



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These projects wrap up the Stronger Country Community Fund that all regional Councils have benefited from and have bought so many projects to Walcha over the last 6 years. I hope that whatever party forms government in a couple of weeks they continue the support rural communities have had since I have been on Council.

Clr Eric Noakes
Mayor of Walcha