



# MAYORAL COLUMN: FEBRUARY 2023

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As this is my first column for 2023 it's amazing that it is the second week of February already. Council has kicked into gear with a lot happening and a feast of projects to delivery, and as with most sectors of the economy both internal and external resourcing stretched. Speaking to the Director Infrastructure & Development on Friday he mentioned that we are attempting to delivery around \$41 million worth of projects over the ensuing period. It would be great to put a date instead of saying "ensuing period" but labour and materials make this difficult. I have been reliably informed that this figure will increase over the coming months with more grants coming our way.

Putting the difficulties in delivery aside it is an opportunistic time to analyse and figure. A minimum of \$41 million for a Council the size of Walcha offers so much opportunity to build, update and manage our capital assets for the benefit of the community, not only in the short term but the medium and long term. From my research and memory this figure far exceeds any funding this Council has ever secured and managed, and while some of it is opportunistic much of the credit lies at the feet of our Infrastructure Staff who recognise opportunities and through diligence obtain grants. Saying this, funding bodies do not hand out cash without checking councils are working within their community and legislative expectations and that all strategies that sit under the Community Strategic Plan (CSP-Your Plan) are aligned and functional. Under our current General Manager and Directors there has been a concerted and coordinated approach to this outcome. While these plans and strategies (Delivery, Long Term Financial, Workforce and Asset Management) still have some input to finalise them, the formation and linking of these plans is not only what Government require but more importantly give our community faith in our future. Council in some ways is just another business, while operating in a more legislated and public environment, we must look long term with a view both to asset management and financial sustainability. All Councils find this an extremely fine line to tread but as it is constantly pointed out to me, that if we don't have our paperwork in order grants are harder to access. I understand the frustration of the community that promised projects have not been delivered, and with inflation adding extra costs the frustration is felt by Council but we cannot deliver projects if we cannot find contractors.

## **SRV Application:**

Last week Council submitted our application for a Special Rate Variation (SRV) to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART). You will recall Council engaged heavily with the community in respect to this step in September and October last year. All documentation, including videos, reasoning and long term financial benefits are still on Council's website and are easily sourced. To briefly reiterate the reasoning and process behind this I will cover the main points again:



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## Reason:

- Council was strongly advised to do this immediately a decade ago to arrest this decline in sustainability.
- The current issue has been clearly identified with the arrival of our current General Manager and under his guidance Council have taken the appropriate steps to rectify the problem.
- We have only asked for enough to "balance the books".
- The SRV will not increase service levels.

## Process:

- Three internationally renowned professors in this area confirmed our Council was not and has not been for a long time financially sustainable and out of necessity we have applied for a SRV.
- Public engagement was thorough, informative and encouraged input.
- The advice was for three (3) increments totalling 57.7% over three (3) years.
- In May 2023 IPART will announce its' decision to the public.
- IPART invites submissions.

It is not an enviable task to lead the Council and community through this process but I am proud of the way Councillors, Staff and the community have rallied to get to this point.

The question may be asked in relation to the first part of this column as to why with so much grant funding that an SRV is required. Grant funding is generally directed at a specific project, or purpose and cannot be used to provide many of the services that Council is required to deliver.

## Busy Season:

The first quarter of the year sees Walcha buzzing with events. The campdraft and races were blessed with excellent weather and with the Walcha Truck and Machinery Show on the 18 & 19 February will highlight machinery that was the backbone of building Walcha as a rich and diverse farming area. Congratulations to the team organising the Show and good luck, though I am sure it will be successful as there is something there for everyone I believe. Following in mid March is the Walcha Agriculture Show, an event that needs no introduction due to its status as by far the best show of its type in the north. A large and dedicated Committee bring this event together that not only showcases the best produce and livestock but shows what a community can do when we pull together. Good luck for a successful event.

Clr Eric Noakes  
Mayor of Walcha