

TOMERONG COMMUNITY FORUM

c/o Post Office

TOMERONG NSW 2540

1 November 2004

General Manager
Shoalhaven City Council

DRAFT COMMUNITY CONSULTATION STRATEGY

Your reference 30427 VE

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. A draft of this response from the Tomerong Community Forum was circulated to the community on 11 October and discussed at the meeting of the forum on 27 October.

It was commented at the meeting that the process of developing this document has in itself been less than satisfactorily consultative. The notion of consultation as council officers drafting something and plonking it on exhibition for consultation is a narrow notion of consultation. “[E]nsuring that the community is given reasonable opportunity to comment on various strategies, plans or proposals” is a narrow perspective to community consultation.

You know that you had office meetings to prepare this draft and did not just rely on harvesting written comments. Similarly, community consultation has to benefit from getting heads together. Harder but more valuable.

[A] Information, consultation and communication.

The Draft Community Consultation Strategy is ambitious in scope. It seems however to lack focus and to divert to other purposes, such as the direction to staff that letters relating to job vacancies should be answered within three days. This is clearly another subject, not part of community consultation. It would be valuable, at the outset, to indicate some hierarchy of obligations and processes, distinguishing:

- the importance of consultation, the engagement of community with the development of policy and issues for consideration by Council,
- served by an effective information program and
- standards of communication.

We note that at the end of S2.3 you offer a definition of consultation but then say this is part of a wider process, including information activity.

Clearly information activity goes beyond consultation, for example in telling people where toilets are or what plants are classed as weeds, but it seems to us that there is some loss in the

document of focus on consultation itself because the document seeks also to catalogue information opportunities. Media releases and media interviews, for example, are listed as methods of consultation (along with shopping dockets!), but these are very good examples of one-way information activity which may assist towards, or lead to consultation but which in themselves should never be confused with consultation.

The business of consultation only has meaning where listening goes with talking, where there is input as well as output. This very important consideration ought to be made early in the paper and doing so would help weed out some of the items in the list of methods of consultation which should not be there. To the extent that this catalogue is intended as a guide for council officers, they should never think that the community has been consulted simply by having provided the community with information.

So for the purpose of this document, we suggest that consultation is the wider purpose. Information (a different process) can serve that purpose. Information for the purpose of this paper is a MEANS to the OBJECTIVE of consultation.

There could be a separate paper on information, perhaps.

There definitely should be a paper on communication standards - people in the community often feel that they have to shout at or harangue council officers, to get something, though our experience as a forum is that council officers generally communicate well and are pretty responsive. To suggest some codification of standards is not intended as a criticism, but as a support and perhaps protection for staff, a statement of what are fair and reasonable standards. There is some of this sort of thing cobbled into this consultation paper. We suggest it should be in a more comprehensive stand-alone document.

Comments have been made that the document is cast as it is because Council wants to take a minimal or token approach to consultation. Whatever Council's motives and intentions are, they should be clarified.

Recommendations:

- [1] clarify the desired scope and intent of consultation and articulate that clearly well before drafting language of instructions to staff;
- [2] weed out from the document those matters that are not properly community consultation;
- [3] clarify the distinctions and relationships between consultation and information;
- [4] engage the community not just in commenting on a draft of this but meaningful discussion of it.

[B] Principal Consultative Bodies.

We had understood that council was reviewing its expectations of these bodies. To refer to them as "Principal" and then whack them simply into an alphabetical list after phone calls and posters and ahead of 'other reference bodies' seems a bit odd and inadequate.

This is not fat-headed ambition on our part. We consider it important as a PCB that we respect the obligation that we are open to and able to represent all rate payers and residents. If an organisation doesn't do that it surely is not a PCB. There are other guidelines in place at present for PCBs. If these are not embodied in this strategy document, this document needs to point to the existence elsewhere of such guidelines. There also needs to be some clarity about the extent to which these are indeed guidelines or rules, and what will become of PCBs that fail to meet guidelines or rules.

We are aware that while we, as a PCB, may be labouring away to achieve a community view on some road or other issue, sometimes the council has, in reply to individual representations, whipped out smartly to attend to something on which there might reasonably be broader community views. While we do not want to make processes cumbersome, and we do not want to slow council responses, and do not want to be a formal filter for all requests to council, there would seem to be value in having some further discussion, perhaps among PCB reps about this broad issue.

We appreciate the acknowledgement of some status for PCBs in council's specification of biannual meetings with council officers. Where you say this will "allow interaction between the PCBs" we are sure you did not mean 'allow' in the sense of it not otherwise being allowed. Perhaps 'facilitate,' or, in plain language, give the PCBs a chance to meet and compare notes.

Recommendation:

[4] Present to the forthcoming meetings with PCBs a clear account of council expectations of them; discuss the whole issue of consultation with PCBs.

[C] The internet.

While there is emphasis in the draft on use of the internet, there needs to be a strategy to provide internet access for more people. There is access in libraries. There could be more in the way of a volunteer program to assist people learn to use computers and the internet. Given the fall-out in employment in the computer sector in recent years, is it worth considering work-for-the-dole people with computer skills to assist with an access program?

There is still considerable risk and actual fact of exclusion of people because of lack of skills and lack of means to use the internet. Council should avoid policy directions which are not community-inclusive. Council needs, if it is to assert wide use of the internet, to develop a strategy to assist all to access the internet - this in consultation with other levels of government. Given that there is no early prospect of a sell off of the balance of Telstra, Council should be working hard now on schemes for Council-sponsored-Telstra-sale-financed easier access to the internet for ALL.

Recommendation:

[5] Avoid policy directions which are not community-inclusive.

[6] Increase reliance on the internet only in the context of policies and actions to assist with wider access to the internet.

[D] Understanding of government/understanding of community - core of consultation issues.

Perhaps this should be right at the top. It is the subject not really dealt with in the draft strategy.

It will be more than evident to council members and officers that understanding of how the different levels of government work is very uneven in the community.

It is perhaps also fair to say that understanding of how community focuses on issues is not evenly appreciated or understood by the machinery of government, including council.

The focus in this strategy is, as is customary in such things, on giving community a chance to whistle at the train of government going by and maybe getting it to stop or shift track a bit from time to time.

Should there be something much more substantial than this? Shaping government to community is not easy and never will be because of the diversity of community interests and perspectives, the fact that many don't want to be engaged. That does not mean we should not try. The cornerstone of local government's link to community is the election and performance of members of council, and that should remain the case. But the existence of this draft strategy, of PCBs and all the other consultation mechanisms in the paper makes clear that the elected council is only a part of the process. There is a lot of vagueness - in itself not necessarily bad, you need flexibility - but there is also a need to try to think through some of the issues about shaping local government more to community, not just giving community some look at government rushing along. Perhaps a 'charette' (which is referred to but not explained, though it should be) or other consultative process could be organised to review this broad subject. What became of the outcomes of the Nowra charette?

Recommendations:

[7] Recognise that this draft document needs general recasting and that a clearer structure will bring to light the need to clarify intent and scope of consultation and the relationship with the community.

[8] Engage the community in *discussion* rather than draft waving, to achieve real advances in this area.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

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for
Tomerong Community Forum