



## **COMPLIANCE**

At the recent June Ordinary Meeting of Walcha Council the Community Strategic Plan (CSP) Delivery Program and Operational Plan were adopted. These form part of compliance under the Independent Planning & Reporting Framework. The Long Term Financial Plan is being delayed until the outcome of our Financial Sustainability Review.

Engagement with community was extensive this year, leading to an increase in submissions to be considered. Effective community engagement sits at the core of Local Government's strategic direction and this plan looks 10 years ahead. It is what is termed a 'live document' and can be reviewed at any time as direction or circumstance changes. Having said this the crux of the document does not change a lot as Council's delivery of fundamental infrastructure and services (roads, rubbish, water, etc) consumes most of its' income. It was very gratifying for Councillors and staff to receive so much feedback from the consultation process and we would like to thank those who contributed to our future direction.

Many of the submissions, not surprisingly, related to renewable energy projects. For those who have followed this column over its course would be aware that local government plays a minor role in the path of these projects and I will expand on this later in this column.

## **FIRST STEP**

Personally the highlight of the week (and possibly the year) has been the clearing of the land for our Off Creek Storage. At times I wondered if we would ever actually get to the point of moving dirt, but here we are. Local contractors Marchant Bros were awarded this contract under an Engineering Procurement Construction Management negotiated by General Manager Barry Omundson and sees local contractors heavily involved in the associated works. The fencing and access road contracts are in the process of being negotiated and have heavy local involvement. Due to procurement processes local companies can miss out on opportunities in this area but it's gratifying that this will see money stay in town.

## **OXLEY HIGHWAY CLOSURE**

The persistent closure of Oxley Highway through fire, flood and brimstone is continuing to have negative effects on our community. The closest traffic count I can find is that 600 vehicles use this road daily, but this obviously increases during holidays. If on average every vehicle spends \$30 in Walcha that equates to a loss of \$18,000 a day. Certainly not an inconsiderate amount. I understand this road needs to be fixed and this when done properly is a slow and exacting process. But, and it's a big but, will what is being done solve the long term problems? Trees removed from the edges of the roadway are regenerating and growing fast. A contractor involved in the clean-up following the recent wind storm commented that there was no damage where Council was involved in the bushfire clean-up and removed all hazardous trees. Hopefully what is happening now will give us a longer term solution.



## **RENEWABLE ENERGY**

As mentioned earlier the largest number of submissions for the CSP were around renewable energy and how it should be included. The trail of letters in this fine publication shows how emotion is starting to ramp up as project applications come to our Local Government Area. As I have stated before Council is not the determining authority for these projects. In this situation wind generation projects of this size are what is termed State Significant Development (SSD). There are criteria to meet to be a SSD but suffice to say here that these projects meet these criteria. Basically this means that whatever Council has in their CSP we have no say whether these projects come to Walcha or not. As economic development forms part of Walcha Council's responsibility we would seek to collaborate with any approved renewable energy developers in the best interest of the community. What Council do have an input into is the effect that these projects will have on Walcha Council's infrastructure and services. What is the highest priority, and rightly so, is our transport infrastructure (roads, bridges, etc). As Council does not 'own' the Oxley Highway we can only comment on traffic flow and disruption to movement. Once traffic leaves that Highway Council is working on a comprehensive and detailed agreement on both short- and long-term dilapidation of this vital network. The disposal of waste is another topic that has regularly raised with me and while the quantity of waste is uncertain at this time this is another area where Council will form a strong and long-term view of this issue. It doesn't matter what income we can make from this, if we fill our landfill with outside waste and therefore shorten its' life then we have gone backwards. All waste disposal is fast becoming a major issue and Councillors will take a long-term view as councils have been caught before. Conversations with the developer of Winterbourne Wind centre around our waste disposal facility not being used by them. The third major issues is water. There will be very large quantities of water required for concrete batching, road construction and maintenance. There are regulations around what Council can do with their town water, but you can be assured that after the drought Council will not put our residents water security at risk. We are building our storage and our highest priority will be to fill that on completion and this will use every litre of water we have allocated from the system.

What is being termed the Community Fund, or in some cases Voluntary Planning Agreements usually refer to funds negotiated by the proponent and the community for community benefit and is a vital part of gaining long term benefit for residents. This fund stands separate to landholder agreements and its' negotiation and use options are also being explored.

To this end we have joined with the four other Councils that from the New England Renewable Energy Zone (REZ) to set conditions around how this will benefit these Councils. I believe that if these projects are and do come to our town we need to be in a position to gain as much financially for our community as we can. We are also attempting to form a coalition of state-wide renewable energy councils to share information and lobby



governments for a fair outcome for us. Renewable energy is sometimes referred to as the new mining industry and I believe should be treated the same from governments with mandated compensation and ongoing support.

For those who are taking an interest in this way forward now is a great time to inform yourself on the REZ, our local projects and the transmission lines that need to link the REZ with the Hunter Valley. This infrastructure link may run through our Local Government Area.

The NSW Government controlled statutory authority tasked with developing the REZ, Energy Corporation, have indicated to me that they will be holding individual public meetings in the five Councils this month. The purpose of these is to disseminate information in relation to the REZ and not debate renewable energy as this is not their brief. More information will come as dates and times are set.

There is so much information online in relation to the New England REZ and AEMO (Australian Energy Market Operator) in relation to future electricity generation and distribution and there is no doubt this will have significant impacts on our region. How we as Council and wider community handle this transition and gain as much benefit from it as possible will have a substantial impact on Walcha's social and financial future. It is finding that balance that we must all work at.

Clr Eric Noakes  
Mayor of Walcha