

MAYORAL COLUMN JANUARY 2019

After mother nature made life difficult for many areas in 2018 she left her calling card on a large section of Walcha just before Christmas. The devastation caused in half an hour from the western to the eastern boundaries is probably as bad of a natural disaster as any local resident can recall. The width, length and ferocity of the wind left a trail of destruction that will cost millions of dollars to clean up, and will leave a scar on the landscape that will never heal. I was lucky enough that David Salter offered to fly me over much of the area effected, and to see the mess from above brings into perspective why those impacted feel despondent about the damage. Council roads were impacted heavily with crews working into the night and next day to provide access for emergency vehicles and residents. Landholders volunteered their machinery and labour to assist in this operation and Walcha Council is grateful for the time given by those people.

Essential Energy staff worked tirelessly to reconnect electricity supplies to the many customers who were impacted. The organisational structure and dedication of staff, often working in dangerous and treacherous conditions, is to be applauded. To all of the Essential Energy staff, both local and those who traveled from other areas, thank you from our community.

On the other hand the reaction from Telstra was disappointing to put it mildly. The loss of the 3G and fixed line networks impacted heavily on many businesses that rely on these services for EFTPOS transactions. Mobile phone services were restricted and vital call devices were rendered useless. There are many questions Telstra need to answer, and while we cannot turn back time, systems need to be in place to insure this doesn't happen again.

All of this occurred at a bad time to access information and assistance. Many Government Departments and businesses were closed and disseminating information on what Council were doing was restricted to Facebook. Everyone deserves their Christmas break, but I will have to say that anytime I contacted our Local Members, Barnaby Joyce or Kevin Anderson they sought answers or contacts and passed the information back quickly.

As a result of this Council is calling a **Public Meeting on Monday 14th of January at 3pm at the Walcha Bowling Club**. Local Members Barnaby Joyce and Kevin Anderson have indicated they will attend. Telstra will be represented by the Northern Area General Manager, Michael Maron, and a Technical Support Officer from Armidale, Sally Herbert. Telstra have taken this issue very seriously and I have emailed Telstra 5 questions around issues that effected us. These include the time taken to assess issue, mixed messages coming from their help line and being told there was no issues in Walcha. While this whole process was frustrating the aim of this meeting is to move forward, apportioning blame will be counterproductive, we need to understand how technology can be used to our advantage and Telstra need to recognise that their current complaints system has issues.

I have spoken to the Office of the Telecommunications Ombudsmen in reference to any compensation for businesses and customers of Telstra that were impacted by this outage.

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Their advice is to approach the telco with your case and if you are unsuccessful, take it to the Ombudsman. I have also approached Telstra in relation to sending Customer Service Officers to Walcha to hear these issues, as the process over the phone is time consuming and frustrating. I am yet to have a reply on this.

The purpose of this meeting is to gain information for the community, both from Telstra and what is available to landholders who have damage. Council is only the facilitator and our Parliamentary Representatives will be there to inform everyone on what is available in Governmental assistance. General Manager, Jack Ohara, has completed and lodged the paperwork for our LGA to have a Natural Disaster Declaration. I have been asked why Tamworth was so fast in getting their declaration listed, and the main reason is that they have natural disaster declarations before, and therefore could link in faster. This allows for help to be accessed. Having read as much as I can, I have some understanding of this process, but, if you want to hear first hand what is available it is best to attend this meeting. If nothing else to have a cuppa and a chat can be cathartic.

As I indicated earlier in the Council Facebook post I have been in contact with BlazeAid and we would most likely fit the model of their operations. They require at least two months work, and a fair amount of input from the local community. I don't know how much fencing is required, and what call there would be on this service. They require camping areas, service clubs to cater and most importantly a coordinator. There is an informative website, just type in BlazeAid and chase through the pages. This is something that could be discussed at the meeting. It is up to the community to organise this.

Clr Eric Noakes
Mayor of Walcha