

## EUROBODALLA SHIRE COUNCIL

### PUBLIC FORUM

All members of the community who have registered have been advised that they have a **maximum of seven minutes** to put their case.

Ordinary Meeting of Council on **11 February 2020**

Name	Subject/Comments
<b>Public Forum – 9.30am</b>	
Janelle Day	MR20001 Emergency Response
Peter Coggan	MR20/002 Non-Compulsory School Break.
Kathryn Maxwell	GMR20/001 Eurobodalla Bushfire Emergency Response and Recovery - Overview and Update
Brett Stevenson	GMR20/001 Eurobodalla Bushfire Emergency Response and Recovery - Overview and Update
Coral Anderson on behalf of Joan Armstrong	GMR20/001 Eurobodalla Bushfire Emergency Response and Recovery - Overview and Update

## **Janelle Day presenting on behalf of Our Towns Our Say (OTOS)**

### **Public Forum February 11**

### **Response to Mayoral Report MR20/001**

Councillors, firstly, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land and pay my respect to elders past and present.

You will be aware that Our Towns Our Say (OTOS) hosted a public meeting on Saturday 1 February at the Tomakin Sports and Social Club. There were over fifty participants who came together to share personal stories and ideas to inform Council deliberations on the bushfires as we continue to manage this ongoing crisis and in any long-term planning.

The meeting acknowledged the efforts of all those who worked to save lives and property and those who are providing ongoing care and support.

A list of comments and suggestions is attached to the hard copy of this address for tabling so I will only enlarge on those items relating to MR20/001

#### **REPORT**

##### **Community**

**The Mayoral Report correctly states that every person in Eurobodalla is feeling the impact of the bushfire disaster.**

For many who have had their homes damaged or destroyed this impact has been lessened by the receipt of much needed donated funds. For others this is yet to happen. We ask that Council continues to advocate for the speedy release of these funds with minimal administration, so they reach all those who need them now.

OTOS notes the initiative giving a period of rate relief to those whose homes are not habitable. For many however, six months will not be enough. We ask that Council lobby State Government to have this extended to cover the full rebuilding period for each householder.

The meeting made a number of suggestions that can further reduce the impact of the fires on our community. These include:

- waiving of excess water bills for periods during the crisis given that many of these will be a result of fighting fires on their own and others' properties;
- placing a moratorium on tip fees for bushfire related disposal in addition to the current dispensations; and
- elimination of Council DA charges for fire related rebuilds.

Ongoing addressing of both physical and mental health issues arising from the fires was strongly emphasised and seen as a high priority.

***‘With the threat of bushfire still not over we encourage the community to remain vigilant with their bushfire survival plans’.***

A survival plan needs to be underpinned by accurate, timely and reliable communication. For many, communication issues were an impediment to plan implementation.

There was far too much reliance on power and telecommunications. When these went down there were no viable alternatives. There were questions raised as to whether the currently available towers have the capacity to support communication needs, and thus survival plans in a crisis such as we are experiencing. A greater role was seen for more physical communication, including billboards in community spaces and doorknocking in extreme emergencies.

Much of the RFS information, while valued, was viewed as quite generalised and community members would have preferred more specific and timely details as to fire locations to assist them in making decisions about implementing different plan stages.

Those who have included evacuation as part of their plans saw a need to review all evacuation and safer sites to ensure they are fit for purpose and provide a safe, clean and accessible haven.

Minimum requirements expressed included:

- Clear and unhindered evacuation routes and paths;
- Ease of access for the elderly and those with special needs;
- Provision of adequate toilets and potable water; and
- Availability for opening at the times advertised.

## **Emergency services and other agencies**

**Report MR20/001 noted the work undertaken by the NSW Rural Fire Service and their volunteers along with other agencies.** The meeting also valued the work undertaken by these groups but felt that the provision of satellite phones and frequent (and fully funded) replacement of equipment so that it remained ‘fire ready’ would support them in their work.

The report also refers to the National Parks and Wildlife Service. The meeting saw a role for Council in lobbying State and Federal Governments to increase funding to the National Parks and Wildlife Service so that fire-safe strategies can be implemented. Budget cuts to this service of \$121 million in 2011 and \$80 million in 2017 coupled with a 25% reduction in the number of rangers have hindered good fire management in our parks. This directly impacts on the tourism that is so important to our area.

## **In Conclusion**

As ***‘we are in the process of moving into the recovery phase ...’.*** Many at the meeting believed that an important first step for Council is to join with the hundred other jurisdictions (including neighbouring Councils) representing eight million people to declare a “State of Climate Emergency” and for any future planning to be conducted within this context.

We have all been impacted by the fires. Working together and having our voices heard will be an important part of our healing as a community.

## **ATTACHMENT 1**

### **Our Towns Our Say**

#### **Public Meeting**

#### **Tomakin Sports and Social Club**

**February 1, 2002**

### **IDENTIFIED PRIORITIES**

#### **Communication**

Far too much reliance on power and telecommunications

How do we communicate without power, phones and internet

Provision of physical information boards in community places

Particularly dire when ABC went down

Need for regular updates from central command, reliable and timely notifications – radio/TV releases often not up to date

RFS information was too generalised – more detail on location required

Bushfire communication at all levels/agencies be reviewed

Clear communication needed re the access and range of available grants and other payments

Evacuation points need to be clearly defined and signposted

Evacuation orders should be issued to all impacted households

Council to lobby for the data and voice communications back up required for emergencies e.g. ATM, EFTPOS and radio

Clearly articulated process and locations for the disposal of fire related debris

Clear articulation and dissemination of rules for block clearing

Creation and dissemination of a check list for things to do before evacuating

Ensure available towers support communication needs

Council staff available at all times during crisis a must

Development of an email register to update those impacted by fires

Availability of battery-operated transistors

Education to better prepare community/council for evacuation systems/facilities

### **Crisis Support/Recovery Support**

That local businesses be given permission to give away produce instead of disposing as landfill

Council to employ an independent coordinator to oversee the reconstruction period

Change/waive legislation to allow residents to put and use caravans/tents on own land during rebuilds

There is a need to provide current information about location and means of accessing donated items

Appointment of an Aboriginal Liaison Officer

Council waive excess water bills for a period during and post fires (section 44)

Council waive rates on houses to be rebuilt as a result of bushfires

Ongoing addressing of both physical and mental health issues

Council should appoint a designated recovery officer to manage issues related to fire

Removal/planting of trees that are fire risks be regulated in urban areas

More personnel to facilitate evacuations

Moratorium on tip fees for bushfire related disposal (weighbridge not required)

More generators and fuel to be made available

Elimination of Council DA charges for fire related rebuilds

### **Economic Recovery**

Develop an economic stimulus package for local businesses

### **Evacuation/Sites**

Clear and unhindered evacuation routes and paths

Ensure ease of access to evacuation and recovery sites for people with special needs

Provision of adequate toilets and water facilities at evacuation point

Evacuation centres need to be open at the times advertised

### **Future Planning and Risk Minimisation**

Controlled burning necessary to minimise risks and reduce fuel load

Declare a State of Climate Emergency

Small regional fire stations should be fully equipped

Hazard reduction – dense vegetation hindered access

Ensure developers keep their blocks cleared

Provision of funding to the Indigenous Communities for controlled burning

Review of community safe place to ascertain suitability for purpose

Tip fees are a deterrent for pre-fire green waste clean-up

Simplify approval process for reduction burns

That a detailed bushfire plan be developed for our community with the appointment of a person to assist with public queries

Establish community fire units

Allow more tree removal around properties with easier and faster approval process

Ensure Council keeps their land and 10/50 Crown Land cleared

Develop a Bushfire Prevention Plan to reduce likelihood of repetition of current crisis

Council ensure homeowners/absentee homeowners/landlords clean up tenanted properties, weekenders – gutters, tree debris, gardens

Provide local SES with satellite phones

Council to ensure residential maps are up to date, particularly for new areas

Development of up to date emergency plan

Review provision of power during crisis to ensure continuity

Establishment of safety zones to protect public assets

Frequent turnover of firefighting equipment to ensure reliability

RFS recruitment strategies to further encourage younger members

That green waste be collected weekly

All holiday parks have generators as a mandated requirement

Buffer zones of a minimum of 100m be established on both sides of all forested roads

Use of non-combustible or underground poles/wires

## **Animal Welfare**

Earlier warning to enable movement of animals to safety

Clearly identified safe sites for animals

Provision of feed and water

Provision of Vet care

After fire care plan

### **Partnerships**

Council to lobby State and Federal Governments to increase funding to National Parks and Wildlife Services so that fire safe strategies can be implemented

Encourage cooperation between states when publishing fire information

### **General**

Several groups expressed a lack of confidence in the Council and council practices

Subsidise batteries for storing solar power

Concerns about the capacity of the Shire's tips

People to collect gas bottles during bushfire emergencies

Dob in people using hoses during Stage 4 Water Restrictions

Regulate septic systems to ensure they are fire safe

While some businesses were selling items at reduced or cost prices, it was believed that others were inflating prices

ADF, where were they...too late and too much red tape

Serviceable road access lacking – this restricted movement of emergency services



Response to Agenda Item MR 20/002 for ESC Meeting 11<sup>th</sup> February  
2020

My name is Peter Coggan. I live at 2 Warragai Place Malua Bay.

I acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the land upon which we meet today. I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

While I applaud the sentiment evident in Councillor Innes' proposal for a non-compulsory school break at the end of Term 1 or the commencement of Term 2, I foresee a number of logistic and organisational issues in the implementation of this proposal. As a retired executive teacher I offer the following observations from my school management perspective:

1. The organisation of a week of fun activities would place a significant increase in workload on all school staff.
2. Teachers and school support staff were also impacted by the catastrophic fires in our region. Apart from property loss and damage, teachers were unable to plan and prepare for the new school year as power outages and the unavailability of communications made this task impossible. Many teachers and their families spent time in January volunteering at various support centres, cleaning and repairing their properties, or volunteering time at school to look after children while parents conducted necessary post fire business.
3. Currently, teachers and support staff are in the acute stages of dealing with traumatised students and families. School has provided children with a safe place of normality and welcome routine where they can resume their day to day lives. It is important that this security and predictability is maintained.
4. Excursions cost money. Many families are struggling financially while they await insurance, government and charitable

support. This proposal could place further unnecessary burden on their shoulders.

5. Excursions take considerable time to organise. After deciding on a venue, transport must be organised along with an appropriate staff to student supervision ratio, provision for students with special needs must be made, risk management paperwork must be completed and lodged with educational management for approval. All of the above needs to take place weeks before the excursion takes place.
6. All volunteers in NSW schools must complete a Working With Children Check before they are permitted to work alongside children. This would apply to retired teachers, sports persons, artists and others. They are not permitted by law to simply walk into a school and help.
7. Risk Management paperwork must be completed for every activity that is proposed. Is it the expectation of Councillor Innes that schools will do this?
8. Amendment – Perhaps a suitable and workable amendment could be that the Council requests that all public, Catholic and Independent schools in bushfire impacted regions in NSW be given an extra weeks holiday, with the NSW and/or Federal Governments funding existing Out of School Hours Centres to provide additional places during that week for children of families who require additional care. These centres could deliver the supervision and fun activities that Councillor Innes has described. Or parents could opt to spend the time with their children.

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to make this presentation to you today.

Peter Coggan

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## **Eurobodalla's Shock Doctrine**

Around the world there are people with power who are cashing in on chaos, and exploiting catastrophe to brutally remake our world for their own gain. In her book "The shock doctrine" famous author Naomi Klein calls this "disaster capitalism" - orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events.

Exponents of the shock doctrine realise that a great rupture, like a bushfire disaster, can generate the kinds of vast, clean canvases they need. It is in these critical moments, when the community are psychologically unmoored and physically uprooted, that they plunge in and begin their work of remaking the world.

For example, after Hurricane Katrina, the disaster exploiters took advantage of the crisis to auction off the New Orleans public school system with military speed and precision. They used a pretext of raising money to speed recovery from the disaster. Before Hurricane Katrina the school board ran 123 public schools, now it runs just 4. Public school teachers watched helplessly as money allocated to hurricane victims was diverted to erase a public system and replace it with a private one that would take money from the public and into the hands of disaster capitalists.

The success of the shock doctrine depends on swift action to impose rapid and irreversible damage before the crisis-ravaged community slips back into normality.

Self serving disaster exploiters are already at work in our shire. Even whilst the shire was burning, the Eurobodalla community traumatised from weeks and weeks of fluctuating bushfire threat, our environment with its wonderful native flora and fauna, devastated. What does our Eurobodalla Council (the elected members lead by the mayor) do during these profoundly disturbing times?- They want to bulldoze what's left. They are going to ask the NSW Government to switch off the Biodiversity Conservation Act so as to facilitate extensive land clearing of protected sites that were impacted by the fires but approved for development in the Rural Lands Strategy/LEP.

On page 20 of the 11 February 2020 Council papers it states the following under the heading of Planning and Development:

“Council has been advocating to the NSW Government for changes to the planning system to facilitate the recovery process and to make it easier for our community to re-build. Decisions have previously been made to allow development in areas impacted by the fires. The focus needs to be on facilitating redevelopment and where appropriate improving health and safety through actions such as complying with current bush fire management standards.

To this end Council has advocated that the Biodiversity Conservation Act should be switched off for development replacing fire impacted development and where it is proposed to introduce an asset protection zone up to a level agreed in consultation with Rural Fire Service eg clearing up to a BAL29 is exempt.”

Our Council is not wasting any time trying to take advantage of a crisis to further their non-sustainable, dangerous development agenda.

The community has been told by our Mayor that now is not the time to talk about climate change, and the associated longer droughts, higher temperatures, and more extreme weather events. But obviously now is the perfect time to seek further destruction of the natural environment to meet Council's unsustainable development objectives and in so doing put more lives at risk in the future.

It seems nothing will stop the Council from approving 300 plus new dwellings in high-risk bushfire prone areas which were razed by the recent fires. They think that if enough of the vegetation is removed to meet the minimum fire standard, prospective home owners will come and build their dream homes. Unfortunately, the current fire season has shown that no amount of clearing in fire prone areas will be enough, in the Eurobodalla alone 500+ homes were burned to the ground. The plans of our council will only add to this total in the future. It seems as if the councillors/large landowners will make a substantial profit while these people will be left to deal with the massive risks that have been passed onto them through the purchase of these bushfire-prone lands. It is profit before people. Disaster exploitation is alive and well in the Eurobodalla.

Councillors,

I will begin by expressing my sympathy to all members of the directly impacted community across the Eurobodalla for their substantial losses, both personal and material, and note the extensive wider impacts of the disastrous 2019/20 Bushfires on communities, ecosystems and landscapes across all of southeast Australia. I also wish to offer my thanks to all groups and individuals for the support and assistance provided in so many ways to so many people or groups across these bushfire ravaged communities.

This morning I want to provide feedback on lessons that can be learnt from the recent catastrophic bushfires. I feel it is important that the insights gained from these tragic events need to be captured and distilled while they are still clear, so that important issues are not forgotten or glossed over with the passage of time. Our community and environment has paid a heavy toll from the fires, and it will only compound the tragedy further if we do not take the effort to learn from our recent travails.

Communications were a key issue during the recent emergency, and this was an area where there is room for great improvement in the Eurobodalla response. Council's emergency communications were heavily dependent on Facebook, which meant that many people (particularly older community members) were unable to access information even if they were lucky enough to have retained internet access during the emergency, while the Council emergency webpage was largely unchanged during the bulk of the disaster period and of little practical use. Given the significantly impaired mobile phone, NBN and power networks during the emergency, broadcast radio was the best means of communication, as evidenced by the regular "listening for an update" sessions held throughout the Eurobodalla by community members using car radios or old transistor radios revived for the emergency. Under these trying circumstances, the neighbouring Bega Valley Council communications response really stood out with broadcasts on ABC emergency radio of regular live updates, including Q&A sessions, featuring Mayor Kristy McBain together with other emergency committee members. These radio sessions were also live-streamed to the web, affording an even greater audience reach. The Bega Valley Shire communications model is definitely a system worthy of emulation in the Eurobodalla for future emergency situations.

It is also notable that Eurobodalla Council has demonstrated an inexplicable reluctance to formally engage with the community during the recent disaster period. Council delayed re-opening its offices until the 13<sup>th</sup> January, by which time the disaster had been running for several weeks, and refused any moves to hold an extraordinary meeting or briefing session before the scheduled restart of routine Council meetings in February 2020. In contrast, the extensively bushfire impacted Shoalhaven Council to our immediate north organised an extraordinary Council meeting held on the 20<sup>th</sup> January, which provided a wealth of useful information readily applicable both within and beyond the Shoalhaven LGA, and clearly demonstrated that Shoalhaven Council was actively seeking out lessons which could be learned from their emergency experience. In contrast, I was disappointed when I

searched through today's agenda papers and found not a single mention of the words "lesson" or "learnt". I will now share the recommendations from the Shoalhaven Mayoral Minute 20.1 drawn from the agenda papers for the Shoalhaven Council Extraordinary Meeting of 20<sup>th</sup> January 2020, as they are all readily applicable to the Eurobodalla experience. I recommend that Eurobodalla Council take up these recommendations as well.

### **Recommendation**

That:

1. Council prioritise the installation of Solar PV and back up battery systems to Council facilities that are used as neighbourhood safer places, or places for community to gather and exchange information in times of crisis such as community halls. In prioritising this list, extra weight be given to facilities that are in communities that have one road in/out.
2. Council audit identified possible evacuation centres to ensure that they have the electrical capacity to be connected to an emergency generator and if not rectify as required.
3. Council work with Office of Emergency Management to create an emergency response kit for each of these locations, such a kit could include a satellite phone for communications, guidance for communities who become isolated during a crisis etc.
4. Council request that the NSW State Government offer a funding package to assist in this type of 'disaster proofing' in the community.
5. Council also request that the NSW State Government fund any modifications that need to be made to public and private buildings that act as Evacuation Centres as a matter of priority.
6. Request that the State Government work with the State's energy network providers to look at better 'future proofing' for small communities that are at the end of the line through micro grid solutions.
7. These representations be sent to the relevant Federal Ministers.

The Shoalhaven Council Extraordinary Meeting Agenda papers also have an entire item detailing Shoalhaven Council's systematic efforts, including financial assistance, which were undertaken to successfully facilitate a BlazeAid station being set up within their LGA. For those not familiar with their activities, BlazeAid is a volunteer-based organisation that works with families and individuals in rural Australia after natural disasters such as fires and floods. Working alongside the rural families, BlazeAid volunteers help to rebuild fences and other structures that have been damaged or destroyed. There are now BlazeAid camps located in both the Shoalhaven LGA (at Milton) and the Bega Valley LGA (at Cobargo). In contrast, Eurobodalla has no BlazeAid station located within our LGA, and today's agenda papers make only passing reference to "liaising" with BlazeAid. This is certainly an aspect where the Eurobodalla recovery response could be improved, as the proximity of a local BlazeAid station within the Shire would be of significant benefit to Eurobodalla rural families.

Eurobodalla Council's reluctance to engage with the local community regarding their experiences during the bushfire emergency is all the more baffling in the light of the

requirements for Recovery Committees specified in the Community Recovery Toolkit produced by the NSW Office of Emergency Management. The NSW Office of Emergency is the lead agency for disaster recovery in NSW, and auspices all local government recovery activities. The Community Recovery Toolkit begins by stating that *“The Recovery Committee is the strategic decision making body for local recovery. It provides credible and strong leadership and has a key role in restoring confidence in the community”*. It then goes on to highlight the importance of *“engaging with your community”*, and states that *“Community development in the disaster recovery context is the empowerment of individuals and communities to manage their own recovery”*. How can a Council that shies away from engaging with their own community about their disaster response experience have any credibility with their community? How can such behaviour engender a sense of “trust” or “empowerment” with in our community? The answer is that it cannot, and until Council systematically undertakes meaningful engagement with the community to harvest and distil the lessons learnt from the recent bushfire disaster it is failing at the first vital step to create a robust and resilient recovery for the Eurobodalla.

The Community Recovery Toolkit provides a ready means to engage with the community via the means of Community Reference Groups chosen to fully reflect the broad spectrum of activities, knowledge and experience from within the Eurobodalla Shire. The omission of Community Reference Groups from the Eurobodalla recovery effort, or attempts to stack them with unrepresentative members, would be deeply counterproductive to the recovery program. The community will be keenly watching this space in the months and years of recovery activities that lie ahead for the Eurobodalla.

This morning I have laid out some useful lessons and information that has been accrued from the community leadership responses demonstrated to our south and north by bushfire-affected LGAs. It demonstrates that there are realistic and achievable improvements in emergency and recovery responses at the LGA level which can be delivered for the benefit of the whole Eurobodalla community.

I trust that Council will now begin to systematically and comprehensively seek feedback from the Eurobodalla community about lessons that can be learnt and systemic improvements that can be made to ensure the next Eurobodalla emergency response can be significantly improved in a variety of ways.

I will end this presentation by informing Councillors that I am still waiting for a response to the questions I posed to Council regarding bushfire planning issues on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2019 during the Public Access session. These questions have become of even greater significance since I asked them in early December, and I trust that a considered reply will be forthcoming in a timely manner, and not be conveniently “swept under the carpet”.

Brett Stevenson

Public Forum Presentation to Council Meeting 11<sup>th</sup> February 2020

Joan Armstrong

'Speaking' on Agenda item GMR20/002

Back in August 2019 the Bushfire and National Hazards Co-operative Research centre released a bushfire outlook for the coming season showing that large areas of eastern Australia were facing above normal potential .

With 80% of the Shire being National Park, public reserve or state forest this should have raised some concern.

The Currowan fire started on 26<sup>th</sup> of November and gradually joined with the Clyde mountain and Kings Highway fire to create extreme and catastrophic conditions.

It was amazing that unlike the Black Saturday fires that more lives were not lost

Although council and staff would like to take credit that - quote - 'people were kept safe and taken out of harms way' is a fallacy .

The truth of the matter is that the community were mainly left to their own devices and it was only their resilience and community spirit that endured.

For example those who were trying to phone Council for advice were met with a message that the office was closed from the 24<sup>th</sup> December until the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2020 and then again until the 13<sup>th</sup> January !

Who was it that made this executive decision to 'close shop' during a most traumatic bushfire situation ?

Council claims to have taken a leadership role throughout this disaster but it is unfortunate that many councillors and staff were conspicuous by their absence.

Communications in conjunction with NSWRFs emergency bushfire warnings to leave to Narooma and Moruya were inadequate with people arriving at evacuation centres only to find them closed.

Evacuation centres need to be identified early and up to a standard that follows the NSW State Emergency Management Plan and follow the Major Evacuation Centre Guidelines . This would avoid any possible Health issues that could arise .

Will the recently established Eurobodella Recovery Committee consult the community and issue weekly reports to be made available to the community ?

In the interest of fairness The Eurobodella Disaster Recovery Fund should be headed by a panel independent of any councillor or staff member. This would hopefully avoid any controversy that should arise.

I conclude with saying that it was extremely disappointing that many councillors and staff did not rise to to meet their obligations to the community during this traumatic time

In the event that I am unable to attend this meeting I authorise Coral Anderson to speak on my behalf.

Joan Armstrong