



Mildura Rural City Council

MILDURA RURAL CITY COUNCIL
RESPONSE TO

**THE ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES
AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE
(ENRRDC) INQUIRY INTO THE
SUSTAINABILITY AND OPERATIONAL
CHALLENGES OF VICTORIA'S RURAL AND
REGIONAL COUNCILS**

SEPTEMBER 2016

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MILDURA RURAL CITY COUNCIL SUSTAINABILITY REVIEW

At the end of 2012, Mildura Rural City Council (MRCC) commenced what we have called a 'Sustainability Review'. The intention of this review has been to systematically analyse and evaluate each service area across the organisation asking two fundamental questions:

1. Should Council be providing this service?
2. If so, what should we be providing, at what level and how can we do that as efficiently as possible?

The catalyst for starting down this path was not rate capping or the freezing of grant indexation; it was the availability of objective data that clearly spelled out our community's lack of capacity to pay.

The inherent characteristics of our municipality mean that we are required to deliver services and infrastructure as a regional city but the reality is that our revenue raising capacity is only that of a large shire.

➤ ***Sustainability Review Objectives/Outcomes***

- To review all services provided by Council against the Victorian Local Government Best Value Principles and to establish:
 - best service mix to meet a broad range of community expectations
 - most appropriate delivery model for each service
 - appropriate levels of service
- Identify and maximise cost savings now and into the future
- Identification of opportunities for improvement/better ways of delivering services
- Improved targeting of services

➤ ***The Process***

MRCC has a defined end-to-end process supported by templates and our Business Improvement Officer, who facilitates the process for each review. We commenced by prioritising our reviews according to a number of criteria (i.e. whether or not the service is a statutory function, whether there are already influences that are impacting on that service, etc.) Other triggers have also brought forward or shuffled the order of reviews, including legislative changes, staff leaving, grant funding changes etc.

THE COMMUNITY

MRCC, like other councils, develops a Community/Council Plan through engagement with the community. We use the IAP2 method for community engagement. Sitting underneath the Council Plan is a series of more specific strategies designed to achieve agreed outcomes. These strategies are also developed through engagement with the community. The sum total of all those strategies amounts to far more than Council can afford to undertake in any given year but the way we see it is that this lays out the landscape and

once we know what that looks like, it becomes much easier to prioritise, to group or integrate actions, to capitalise on funding opportunities. Obviously there are issues to manage in regard to creating (or not creating) community expectation and this understanding needs to be part of the engagement process.

In the case of service reviews and any changes to what we deliver to the community in terms of services or service levels obviously requires community engagement, particularly with the users of that service.

WEEDS, RABBITS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

With over 5,100 kilometres of road in the Mildura municipality invasive plants and animals (particularly rabbits) on our roadsides pose a serious threat to primary production and biodiversity in the region. Invasive species can reduce farm productivity, disturb native species habitats and food sources and contribute to land degradation. There is a significant financial cost to farming communities in particular, through lost production and the cost of control measures. The cost to the environment is immeasurable.

Council recognises the need to control invasive species across the land it owns and manages within the municipality which now includes control on Council roadsides (due to an amendment to the CaLP Act). This legislative change has the potential to place a huge financial burden upon MRCC due to Council's extensive road network and the high risk of rabbit infestation / plagues within the region. It is important to note that whilst every effort is made by Council to undertake effective invasive species management, budget constraints meant that external funding is required for most projects. Where possible, Council does provide an 'in-kind' component by contributing staff labour and the use of Council vehicles and equipment etc.

Council has developed a strategic plan to work with land managers and/or landowners, including State Government agencies to mitigate the ongoing impacts of invasive species on municipal roadsides. The establishment of partnerships with community groups, land managers and/or landowners and stakeholders will help ensure that desired outcomes are achieved.

We will keep finding savings and raising revenue from sources other than rates where we can to keep rate increases to a minimum in acknowledgement of the lack of capacity for our community to pay – we are doing that anyway. BUT that is not going to address our infrastructure renewal gap or enable us to undertake significant projects into the future. A variation to go above the rate cap is not an answer due to the fundamental issues of community capacity to pay.

THE FUTURE

If we accept that one of the fundamental roles of a democratic government is the redistribution of wealth to ensure all citizens have equal access to services and facilities and therefore quality of life, then the change that must be considered is how local government is funded by other levels of government to achieve this.