

Who will stand for Council?

Dennis Argall

I came very close this week to throwing my hat in the ring for the Mayor job at the September elections.

We have only four months to find good people to run for office. I have only been in the Shoalhaven for five years but that is enough time to see that there is a huge difference between the vibrant beauty of the Shoalhaven and the huge potential of its people, on the one hand, and the dark and negative way in which local government is done.

It doesn't have to be so shoddy, it isn't like that in every other place, we have to get ourselves into the twenty first century quickly. The issues ahead are too large, too complex and too important not to change things now.

We have to begin change at the top, that's why I considered challenging the sitting mayor. We also need new faces, new bright faces, for the council. I don't belong to a party, I don't care where they come from, so long as candidates come forward to work for transparency and integrity. I urge women to stand. We need the voices of women and family perspectives urgently.

...That's what I would have said, for beginners, as a candidate.

But like others I am not keen to sign on for four years in the maelstrom of the deal-doings of this elected council. No one sensibly would do that. It ought, however, to be possible to change it all, if enough people stand to make a difference, to lift the game.

What are the things people should sign on for?

Well, for a start, the charter principles at the front of the Local Government Act:

(1) A council has the following charter:

- to provide directly or on behalf of other levels of government, after due consultation, adequate, equitable and appropriate services and facilities for the community and to ensure that those services and facilities are managed efficiently and effectively
- to exercise community leadership
- to exercise its functions in a manner that is consistent with and actively promotes the principles of multiculturalism
- to promote and to provide and plan for the needs of children
- to properly manage, develop, protect, restore, enhance and conserve the environment of the area for which it is responsible, in a manner that is consistent with and promotes the principles of ecologically sustainable development
- to have regard to the long term and cumulative effects of its decisions... [etc]

Then there's the issue of integrity. Section 8 of the ICAC Act says:

(1) Corrupt conduct is:

- a. any conduct of any person (whether or not a public official) that adversely affects, or that could adversely affect, either directly or indirectly, the honest or impartial exercise of official functions by any public official, any group or body of public officials or any public authority, or
- b. any conduct of a public official that constitutes or involves the dishonest or partial exercise of any of his or her official functions, or
- c. any conduct of a public official or former public official that constitutes or involves a breach of public trust, or

d. any conduct of a public official or former public official that involves the misuse of information or material that he or she has acquired in the course of his or her official functions, whether or not for his or her benefit or for the benefit of any other person.

(2) Corrupt conduct is also any conduct of any person (whether or not a public official) that adversely affects, or that could adversely affect, either directly or indirectly, the exercise of official functions by any public official, any group or body of public officials or any public authority...

But to build a healthy society it is the duty of public figures not just to slither through the law but to lead with ethical principles. I would propose this way of working:

1. **Public officials must be exemplary in their conduct.** Ethics permeate from the top.
2. **Build community:** We are in trouble, nationally, locally. Government cannot do everything; communities must be encouraged to build on their strengths. **Ensure that consultation with community is meaningful and effective.** Not all things for which community members ask can, should or will be done. Weight should be accorded to views which represent breadth of participation. Bridge between richer and poorer communities.
3. **Credit must be earned by action and never stolen from others.** Accord respect and give credit to community and elected councillors and to staff for all they do and achieve. We cannot succeed without staff being confident and proud of where they work, knowing that they can work harmoniously and usefully.
4. **Admit promptly to error.**
5. **Donations received must** be reported publicly and promptly.
6. **Arms length:** Clear and easily followed rules to advance the principles of the ICAC Act, not just get around them.

What practical things could a new team work for?

There are restraints of budget, limiting concrete goodies council can deliver. A first step might be to build a sense of “yes we can!” in the community, as distinct from “we will sit and whinge.”

Australia faces major challenges which will hit hard in a place of scattered towns and villages, high unemployment, relatively low income and high proportion of aged people. Here is my list of priorities:

1. **STOP KIDDING OURSELVES:** We will not, in the long term, be able to build faster and faster roads and use more fuel. That simple game is over. Peak oil (the capacity to produce oil being exceeded by demand) has arrived or is near. Fuel and construction costs will escalate. There will be no protection other than in doing things differently. Tax reduction and subsidy will not work, will impoverish, will delay reality sinking in. We need adequate public transport, clustering of amenity, focus on education and connection using the internet, provided more widely. *Many such things are beyond the ambit of local government; all will require effective initiative from local government; get to the front or be stuck at the back - which is where we are now.*
2. **WORK TOGETHER:** We need mutual community support to foster adjustments such as these. No more shall we allow people to be run over by progress. We can all progress, with respect for the individual. The future of Berry and Milton and Vincentia depends on decent opportunities for struggling communities too.
3. **PREPARE FOR THE GAOL:** A gaol is being built. None of us can distance ourselves from the social impacts of that. We must work to get in place adequate social and rehabilitation resources, both for inmates and families who come here.
4. **FIGHT FOR HEALTH:** We must argue for strong, effective local health and mental health services, with great focus on prevention, early intervention, and family and carer support.

5. **SOCIAL INCLUSION FOR THE LEAST:** We must address serious pockets of disadvantage, among indigenous and non-indigenous people.
6. **DECENCY AND RESPECT:** We must build community processes to make welcome people who come from other cultures and promote mutual understanding.
7. **WE MUST HAVE A SHOALHAVEN 2020 PROCESS.** I will turn 77 in 2020, if I am lucky enough to be here. We must find ways for younger people to feel confident and constructive in participating in public life. The issues run from local to state to federal government responsibilities, but visions should not be so limited. *Find the visions, find the schemes, find the ways. Reform the systems if they are obstacles.*

I am accustomed to dealing with public policy and with other governments. There are many others in the Shoalhaven with such skills. We must pool these skills, strengthen these skills, share them, use them, link them with business skills.

No one can work for such an agenda alone. Do others believe we can do things better, especially if we try to do it together? The system can be changed if enough good people stand up now.

I asked a young Aboriginal friend last night: “What would you do if you were mayor and the Shoalhaven were to be run properly?” “I'd get off my backside and go and show the people that I cared,” was the swift reply.

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