

Hepburn Shire Council higher cap application

Submission received via email

Date submitted: 17 March 2025

Submission written by: Lisa Gervasoni

I strongly object to the current rate rise application by Hepburn Shire Council.

I complained about the timing of the consultation as the basis for this rate rise at the time. Council released the financial statement in the middle of the very controversial Future Hepburn Process. Both processes were rushed to make the final Council meeting and 95% of people still have no knowledge of the financial statement.

Future Hepburn involved over 1000 pages of strategies and studies with six weeks to respond. The financial report was open in the middle of this period. The Future Hepburn work was rushed and full of errors and inconsistencies. As a professional planner I had to work with many local communities to assist in having their word heard, as well as working full time. I was easily spending 20 hours a week on Future Hepburn activities, and did not have the capacity to take on additional document assessment.

I requested extensions of time for both of these projects as neither needed to be actioned in the current term of council. Council refused.

I have previously submitted on many Council budgets and was frustrated that the format of the current financial year's budget did not allow detailed consideration of project funding.

It is frustrating that after the efforts of previous Council to turn around the economic situation in Hepburn that there has been poor governance processes that led to the major financial losses - such as the Rex Project.

Prior to the commencement of the Rex Project I queried both the estimated project cost (under \$1m) and the interpretation of the clause has the building is in a heritage overlay and Minister Madden's letter in introducing the GFC provision (permit exemptions) for 'shovel ready' Council projects under \$1m referred to emergency measures, trusting council to have undertaken

regulatory assessments and community engagement. It was followed up within a week with advice that it did not apply to demolition / alteration of heritage places.

Council ignored this advice, and the advice (quantity estimates) and proceeded with the project that was never completed. When the estimate of completion reached over \$9million Council discontinued the project. This single project and the multi million dollar losses council incurred are the reason why a rate rise is required.

Actions have logical consequences. The ratepayers of Hepburn Shire are frustrated with poor financial management. Hard decisions need to be made about what are core services. Mismanagement should not be rewarded by no consequence for the executive and financial stress for ratepayers.

Hepburn Shire has an aging population. Many people find the current rates a burden. In the past 18 months in Hepburn Springs alone the Palais, the Savoia Hotel, Frank and Connie's Kitchen, the Slow Wombat and Harries at Hepburn have closed. Only the general store, a clothes shop, a pizza venue and a restaurant remain (outside of 2 accommodation venues with facilities) and many of those businesses are struggling. This story is repeated shire wide.

This is not the time for a significant rate rise for residents, businesses or farms. Rate rises are significant in the farm sector. Hepburn shire farmers are facing land use conflict, transmission impacts on their future and drought. There is no rate category that can sustain increased rate rises due to governance failure by council.

There is significant anger and shock within the community and I strongly recommend that you undertake a survey of all ratepayers in relation to this proposal.

