



Essential Services Commission - Advice from Independent Engagement Expert

26 May 2017

Thank you for the opportunity to review the submission from Pyrenees Council on their approach to engagement with the community around their application for a higher cap under the Fair Go Rates System.

Outlined below is my response to their original application and my additional comments when supplementary information was provided later in the process.



Kathy Jones
Executive Chair
KJA





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Summary of contents provided and completeness. Clarity of reasons for methodology. Integrity of delivery.

No engagement plan was submitted.

Reference is made to the regular engagement undertaken for budget process but there is no detail on engagement methodology or content.

The Community Attitudes Survey results are included as evidence but there is no detail on its applicability to the community's understanding of the trade-offs associated with going with an increased cap or not.

The methodology, content and results of the engagement program around the gravel road upgrade undertaken in September 2016 are included but the content shows that the engagement was undertaken in isolation from any trade-off discussions.

That being said there is a good description of the community's characteristics, the constraints (and opportunities) of the local economy and the way that the Council has dealt with its past and future spending in the application. However there is no evidence of this being shared in any formal sense with the community.

Does the engagement program contain clear accessible and comprehensive information and follow a timely process to engender feedback from the community? Does it satisfactorily detail the following? What council did to engage with their ratepayers and communities, what information was provided during the engagement process, how this information was presented and how feedback was gathered and what this feedback was.

The engagement program would be significantly improved by being embedded in a framework which addresses the engagement objectives, engagement program, council requirements and the information sharing process that was undertaken. This could easily be presented as a one page document which puts some structure around the engagement program undertaken (see case study in the guidance materials)

This approach together with a stated council policy on engagement (again, only needs to be a short statement which should be endorsed by the councillors at the beginning of each term) would then help to show that the engagement is part of a continuum and that it addresses the differing views of stakeholder groups.

However, it would be fair to say that such a small council has indeed undertaken engagement activities appropriate to the size of the community. It has used existing tools to enhance their understanding of the community's position on a higher cap. What is disappointing is that the only option canvassed in this context is the gravel road upgrade program.



Is engagement on going and tailored to community needs? Does the program fit in with Councils ongoing SRP engagement?

There is little evidence to show that this is the case except for the annual Customer Response Survey which is a somewhat blunt instrument that does not specifically measure or articulate the issues behind a higher cap.

Does the engagement program prioritise matters of significance and impact? Does it satisfactorily detail the following? How Council considered the scale of the higher rate cap, whether the higher rate cap is addressing short term or long term financial needs, how engagement was conducted in the context of the issues above, how the options or trade-offs were presented, what Council learnt about the community's priorities through the engagement process, how Council assessed differing community views.

There is no evidence to show that this is the case.

Has the engagement program led to communities becoming more informed about council decision making? Does it satisfactorily detail the following? How the engagement program was evaluated, how feedback was gathered and what this feedback was, how the outcomes of the engagement process were communicated with the community, how the engagement undertaken influenced Council's decision to apply for a higher rate cap, how Council is responding to issues raised during the engagement and why, how Council dealt with or is dealing with unmet community expectations in relation to rate increases and/or service provision and how Council maintains ongoing communication with its community.

There is no evidence for this and the engagement program does not show how this can happen because it is not shown as part of a continuum.

What were views of ratepayers and the community about the rate increase?

The majority of ratepayers involved in the Gravel Road Upgrade were in favour of a higher cap for this project. The engagement content did address how the higher cap would address this issue in the long term.

How were these views taken into account by Council in making their decision?

The narrative does show how the views of those involved in the gravel road upgrade engagement and the community survey results were taken into account in the budget process and in application for the higher cap.

List any items identified for future information

Council's engagement policy

Additional advice provided as part of further ESC and Council Consultation

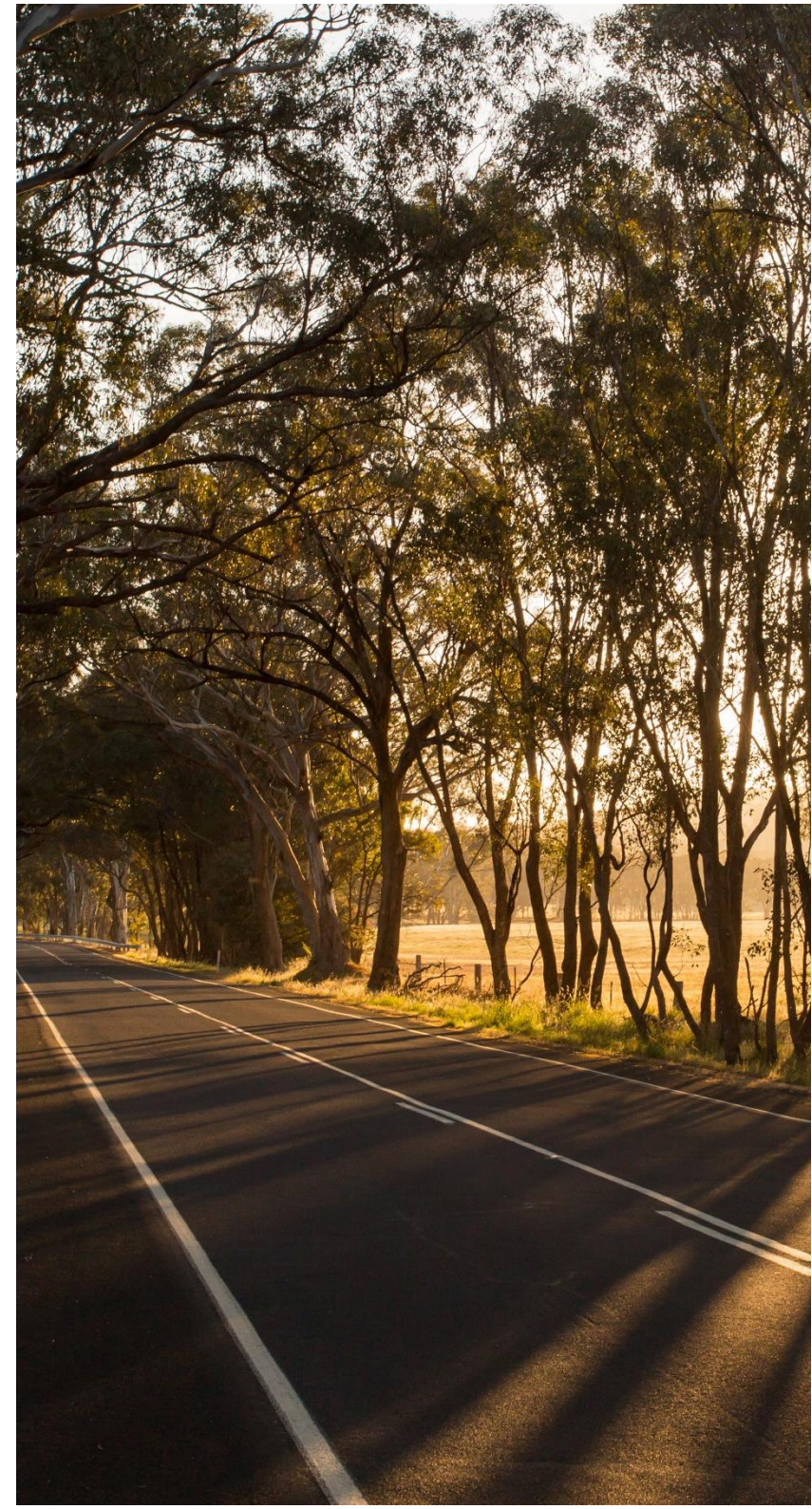
Council submitted a copy of their engagement policy

The strategy is simple but well said. It is missing milestones and evaluation and also how they will ensure they learn from their communities and vice versa. The fact that engagement is interactive is implied but not explicit in what they say. A good first step.

With the Keep me in the Loop sessions, what was the feedback and what did they learn. How did what the community have to say impact their decisions on these projects?

Council needs to explain why they need to take an intergenerational view and how they will achieve it, acknowledging that only 30% wanted rate rises to fix the problem.

Should compare the 27% of customer action requests with the quantum of requests for other services.





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