

Is the Council's solution to the rural waste levy fair?

Last week the Independent ran a front page story detailing Armidale Dumaresq Council's rethink over proposed rate rises for non-city ratepayers due to what is effectively a levy for the city's waste disposal facilities. Here Margaret Gunter provides her opinion on their apparent change of heart.

The front page heading People Power (*Independent* 24/5/06) is misleading. The contents of that article clearly reveal that Council does not listen to non-city ratepayers who appear to be powerless to influence council decisions affecting them.

At the Town Hall meeting, Councillor Beyersdorf stated that the Council was committed to community consultation. Consultation implies that you actively listen to what the consultees say - not just let noise waft past your ears!

How well did the councillors and Council staff listen? Not very well.

The consensus of the meeting was that the User Pays. Subsequently, the Council has decreed that rural

ratepayers continue to pay the \$39 levy that they have already unknowingly paid for services not delivered, wanted, nor used. They will also be compelled to pay an additional \$50 per year for those services. Rural ratepayers will pay \$1.71 per week for services not wanted, used nor delivered, PLUS increased gate charges for those occasions on which they actually do.

Compare this with charges to city residents - including non-ratepaying residences. Each household pays only \$3.95 a week for their garbage (and recycling) collection for a service that they do use. Green bin waste is not sorted for recycling so that everything in the green bins go into the landfill site, thus decreasing the life of that landfill. This service costs city ratepayers less than the cost of a beer, a packet of cigarettes, a cup of coffee in a café, a magazine, etc. As Councillor Beyersdorf pointed out at the Town Hall meeting, it is a great deal for city residents!

In other words, profligate

producers of waste are being rewarded for their ecologically irresponsible behaviours while those who are scrupulous recyclers, the rural ratepayers, are being punished for their ecologically responsible behaviours. In addition, rural ratepayers are being forced to pay for a new landfill site because of the profligate producers of waste who are being encouraged to produce even more.

What part of User Pays did the councillors and the Council employees not understand?

Council claimed that it was motivated by equity issues. What part of Equity did they not understand?

Council claims to be concerned about the decreasing life of the existing landfill yet rewards those who are shortening that lifespan. What part of consistency between principles and practices does it not understand?

Councillor Beyersdorf's comments later in the article clearly indicate that the council has no intention of leaving matters as they

newly are. It intends to 'investigate' the need for garbage collection services in the rural residential area. This is Newspeak for the imposition of yet another levy on rural residential ratepayers who this year have already been slugged \$60 for the privilege of not receiving services and another \$50 for not using the landfill site. These are in addition to the expensive annual rates that they are already compelled to pay for services not delivered!

Why didn't the Council consider other options to pay for Landfill services? More realistic costs of providing the city green bin services; operating rural landfills on only one weekend afternoon; and even greater increases in gate charges for using all waste collection sites?

What about significantly higher garbage collection charges for those residential premises, non-public schools and businesses who do not pay rates for the services that are provided to them by ratepayers?

What about increasing the cost of the mulch produced at the landfill site and charging for delivery to city

users? (Rural residential ratepayers already pay \$36 per delivery)

There is no point in wasting ratepayers' time with "community consultation" processes that exist in name only when council is determined to impose an already decided upon agenda upon rural ratepayers. Councillor Beyersdorf states that the Council will 'consult widely'. We can hardly wait to see how many more punitive levies will be imposed upon rural and rural residential ratepayers to support services and facilities for city ratepayers.

Since Council appears to be using rural and rural residential ratepayers as the purse to fund city-based projects, it may be time for rural and rural residential ratepayers to request an inquiry into Council finances.

Rural and rural residential ratepayers can only hope that the Minister for Local Government and the Ombudsman will be more proficient active listeners than this council has been.