



CLARENCE ENVIRONMENT CENTRE INC

31 Skinner Street

South Grafton 2460

Phone/ Fax: 02 6643 1863

Web site: www.cec.org.au

E-mail: admin@cec.org.au

Date: 12th January 2016

The General Manager
Clarence Valley Council
council@clarence.nsw.gov.au

SUBMISSION

Proposed changes to Code of Meeting Practice

Introduction

The Clarence Environment Centre (CEC) has maintained a shop-front in Grafton for over 26 years, and has a proud history of environmental advocacy. The conservation of the Australia's natural environment, both terrestrial and marine, has always been a priority for our members, and we believe the maintenance of healthy ecosystems and biodiversity is of paramount importance.

Through our scrutiny of numerous development proposals put to Council over the past quarter of a century, we have had regular discourse with both Councillors and Council staff, and from time to time have the need to petition Council and address meetings. As such, we believe every avenue that enables this interaction to occur should remain open, so we feel compelled to comment on some of the proposed changes to the Code of Meeting Practice.

Matters of concern.

Petitions: We have major concerns about the proposal whereby Council will only “*accept written petitions from persons that have a direct interest in the Clarence Valley Local Government Area, such as residents, land and business owners*”.

As a volunteer, not for profit organisation, it is unclear how this proposed change would effect us and the many smaller groups that may have been specifically set up to promote their particular interests.

On occasions, the CEC may request environment groups from other LGAs, or organisations such as the Environmental Defenders Office to petition on our behalf. The CEC regularly reciprocates in this manner, lobbying or makes submissions to other Councils across NSW and occasionally interstate, usually in opposition to something that may create a precedent that could then impact our local community at a later date.

Also from time to time we have petitioned Council on issues that may also affect holiday makers to the district who, while not having any direct connection by way of land or property ownership, are likely to have legitimate concerns about the amenities, natural and built, that they enjoy during regular stays in the valley. A typical example of this is the current proposal for a 170 lot residential subdivision in the seaside village of Iluka. The loss of bushland landscape and other changes resulting from the massive increase in population, would be of interest to those visitors whose concerns should be heard.

Furthermore, we consider the suggested use of 'prescribed forms' for petitions to be overly restrictive, and this form of petition invariably does not allow the attachment of images, etc. crucial to getting messages across.

Likewise, the suggested requirement of signatures in original writing of each petitioner is unnecessarily restrictive. In this electronic age of public media, forcing petitioners to either post or deliver petitions by hand is ridiculous. It has long been said that Clarence Valley council is living in the past, this suggestion simply proves it, as does the suggestion that there be a minimum number of signatories to any petition.

We are also curious to know how Council will determine what suggestions/complaints are "vexatious"? We wholeheartedly agree that abuse in any form is unacceptable. However, we have to wonder what has occurred to generate that abuse in the first instance, and can it be attributed to deliberate attempts by council, staff or councillors, to block or gag reasonable complaints or proposals. These complaints should be addressed no matter how unpalatable.

To us these proposed changes appear deliberately designed to take away the community's right to suggest change. Council needs to be much more receptive to concerns of the general public, and each petition should be considered on its merit, regardless of the number of signatories. In short, we strongly believe the broader community's voice should be heard and ask that this ridiculous restriction be rejected.

The Environment Centre also notes the proposed deletion of the Community Forum from Council Meetings. We have to admit that we are not exactly sure what this means. Does it mean that deputations will no longer be accepted? If so, we find this to be totally unacceptable, and demand to know why this move is being proposed if not to further gag public debate on contentious matters.

Finally, we are appalled at the proposal that Council delegates will not be required to compile public reports on the events they have attended while representing Council. These events should not be a rate-payer funded 'junket', and the public should be kept fully informed of what their rates are being spent on.

Councillors and Council management need to realise that they have a responsibility to ratepayers and the general public, and their job to do the very best they can for that community, and listening to those who are paying their wages, and being accountable for expenditure of their hard-earned dollars, is an essential part of doing their job.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Yours sincerely

John Edwards
Honorary Secretary.