

Council happenings . . .

with Mayor
Glenn Wall

Tillegra Dam Whole of Government Taskforce.

Last week, the Hon. Nathan Rees MP, Minister for Utilities, announced the establishment of the Tillegra Dam Whole of Government Taskforce, which will focus on matters affecting Dungog Shire in response to the proposed dam. The first meeting will be held in February.

This will assist Council in ensuring that the appropriate government agencies are involved in the development of strategies and programs to address likely impacts upon our community. One of the most obvious and immediate concerns is how our substandard regional roads would cope with all the extra traffic associated with dam construction and a subsequent influx of tourism. But many other important issues will also be submitted for consideration.

The Taskforce will play no part in processing of the DA for the proposed dam, which will remain matters for Hunter Water Corporation (HWC) and government agencies with statutory planning responsibilities in that regard.

On behalf of Council and the community I would extend our sincere thanks to the Tillegra Dam Community Reference Group and HWC for supporting our request for the Taskforce to be established, and to Minister Rees and the NSW Government.

Release of NSW Planning Reform Agenda.

The Minister for Planning has released the discussion paper Improving the NSW Planning System, which is available at www.planning.nsw.gov.au . Submissions will close on 8th February 2008.

The stated intent is to improve efficiencies and streamline procedures to facilitate a more robust and workable planning system. Local government supports these goals and accepts the need for some reform, but many of the recommendations put forward would result in increased complexity and much less accountability to the community.

The reforms propose reducing the role of councils in many aspects of the development assessment process, expanding the role of private building certifiers, increasing the number of complying developments across the state, and establishing Joint Regional Planning Panels to assess 'regional' applications.

Other key changes warranting careful evaluation include the proposed code on Exempt and Complying Development, the suggested methods of increasing the transparency of private certifiers, and the implications of the proposed 'gateway' test on rezoning applications.

The reform agenda does offer some positive suggestions including variable assessment times depending upon DA complexity, E-planning initiatives where resourcing is available, and allowing variations to plan making depending on the scale of the rezoning or LEP. Also, local government would welcome the introduction of a Planning Assessment Commission to deal with state significant development.

Most of the above issues will mean little to ordinary people until they become involved with some form of development. Sadly, over the last ten years planning processes have become increasingly complex, and applicants often need expert assistance to lodge a DA. Mr John Mant, a Sydney urban planner, recently summarised the situation in "City Scape News" under the heading "Sartor Blames Wrong People for Planning Delays", with extracts as follows:

NSW has "by far the most complex planning system in Australia, made worse by recent 'reforms', which have increased the legislation by over 80 new sections. The State Government alone has over 60 sets of planning controls, dealing with a wide range of subjects and areas... No other State comes anywhere near this complexity... When Councils operate this shambles ..even the simplest applications result in lengthy reports... All this suggests that there are systemic problems for the Minister to address rather than blaming the councils." (<http://cityscape-news.com/OCT-2007.pdf>).

Local government is disappointed that such matters are not addressed in the discussion paper. We question the need for the extensive reforms recommended, and are concerned that many would not achieve the intended aims whilst introducing new problems. Unfortunately, much of the reform agenda concerns measures intended to address city-based issues that are being forced by default upon rural areas. Once finalised Council's submission will be posted at www.dungog.nsw.gov.au.

23 January 2008