



Bass Coast Ratepayers and Residents Association

**SUBMISSION IN RESPONSE TO BASS COAST SHIRE
COUNCIL COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT
REVIEW – March 2022**

Contents

INTRODUCTION..... 3

Current Communication and Engagement Strategy..... 3

Councils actions against genuine communication and engagement..... 4

Councillor social media accounts..... 4

Councillors ability to publicly discuss Council matters 5

Public Question Time 5

Public policies..... 6

Public submissions 6

Non-resident ratepayers..... 7

Project information..... 7

Requested outcomes to review 8

CONCLUSION..... 9

INTRODUCTION

According to the 2021 Local Government Community Satisfaction Survey . . .

“Council rates lowest – relative to its performance in other areas – on consultation and engagement, with an index score of just 54.”

This submission has been prepared by the BCRRRA committee in consultation with Association members.

As all Councillors are aware, BCRRRA is an incorporated association that is managed by volunteers from across Bass Coast Shire. The Association aims to improve transparency, engagement, and financial discipline at Bass Coast Shire Council.

The Association asks that Councillors, when considering this submission, abide by their pledge to consider each and every item based on the individual merits of each item, without bias or prejudice, by maintaining an open mind and disregarding Councillors personal interests so as to avoid any conflict with their public duty.

The community elects Councillors to act as their representatives. The community does not elect Councillors to act as the representatives of the CEO, Council Officers, other Council staff, or contractors providing services to Council.

It is a Councillors public duty to represent their constituents faithfully and honestly.

Current Communication and Engagement Strategy

The current Engagement and Communications Strategy states the following:

This Communication and Engagement Strategy has three objectives:

- *To support good decision-making by Council*
- *To communicate and engage with respect, trust, openness and accountability*
- *To build a strong partnership with our community*

Also, the following statements are extracted from the current Engagement and Communications Strategy:

To ensure the communities of Bass Coast work together to make important decisions about their region, Bass Coast Shire Council has made communications and engagement a key priority.

This Communications and Engagement Strategy has been developed to create robust systems for collecting and sharing information with our community, understanding different points of view, and informing decision-making.

A strong partnership between Council and our community is necessary to support the democratic process.

An informed, empowered and connected community that is involved in the decisions that affect quality of life in the region will make Bass Coast a better place to live and work.

While these statements from Council all sound good and worthy, this Association has concern around Council's sincerity in applying the stated principles.

Council's actions against genuine communication and engagement

Recent and past actions taken by Council have proved to be anything but supportive of genuine Communication and Engagement with the community.

Some Councillors and officers will recall the debacle that followed Council's failure to genuinely engage and communicate with the community regarding Council's announcement that it had chosen a site on the San Remo Foreshore for a regional skate park.

And the recent decision by the Mayor and Councillors to prevent Public Question Time at the March 2022 ordinary council meeting is another example of Council not sincerely and genuinely engaging with the community which it is meant to represent.

And further, the very recent practice that this Council is now attempting to sneak in, whereby legitimate and reasonable public questions are censored and prevented from entering Council meetings or Council minutes, is yet another example of Council not sincerely and genuinely engaging with the community which it is meant to represent.

Councillor social media accounts

Social media is an important part of modern communications for individuals and organisations. Council has its own social media site, and some Councillors have their own Council social media accounts which they use to publicise their work as a Councillor.

The Association notes that some Councillors block participation from community members who submit reasonable and legitimate opinion and ideas that do not align to the Councillors opinion.

The Association believes that if Councillors wish to use social media to publicise their work on Council, then those Councillors should demonstrate the professionalism and maturity to engage in reasonable discussion.

Councillors should not be blocking community members from presenting reasonable and legitimate criticism and questioning on a Councillors public social media page.

Councillors' ability to publicly discuss Council matters

The Association believes that the rules defining what public discussion Councillors may engage in while using their public title are far too restrictive and are not conducive to genuine communications and engagement with the community. This is something which the Association believes needs to be addressed sooner rather than later.

Public Question Time

Public question time is without doubt one of the most important mechanisms by which Council communicates and engages with the community.

The Association notes the recent subtle change on Council's website to the wording about public question time.

Until recently Council's website had described public question time as **the only opportunity** to put public questions to Council.

Now Council's website describes Council Meeting Public Question Time as **an opportunity** for the community to ask questions.

The fact is that public question time is the only opportunity for community members to ask questions to which Council will respond on the public record by way of the Council meeting minutes.

The Association notes with alarm the very recent practice that this Council is now sneaking in whereby legitimate and reasonable public questions are censored and prevented from entering Council meetings or Council minutes.

Since its inception in 1994 Bass Coast Shire Council has held the custom and practice of allowing all public questions, together with the Council's response, to be read out at ordinary public meetings and to be recorded in the meeting minutes. The only exception to this being during election caretaker periods, at which time BCSC provides prior notification to the community advising of the suspension of public question time during the caretaker period.

The creeping introduction of this censorship practice is an example of Council not sincerely and genuinely engaging with the community which it is meant to represent.

Public policies

Another practice which Bass Coast Shire Council is now attempting to apply is where so called “operational” policies are not allowed to have public consultation before a final draft is put to Council for ratification by public vote.

The Association notes that in response to a public question earlier this year Council responded by saying “Policies that are operational in nature such as the Procurement Policy and the Complaint Handling Policy do not require public consultation. This is standard practice with Victorian Councils.”

Councils response does not keep faith with Councils Public Transparency Policy which was adopted by council on 19 August 2019.

Section 7 of that policy deals with Council decision making processes, and specifically clause 7.1 of the policy states

“ Council will ensure that the decision-making processes that it adopts are transparent and open to the Community so that the Community is provided with an opportunity for meaningful engagement with Council and its decision-making processes. “

Further, the Local Government Act 2020 makes no mention regarding so-called operational policies at Council.

Arguing that some other Councils attempt to claim operational policies as reason for not needing public consultation does not provide legitimacy to Bass Coast Shire Councils claim for not making the policies available for public consultation before they are put to Council for a vote.

The Association rejects Councils claim of so-called “operational” policies as being nothing more than a construct which allows Council to circumvent the principles of the Local Government Act, as well as Councils own Public Transparency Policy, and Community Engagement Policy.

Public submissions

It is important that the community have access to the wide range of ideas and suggestions offered by other community members and organisations.

Therefore, when Council calls for public submissions each and every public submission should be made public on Council’s website.

Where a public submission is presented by an individual and that individual wishes to remain anonymous, that can easily be achieved by deidentifying the public submission. This is common practice with other government bodies when seeking public comment and submissions.

In the case of an organisation, such as this Association for example, then it is in the public interest for the organisation to be identified as the submitter.

Non-resident ratepayers

Council's budget 2021/22 advises that there are some 33,017 rateable properties across the shire. Approximately 10,000 (30.3%) ratepayers are not permanent residents of Bass Coast.

All ratepayers are entitled to be informed at on matters of council. When Bass Coast Shire Council is seeking public comment, it is important that it make all reasonable efforts to reach the community members.

Several non-resident members have advised the Association that they do not receive adequate information from Bass Coast Shire Council. This very Communications and Engagement Strategy review is one such example, whereby members were unaware of the review until advised by friends or family who reside in Bass Coast Shire.

It is suggested that Council should make use of direct email communication as an easy and inexpensive way to communicate and engage with non-resident ratepayers.

Project information

The method and frequency for reporting on Council projects is a recurring topic which BCRRRA members. It is felt that Council needs to make its reporting clearer around projects and that the information be frequently updated and reported to the community.

Some areas of project reporting mentioned by members include;

- Cowes Cultural Centre
- Shared pathways
- Roads and footpaths
- Aquatic centres

Requested outcomes to review

BCRRA requests that the following 10 outcomes be delivered as part the Communications and Engagement Strategy review:

1. The strategy document includes signed forwards from the Mayor and from the CEO declaring what principles they will stand for and how they will demonstrate same in achieving genuine and sincere communication and engagement with the Bass Coast community
2. Council, Councillors, and senior officers immediately cease the practice by which public consultation and engagement on public policy development is subverted by Council declaring policies to be so called “operational “policies
3. Councillors cease blocking community members from public Council social media accounts, otherwise they be directed by Council to terminate their Council public social media accounts.
4. All policies containing rules defining how and when Councillors may speak about Council matters be reviewed this year
5. Council seek means by which it can reach out to all ratepayers individually and to offer Council communication via direct email. One suggested method by which this might be done is for Council, when sending out annual rate notices, to include a reply-paid envelope and agreement notice to all ratepayers
6. The strategy document include statements acknowledging the high importance which Council Public Question Time (at Council Ordinary Meetings) plays in Councils Communication and Engagement Strategy
7. Council immediately ceases its newly introduced practice whereby it censors and prohibits reasonable public questions from being read out at ordinary Council meetings and thereby into the meeting minutes
8. The strategy include statements acknowledging that Council will provide frequent (suggested monthly) updates reports on all projects including user friendly graphical representation as to the start date, major milestones, and scheduled completion date for each project
9. All submissions to all Council public engagement topics be made available in full on Council’s website
10. The Association notes that Mr Graham Jolly has separately presented a lengthy submission to Council, and the Associations endorses and agrees with the points raised in Mr Jolly’s submission.

CONCLUSION

The 2021 Local Government Community Satisfaction Survey states . . .

“Council rates lowest – relative to its performance in other areas – on consultation and engagement, with an index score of just 54.”

Bass Coast Shire Council has much mileage to make up if it genuinely wishes to demonstrate itself to be a leader in communications and engagement.

Bass Coast Ratepayers and Residents Association has prepared this submission in good faith, and with the clear expectation that each and every Councillor will give genuine, sincere, and honest consideration to this submission.

BCRRA rejects recent attempts by this Council to weaken its communication and engagement with the community by restricting reasonable public questioning and public criticism.

The Association reminds Councillors that the community elects them to represent the community. The community does not elect Councillors to act as representatives for Council Officers and executives. It is a Councillors public duty to represent their constituents faithfully and honestly.

On behalf of all BCRRA members I thank Councillors for considering this submission.

Yours sincerely,

Kevin Griffin
BCRRA President



Incorporated Association
Number A0096592H