

Councillors become king makers, but the secrecy remains



In charge: former WCC Community Development manager Vikki King was chosen by the leaders of last week's coup to replace the sitting CEO Peter Schneider. Image: WCC

Carol Altmann – The Terrier

I asked a simple question of the Warrnambool City Council last Friday: could I have the CV of our new CEO?

The answer was no.

Secrecy is so ingrained in the Warrnambool City Council that ratepayers are not allowed to see the CV of the person who we will potentially* pay around \$340,000 – or \$26,000 a month for the next 12 months – to run our city.

*(Edit: I have added the word potentially, as this was around

the mark for the former CEO, Peter Schneider. Another former CEO, Bruce Anson, received a package of \$320,000 in his final year. These salaries are in line with what is offered in "Band 2" councils which include W'bool. The WCC has not disclosed the package for the new CEO.)

As we know, the council's head of Community Development, Vikki King, was thrust into the top spot by the Four Horsemen who decided to axe Peter Schneider and replace him with the person they wanted in the job.

Given this extraordinary turn of events, I thought it logical that we, as ratepayers, should see the credentials and work history of the person we just "hired" as our chief executive.

The request was denied by Ms King herself.

Here we go again.

It's just a few weeks since the release of the community survey which showed the people of Warrnambool have had a gill full of being treated like shiitakes, but nothing has changed and, if the past week is any guide, it's worse.

We were not told by our councillors that the former CEO was about to be sacked, or why, and in some sort of perverse charade the councillors spent the last monthly meeting congratulating themselves many times over for their brilliance.

We also don't know the cost of this whole set up, and because the coup conveniently happened after 30 June, that cost won't be included in this year's annual report.

Amidst all this darkness, it's the terriers who have to do the digging and delving and poke holes into the walls so that the light gets in.

As I say many times over, scrutiny of our council is not about personalities, but process: when decisions are made on behalf

of the public, and involve public money, we have a right to know.

So what do we know?

Well, we know Ms King has been with the council for five years as head of Community Development and, according to some of those who worked with her over that time, is known as “a straight shooter”.

As it happens, Ms King’s contract was due to end in August and who knows what that meant for Ms King’s plans or her future with the WCC?

It doesn’t matter now, because Crs Neoh, Gaston, Cassidy and Owen had Ms King pegged for a whole new post and signed her up for a full 12 months, all without asking the Mayor or the other two councillors.

They didn’t even bother to put an ad on the tearoom noticeboard: “Vacancy. Long hours. Pays well.”

Ms King told the local newspaper last week that she had no idea what was coming.

Judging by the evidence put forward so far by Mayor Tony Herbert, neither did Mr Schneider, who had passed his performance reviews and received a pay rise before being booted out the door without so much as a farewell speech and a WCC tie-pin.

Ironically, Mr Schneider’s departure is the latest in a string of senior resignations from the council these past 12 months under his watch.

Among them was head of governance Anne-Marie Neal, who reported directly to the CEO – both Bruce Anson, and then Mr Schneider – before she departed suddenly late last year without any explanation or comment by the council.

A reader alerted me to a case listed in the Magistrate's Court for September involving a worker's compensation claim between Ms Neal and the WCC, so perhaps the circumstances surrounding that situation will soon become clearer.

Another three senior managers have also resigned in the past six months: Manager Economic Development Shaun Miller, Facilities and Projects Manager Ben Storey and, most recently, Director City Infrastructure Scott Cavanagh.

The council itself now has more holes than Swiss cheese and the councillors have never been more divided, with many now asking the same question: how did it get this bad?

And as the Warrnambool Ratepayers Association asked at the weekend, where to from here to turn it around?

As we head toward an election on October 24 and have a chance to determine who runs our city, both behind the scenes and up front, these questions have never been more important.

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