

Transparency just a word at WCC, as secrecy rolls on



Secrecy at the Warrnambool City Council sunk to a new level with the sacking of the CEO by four of the seven councillors, who then appointed Vikki King (centre). Images via WCC.

Carol Altmann – The Terrier

Tomorrow night's Warrnambool City Council special meeting is shaping up as a crucial test before the October election.

It will be a test on where each of our councillors truly stand on secrecy and transparency.

This is because the council will vote on its new governance policy and has a chance to become more open....to actually put its money where it's mouth is.

One critical part of this policy was whether “general business” would make a come back.

As it stands, it has not made the cut. It is not part of the new policy.

General business is not radical. Plenty of councils do it. It's simply a chance for councillors to raise topics that are not already listed on the council meeting agenda.

The could perhaps ask short questions on our behalf like: “how much has the council spent on legal fees so far this year?”

Or “has Cr Neoh installed a grease trap and fixed that dodgy deck at his restaurant?”

Or, they could ask long questions like: what was the point of that [\\$700 dinner for four at the Myrtle Bar & Kitchen](#), which included five bottles of wine and six glasses of champagne and was paid for by the Director of City Growth, Andrew Paton, and attended by Cr Sue Cassidy?

Or why was Vikki King appointed acting CEO and not Peter Utri, who is the most logical choice being the Director of Corporate Strategies?

Or who gave Ms King permission to be both acting CEO and head of Community Services at the same time? Did she have to ask an underling?

And then there is that question which just won't go away: “why did you sack Peter Schneider, and how much will it cost us?”

You get the drift.

Moyne Council has general business. It even has urgent business. It also allows the public to address the council for up to five minutes on an agenda item.

Warrnambool City Council does none of this.

General business ended in 2015, when then councillors Kylie Gaston, Mike Neoh, Jacinta Ermacora and Rob Askew threw it out the door – Crs Peter Sycopoulis and Brian Kelson voted to keep it – and since then it has been one, slow steady retreat into secrecy.

We saw the worst of that secrecy with last month's dumping of the CEO, when four councillors decided to seek legal advice on how to get rid of him, voted to get rid of him, stitched up some sort of deal with the new acting CEO, and did it all without telling us a single word.

This is new normal for our council.

What a disgraceful benchmark and one we should never accept. The truth of that whole stitch up is yet to come out, but come out, it will.

In the meantime, we shall watch with interest tomorrow night to see who leaps up to defend the public right to know.

Only then will you be able to judge, as the October election creeps closer, who actually stands for transparency and openness and who just talks the talk, while pulling down the shutters.

(Tomorrow night the council will also vote to start looking for a recruitment agency, at a cost of \$50,000, to hire a permanent CEO by next May.

I remember the cost of using a recruitment agency was one reason Crs Neoh and Gaston gave for rolling over Bruce Anson's contract each time it expired, rather than look for fresh blood.

Now the WCC will spend another \$50,000 – or \$100,000 in two years – without so much as a blink.)

The special council meeting via Zoom starts at 5.45pm and will be live-streamed on the WCC website.

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