

Wave of change rolls through Warrnambool City Council



New Warrnambool City councillors elect Ben Blain, Angie Paspaliaris, Debbie Arnott, Vicki Jellie, Otha Akoch, Max Taylor and Richard Ziegeler.

Carol Altmann – The Terrier

Warrnambool has spoken and oh boy, it is being heard.

Like you, I went to bed last night in one Warrnambool and woke up to another one.

In what is an unprecedented election result, we saw one candidate, Vicki Jellie, finish with an astronomical 6526

first preference votes: almost one third of the total counted.

We saw a Sudanese man, a former refugee who has made Warrnambool his home, Otha Akoch, elected with 2771 first preference votes.

We saw a record number of women elected in Vicki, Angie Paspaliaris and Debbie Arnott.

And we saw a record turnout of 86 per cent of voters who, between them, voted in seven new faces for seven vacancies.

I doubt there has been any 2020 council election result across Victoria like this one, where not one sitting councillor was re-elected.

Warrnambool has done it: it has found its voice and turned the page on what has been more than a decade of division within the council and councillors, a toxic culture that enabled entitlement, and a growing disconnect from the community.

For all of the good work done by our elected councillors these past four years, so much had gone wrong.

The community, quite simply, had had enough.

It had had enough of being cut out of the conversation, of being told lies and fed spin, of being treated like a cash cow, of being left wondering why another year would pass and the same problems were still not solved, while fresh problems lined up behind them.

This time around, Warrnambool has really thought about its vote and taken a risk on not the same names – backed by the same power brokers – but a completely fresh start.

It is scary, but my word, Warrnambool is ready to take the chance, because we are exhausted from the battle of just trying to keep on top of the latest scandal which was not of our making.

No more.

There are fears that a new council would not support the environment in the same way as the old one.

I am not sure how this computes when you had a 6/1 majority of the past councillors vote to destroy Levy's Beach by handing it over to Darren Weir and his racehorse training.

And has done nothing to lobby Wannon Water on its sewerage plant upgrade.

And ignored the disgraceful environmental damage by hoons at Levy's Beach.

And took years longer than our neighbouring councils to introduce a green waste bin and then applauded itself for being ground breaking.

It is a patchy track record, at best, and one that can only improve and must.

With this election, ethics and integrity are making a comeback and they are making a comeback not just in words, but in actions.

But it is not about passing the burden of change to a new council, walking away and watching on comfortably from the sidelines.

We need to stay involved, and take the energy from this election and turn it into a driving force for the next four years.

This is the message from this election and it is the message behind the enormous vote for Vicki Jellie.

Because 6526 votes was far more than a vote for Vicki the person: it was a statement of what our community can achieve when we all work together.

We want that feeling back.

Vicki's work with Peter's Project started from a place of personal grief and grew into a movement that saw Warrnambool achieve what many thought would be impossible: a first-class cancer treatment centre, run by Epworth Hospital, in a regional city miles from Melbourne.

Warrnambool wants more of this.

It wants THAT relationship with its councillors and council – the one where we unite, with empathy, respect, honesty and determination, to do the best for our city.

If we work in this way, we can get things done: we can improve the harbour, we can recreate Flagstaff Hill, we can care for our stunning environment, we can find ways to keep rates down under the cap, we can help traders get back on their feet from Covid-19, we can resolve the endless argument about CBD parking, we can get a grip on the 2040 plan, and, through it all, we can bring integrity back to the council process.

This is our chance for true change – Warrnambool has voted for it – and it starts today.