

Prepared Statement from Ed Foulston for the
Meeting of the Ratepayers Association of Wodonga

I apologise for not being at tonight's meeting. I had a long standing commitment to friends to look after their small property while they took a much needed break. With my wife Margaret helping me I am also taking the opportunity to recuperate from minor knee surgery.

There are several council issues that I feel strongly about, but not all can be covered in the time allowed.

Transparent Government

It is important that the council keep ratepayers and interest groups informed during all stages of any planned or proposed major expenditure. The "Commercial in Confidence" excuse does not cut it with the general public. It is our money that the council is spending.

The saga of the proposed closure of the Wodonga Livestock Exchange is typical of what has been happening. Interested developers were informed in or around the year 2000 that the WLE was to be rezoned residential (article printed in Border Mail 22/10/2008), the users were not informed of that decision until 2007. This council also maintains that all parties have been fully consulted over the past 5 years but user groups state that they were neither consulted nor informed of the decision to sell the WLE until reading an announcement in the Border Mail. A proper consultative process and dissemination of information would have avoided much of the anger and disgust directed towards this council.

This council has continually failed to carry out the democratic process which the new council must return to.

Wodonga Councils finances, spending and level of debt

We are told that our debt is approximately \$33 million, this was stated in a presentation by the CEO at the first briefing to prospective councilors. Included in that briefing were figures of \$35 million in combined incomes, and some spending of \$21 million in wages and \$1.5 million in community grants. This leaves \$12.5 million for the council to conduct its business of maintaining/improving assets and infrastructure and debt reduction. We don't know to what we have been committed nor do we know what the repayment plan is other than the "sale of Logic will solve the cities debt". What we are sure of is that the council's income does not match its expenditure. This money has to not only maintain and improve city assets and infrastructure but it is also supposed to repay debt, how? As a councilor I intend to ask for an independent voluntary committee with financial expertise to work with our chief executive and finance managers to find out where we stand. They would also advise on sustainable ways to reduce spending without resorting to a "slash and burn" approach. This would enable the next council to not only reduce debt but continue with essential projects.

Wodonga Councils Role in Development Projects

Simply, I don't believe that I have the necessary expertise to solve the problems of Logic, but I am firmly convinced it is not the role of council to be a developer. I do believe that it is doubtful that Logic will realise its full potential without a rail interchange/transport node and that would appear to be unlikely to occur in the foreseeable future.

Current Projects

After talking to various groups my resolve to keep the Stanley St Pool site has been strengthened. All advice and expert opinion in regards to small city swim centers is to keep them open air and in the center of town. The user groups have also indicated that the Stanley St site with a proposed 50 meter 10 lane heated pool would bring many events and competitors to Wodonga (read money and increased local participation and growth) such as long and short course events as well as water polo competitions. This is something that the proposed Aquatic Center at Whitebox Rise can not do.

The pool promotes shopping and shoppers promote the pool. The Stanley St site is also within easy walking distance from almost all of the State and Public Schools in Wodonga. The pool is, and should remain, the summer social hub of the town.

I can not understand why the closure of the Stanley St pool and the building of a new Aquatic Center were even suggested. The Wodonga Sports and Leisure Center already has the facilities suggested for the proposed Aquatic Center. The original concept also allows for the indoor 25 meter pool at the Sports and Leisure Center to be lengthened to 50 meters if required.

High St does need improving but remembering the Stanley St café precinct debacle and the controversy in regards to the current design and add to these the councils finances, High St can be put on hold.

Bigger Issues

Council is the link between local communities and other levels of Government and should develop a close working relationship with those bodies.

As a council we can urge state and federal governments to act in the best interest of all. We can also look to implement local sustainable ecological programs such as education and information on Carbon Reduction, Water Conservation, Grey/Black Water Recycling and Small Area Vegetable Gardening.

I would like to finish on the very emotive issue of the proposed privatization and sale of the WLE at Bandiana and the proposed Nth Barnawartha Livestock Exchange and Feedlot, I have not seen a full social, financial and environmental cost benefit analysis, if available, of either proposal. Both the Huefner and GHD reports recommend further investigation of the four main Huefner proposals, recommendations which this council, it appears as always, ignores. Everyone I have spoken to talks about the changes proposed for the Livestock Exchange but my understanding is that there will also be a 1,000 head feedlot as part of the Nth Barnawartha development. This will be on an environmentally sensitive area, to me, that proposal is simply not acceptable. I will do all that I can to stop the closure of the WLE at Bandiana and stop the Nth Barnawartha project.

I can only do these things if I am elected so I am asking you to Vote 1 Ed Foulston. I am also imploring you to indicate your preferences and ask that your 2nd, 3rd and 4th preferences go to other candidates with similar values as mine, Dean Freeman, Angela Collins and Julie Emmins immediately come to mind.

Authorised by Ed Foulston, 18 Ruby Rd, Wodonga