



## BUDGET A TOUGH TASK FOR COUNCIL

The process for adopting the 2019/2020 Council budget is almost done. Like other years, Councillors and senior staff can breathe a slight of relief once the long and daunting process is over.

For the 20 years I have been involved in local government, the budget period is the time when Councils attract the most criticism. The process is that the staff of the Council develop a proposed or draft budget, Councillors vote to put the recommendations on public exhibition for at least 28 days and ask for public submissions.

It's at the end of the public submission period that Councillors weigh up what residents are thinking and either amend the budget or adopt it.

We are in the third year of an amalgamated Dubbo and Wellington. That in itself has given ourselves a number of financial challenges that need to be addressed. From a purely Dubbo point of view, we grew 150 per cent in geographic size but only added one-fifth extra ratepayers to the council area. The new Wellington areas has a vast amount of infrastructure backlogs that need funding and addressing.

And with the merger, the State Government gave us a lot of incentives and money for new infrastructure. Things like the new Wellington Pool, and Adventure Playground have been welcomingly funded by the state, but are left to Council to fund the ongoing operation.

A bigger and more advanced pool at Wellington needs to be looked after and has higher running costs to be funded. Likewise the new Adventure Playground needs the equivalent of a full-time staff member allocated for upkeep and maintenance.

The airport hasn't been missed either. While we cheered when we got government grants for a major upgrade of the runway, the reality is the new runway requires additional funding to operate and maintain, because as we all know, safety is critical.

So obviously in this budget some things have been proposed to go up. There is a proposal to add 70 cents to Wellington Pool entry and another proposal to raise landing fees at the airport by \$1.60. There is also a proposal to increase water rates by 5 per cent to cover new water-saving infrastructure for droughts and to also try and cover the estimated loss of revenue due to the new water restrictions that we are having to implement.

However all these new proposed charges are just that - proposed. It's up to Councillors to now decide to either vote for them or against them. Personally there are a number of new charges I will be voting against.

There is also a number of incorrect rumours around the community about the budget. There is a rumour that there is a cut to the funding of the Western Plains Cultural Centre - this claim is simply untrue. Likewise I was very disappointed when a former Mayor tried to assert that Council was putting up fees for the Eisteddfod, which of course, was simply not true.

These untruths, along with others, are making Councillors' job of wading through submissions and working out what to support and not to support incredibly hard.

My tip to residents is to not believe everything you see on social media. Often, stories are embellished or political axes to grind are at work when it comes to commentary about Council.

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