

Guardian & Tribune

EDITORIAL

Council gag rules make mockery of “transparency claims”

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Nobody likes gags – the muzzling, shut-your-mouth type that is. So why on earth would a majority of Scenic Rim councillors decide on Monday to gag themselves from that day forth?

Not permanently, as you will understand on reading our report on that day’s Council meeting. But significantly.

Significantly in the sense that councillors will be banned from publicly discussing or releasing information before it appears on the Council meeting agendas or website or is published through council media releases.

Significantly enough to make a complete nonsense of Mayor Greg Christensen’s professed ambitions for a ‘transparent’ local authority ‘loved’ by its ‘customers’.

The speech bans are part of a crack down on what seems to be regarded as ‘too free’ speech. And councillors have given the CEO, Jon Gibbons, powers to administer them.

It’s all part of new policies aimed at maintaining control of allegedly confidential information that Councillors have had access to.

And, humiliatingly one would think, they require our councillors to go through an ‘Acceptable Requests’ procedure to be adjudicated by Mr. Gibbons.

Whether the Councillors realize it or not, at the same meeting they not only accepted shackles on their own freedom, but also on freedoms of the public and media – specifically print newspapers.

This came in three ways:

Axing all of Council’s committees.

Result: Public lose the benefit of informative access either through attendance or media reports.

Replacing the committee meetings with just one full Council meeting open to the public twice a month. Result: Secrecy surrounding issues kept behind closed doors until decisions (formulated as recommendations) are confirmed in open Council.

Changing the day of next year’s full Council meetings from Monday to Tuesday, knowing full well that this is publishing day for some local weekly newspapers, including us, making it difficult to report Council stories in print the following day.

Surprisingly, the majority of Councillors accepted the claim that a ‘24-hour news cycle’ now existed for news media rather than emphasis on press deadlines.

What a shocking demonstration of an uncaring ‘I’m all right Jack’ philosophy that is! Uncaring for the public as much as for a media and communities that face growing ‘media deserts’, as newspapers all over the world fall like dominoes.

A lack of public empathy has been a palpable failure of this Council. And this is another glaring example.

First it is a direct snub to the readers of local papers which seems to cast them into Hillary Clinton's infamous 'basket of deplorables'.

For the information of Council bureaucrats and Mayor Greg Christensen, not every resident of the Scenic Rim, particularly the older ones, possess a computer. Some of those that do, find them difficult to operate. And many of those who can operate them, prefer to see their news in print.

The proof of the pudding is in the early success of the new Guardian & Tribune that has been gobbled up by newspaper-hungry readers around the Scenic Rim and Ipswich.

And an ABC Australian Story episode on Monday portrayed how people in Broken Hill cried when their local paper closed down, saying it was impossible to replace it with the Internet.

On Monday, the Council reaffirmed its decision made last May to abandon committee meetings in favour of twice-monthly public meetings and a regular series of confidential briefings and confidential workshops.

Now that the committees are gone, and the workshops and briefings are conducted behind closed doors, there is no longer any public access to a place where you might hear the discussions that led to the decisions made by Councillors – giving you a good understanding of how they felt about them.

And as committee meetings were held seven days before ordinary meetings of Council, this allowed time for Councillors to consult with the public on contentious planning matters. Alternately, it meant the Guardian & Tribune could publish stories on such issues, giving readers time to contact Councillors and offer their opinions.

Division One Councillor, Derek Swanborough, was the only one to recognise this. Opposing the move against the Standing Committees he warned that it would exclude both public and press from discussion and deliberations on matters raised in workshop sessions.

But he was supported by Division 5 Councillor Marshall Chalk in voting against the other changes.

Cr. Swanborough described the new policies as 'a shift away from transparency'. We would suggest it is more like a jackboot step into the murky field on censorship.

The experienced Councillor said the Local Government Act already determined and itemized what information should be discussed confidentially in closed meetings. And anything other than that should be open to the public.

He also maintained that the 'Acceptable Requests' procedure to manage control of councillors' confidential information was beyond the requirements of the Local Government Act.

So why did three of the five Councillors agree to be gagged?

The answer might lie somewhere between the ridiculous disciplinary brouhaha that has enveloped former Councillor, Nigel Waistell and apparent warnings contained in comments by Mayor Christensen about the new 'gag' policy.

He said: "The purpose of this policy is about providing reasonable guidance for councillors. It is not about creating a place that is punitive. It is about providing a cautionary framework to allow councillors to avoid falling foul of some of the punitive aspects that are out there waiting for local government to trip into."