

Wattle Range Council
Att: Mr Ben Gower, Chief Executive Officer
PO Box 27
MILLICENT SA 5280
Email: council@wattlerange.sa.gov.au

July 1 2022

Dear Mr Gower,

2022/2023 Draft Annual Business Plan

Thank you for the opportunity to review and submit comments with regards to Wattle Range Council's Draft Annual Business Plan for 2022/2023. This response is provided on behalf of the Riddoch Business and Community Association members for the Riddoch ward but also for the benefit of the entire Wattle Range Council district.

Having reviewed and considered the Draft Business Plan, it is pleasing to see that Wattle Range Council has put a focus on economic development, tourism and; updates to our road network through the significant priorities list.

The Riddoch Business and Community Association also support the recommendations for the improvement of the visual amenity of Penola. However, we have questions and concerns regarding most of these budget items that we wish to query.

The following items are listed in order of importance.

Page 27, Operating Expenditure, Employee Costs

For the 2022/23 financial year, Council is seeking to deliver an operational budget of \$31,390,000, of which almost half, \$13,952,000, consists of employee costs.

Employee costs are set to increase by \$2.955 million in the 2021/22 budget, representing 45% of the total operating expenditure — and being the main contributing factor to the \$3.15 million deficit.

The 2021/22 budget was approved for 125.5 full-time employees, yet it is currently sitting at 134.87 full-time employees. This coupled with a proposed additional 8 new full-time employees for 2022/23, will see an increase in just over 12 months of 17 new employees. Yet, our Council population has barely increased in size (.039% provided by Profile.id.com.au).

The 2019 South Australian Productivity Commission report found that employee costs contribute to 35% of councils' total operating costs, significantly lower than Wattle Range Council's proposed 45%.

• How does Council justify such a significant rise in employee costs consisting of 45% of the operational budget when the average in South Australia is 35%?

• We appreciate that there has been an increase in super payments; wages through enterprise bargaining and; more responsibilities would have been placed on Council over the past years, but technology has also improved which should counteract some of the time spent addressing the duties. **Can Council please provide figures on how**

employee numbers have increased over the past 5-10 years? And in particular, what roles have been added over 2019-20 and 2020-21?

- Change over of staff adds significant expense to an organisation and says a lot about organisation culture. We understand numerous staff changes have occurred over the past couple of years. **What are the figures for staff retention and changeover each year over the past five years? And what these changeovers have cost?**
- The addition of employees can certainly add to the local economy if those employees live within the Council region. **Does Council have a policy on staff residing within the Wattle Range Council area? What is the ratio of staff living in and out of the Council region?**
- An important role of the Council is to support and help our local businesses grow and succeed as well as provide opportunities for new companies to form. Page 28 states that materials, contracts, and other expenses contribute to 34% of operational expenditure, the largest portion of outgoings. This is incorrect and shown in the graph on page 26. Wage expenses is the largest proportion of outgoings at 45%. The decrease of \$220,000 in these material, contract and other expenses isn't a saving if employee costs rise by almost \$3 million. We suggest Council look to qualified businesses within the Council region which may be able to fulfill roles that are earmarked for employment. **Can Council provide alternative figures for contracting new roles instead of employing more staff? For example, what is the contrary figure for employing staff for road construction along with the maintenance and purchasing of new heavy vehicles (budgeted for over \$1.1 million) as opposed to contracting this work out to local businesses and consequently benefiting the local economy? Does this figure factor in productivity and efficiency?**
- **Could Council also address what training and certificates are required by Council staff who perform road works?**

Page 10, Significant Priorities for 2022/23, Improvement of Visual Amenity through wayfinding and streetscaping; Increased capital expenditure on footpaths

In February 2019, Wattle Range Council held a community session to establish a group to discuss the town plan and determine three key priorities for development. In April 2019, after many community meetings, three items were presented to Council for funding. These were for the establishment of a wetlands area, an upgrade to the skatepark, and the development of a whole of town masterplan which was to include a plan for town growth. No funding was received for any of the submitted community priorities.

In March 2020, we were happy to see Council addressing the community's identified priorities through the initiation of the Penola Main Street Masterplan and Placemaking Strategy consultation process with Wax Design. Community consultations were well attended.

The draft Penola Masterplan concept was presented in February 2021, with the Riddoch Business and Community Association at the time putting in a formal request to Council for \$1.5m to be allocated from the 2021/22 Council budget towards development works for the Masterplan given the upcoming completion of the bypass and consequent importance to the town. No allocation was provided.

Council has listed the visual improvement of Penola as a significant priority and yet the 2022/23 budget only includes a figure for \$150,000 total for both Millicent and Penola for wayfinding signage — nothing is itemised additionally for either town's Masterplan's. It is our understanding through various conversations with Council that the next stage for the Masterplan was the tendering for design works. **Considering 2023 will be four years since consultation began around town planning and the Masterplan, Council must deliver. We want Council to allocate an additional \$500,000 each towards the design and delivery of Millicent and Penola Masterplan's.**

- We fully support the development of wayfinding signage for Penola. **However, we would like Council to confirm that the wayfinding signage allocated spend is for the areas identified in the Penola Masterplan only — and that this figure does not include any spend on the Coonawarra Rail Trail project which is supposed to be budgeted from grants out of the 2021/22 financial year? Is the \$150,000 allocation an equal split between Penola and Millicent?**

- The significant priorities overview on page 10 refers to Penola receiving streetscaping yet on page 17, there has not been a single dollar allocated to streetscaping across the entire Council region.

We appreciate that the plan identified the Arthur Street toilets needing reinvigoration at some stage; however, this isn't listed in one of the four key priority projects and we believe it is not the best use of rate payer's money.

Due to safety concerns, including accidents and hospital admissions that have occurred over the past 18 months (that Council is well aware of), Penola's unsafe and unfinished footpaths (due in large to recent town drainage works along Church and McArthur Streets) must be a priority.

Budget highlights on page 4 indicate there will be \$294,000 spent on footpath renewals throughout the Council region. And Penola isn't included within this list. **We understand that footpaths are part of a 10-year renewal program, but funds set aside for the Arthur Street (\$150,000) and Greenrise toilets (\$120,000) could be better spent at this stage. We suggest that some of these funds are redirected towards delivering on the main priorities that were identified as part of the Master Plan consultation (page 20 of the Masterplan).**

- **Page 17 of the budget states the net total to be spent across the region on footpaths is \$874,000 however based on the itemised capital projects list we believe this total is infact only \$389,000. Please confirm.**

- Kerb renewal in the Council region has been allocated \$598,000 in the budget (page 17) with Penola earmarked for \$3000 for Church Street and \$67,000 for Church/Arthur Street. **We thank Council for this allocation of funds but believe these locations were upgraded during the recent town drainage works. We suggest this allocation is put towards new kerbing within the township, of which much is required.**

Page 24, Grants, Subsidies and Contributions

We appreciate that Council renews roads based on a rolling 10-year asset renewal plan which may result, in what looks like, an inequitable ratio of funds being provided to each ward annually.

- Given that over \$4.5 million is expected to be received as income through grants and subsidies for what primarily looks like roads funding, we believe the allocated expenditure amount for the 2022/23 budget of \$849,000 (re-sealed roads) and \$1.49 million (for re-sheets) for roads (total of \$2.34 million) in the Council region is inadequate. Especially given the current state of many roads across the entire Council region. **We suggest a minimum of 10% of Council's total expenditure be spent on roads. Could Council also please provide the grant/subsidy income figure expected for roads?**

- Additionally, given this amount (\$2.34 million budgeted), we question that enough funds have been allocated to the Riddoch ward, with only \$82,000 earmarked to date for Rabbits Road and Gartner Roads in Glenroy. **Could Council please provide further details on what other roads will be included as part of the re-seals funding for Riddoch (\$849,000 total spend) documented on Page 19?**

- We appreciate that we have a large region with an extensive road network. Although a 10-year asset renewal plan is in place, **does Council also use advanced surveying techniques and/or predictive modeling software to best determine where maintenance is required?**
- We understand that Council has a responsibility as custodians of our assets, and we want to ensure equity. **Could Council also provide information on what has been spent on Riddoch roads within the last five years and what the five-year forward planned investment is for Riddoch?**

Page 10, Significant Priorities, Community Events

The Wattle Range Council area is lucky to have hundreds of talented locals volunteering for their community through way of events. Events such as festivals, shows, cellar door initiatives and markets. Regional events bring cash injections from out-of-town visitors, raise the profile of our area and local businesses while also bringing the community closer together.

- Page 10 states that a significant priority is 'an increased focus on delivering community events, support & activities Council wide' and to 'Progress the development of arts and culture and tourism events across the district.' The current budget for event grants across the region is only \$26,000. **We ask Council to consider the benefit to the economy from increasing the amount for the community events grant program from \$26,000 to \$100,000 per annum, exclusive of the delivery of Council services.**
- It's disappointing that as a volunteer organisation, we recently had opposition from Council regarding the payment of an ongoing events invoice for an event that was run annually for the community by the community. This issue took valuable time and resources away from business owners to rectify. We thank Council for rectifying this issue. It was also disappointing to recently learn of volunteers' struggles in Beachport. **The volunteers in our communities should be championed and enabled by Council. We hope that Council has learned from these recent events and look forward to supporting Council in its future endeavours to help our community.**
- **We appreciate other line items have been included within the budget, such as 'event funding for community markets in Millicent for \$6,000 but query why this funding isn't provided for all markets in the region, for example, at Beachport and Kalangadoo?**

Page 40, Capital Expenditure

Thank you for providing an easy-to-read breakdown of where and how rates are spent.

- It is shown on page 40 that \$47.75 out of every \$100 of rates goes towards Assets and Infrastructure, including lights, roads, kerbs, footpaths, etc. This is approximately half of our rates. **Can Council please provide some insight as to how many Riddoch ratepayers there are? And what income comes from the Riddoch ward?**

Page 16 and 18, Capital Projects

Out of the \$28 million Development and Engineering Services budgets, just over \$450,000 has been allocated to Riddoch, mainly for Greenrise Lighting (\$12,000), toilet upgrades (\$270,000), and Rymill Hall (\$132,000). However, there has been over \$1.2 million allocated for Millicent.

- We feel this is inequitable and are particularly concerned at the allocated budgeted amounts of \$321,000 for the review and upgrade of fire hydrants at McLaughlin Park and; \$520,000 budgeted for the renewal or replacement of

transportable buildings at the rear of the Millicent Museum. **These are both extraordinary amounts of money for what has been described. Could Council please respond to this?**

• There is also an allocation of \$44,000 towards redesigning the Penola Visitor Information Centre. Although we welcome discussions around an upgrade, it was not evident in the Penola Masterplan that the Visitor Information Centre was an area of focus. Additionally to this, there have also been discussions within the community about the possibility of the Visitor Information Centre building becoming a community library and gallery and the Visitor Information Centre relocating to an architecturally updated building on Church Street to make it easier for visitors to find — and to make a statement. This would also address community concerns around the lack of a public library. **Could these funds be redirected to further implementing the Penola Masterplan with consideration also given to the future use of the current Visitor Information Centre?**

Page 27, Capital Expenditure, Drainage

We thank Council for the ongoing work in prioritising Penola's town drainage especially given Penola is one of the lowest-lying areas in the Council area and most at risk of flooding.

• On page 19, Capital Works, \$100,000 has been put aside for the entire region for the stormwater drainage renewal program. **What allocation will Penola receive out of the 2022/23 budget? And when will we expect to see drainage works completed?**

Page 16, Operational Projects, Phone Towers

We welcome Council's contribution of \$55,000 to a new phone tower at Maaoupe. Connectivity is imperative for our economy and the safety of our community.

Page 18, Capital Projects, Playgrounds

• **Could Council please provide a list of what playgrounds within the Riddoch ward will benefit from some of the \$82,000 allocation?**

Wattle Range Council's Strategic Plan

In 2020, the community was consulted on the Wattle Range Council Strategic Plan. On page 8 of the Strategic Plan, of which there were 30 days of public consultation and 600 survey results, the highest priorities were listed as youth opportunities and economic development. We support the Strategic Plan.

• Multiple funding attempts to Wattle Range Council by the Riddoch Business and Community Association for youth leadership funding for Riddoch (and to roll out the program to the wider Wattle Range Council community) were rejected. Although the Wattle Range community clearly asked for youth opportunities and an increase in economic development, there doesn't appear to be an appropriate budget allocation.

We appreciate Council investing in the youth school holiday programs, but feel that the additional \$8000 allocated for a skatepark event in Millicent and an awards program of \$3000 as the only budgeted youth opportunities are not enough. And again, Council are not listening to its constituents.

We want Council to invest in youth leadership activities across the entire region. A great start would be to invest in current initiatives that are being coordinated by volunteer organisations such as the Riddoch Business and Community Association and Generation Thrive. This program could be easily rolled out to the entire Council area. **We ask for a budget allocation of \$80,000 to provide up to 80 participants across the Council region access to this program.**

• Significant priorities on page 4 include 'Continued focus on economic development, through strengthening existing industries and attracting investment to the region.' However, the budget indicates on page 40 that Economic Development, reg services, environment, and planning utilise only \$4.95 out of every \$100 of rates. Consequently, there's only \$18,000 allocated to economic development on page 15. **We appreciate that tourism sits alongside economic development, but we question why there isn't an appropriate budgeted amount for 'strengthening industries and attracting investment.'** So again, although the community has listed economic development as a top priority, we feel Council has fallen short in delivering.

Page 12, Discretionary Services

On page 12, Libraries and Cultural Facilities have been allocated \$629,000 for 22/23 however, page 15 states \$744,000. Community Support and Amenities have been allocated \$3,724,000 on page 12, but again on page 15, the budget item is \$1,581,000. **Can you please clarify and confirm the total expenditure?**

Additional

The Riddoch Business and Community Association would like to see Council advocate and lobby for the remediation and redevelopment of the closed Caltex fuel stations in Penola and Millicent. We suggest combined lobbying with other Council's in the Limestone Coast region and possibly the state. Additionally, we ask Council to develop a policy around fuel stations in the Council region and actions that fuel station owners must undertake in the future if a station is decommissioned. We believe this is imperative given the advancement of electric vehicles and phasing out of diesel vehicles which is expected over the next 10-15 years. Fuel stations are strategically located in key entrance areas of our towns — boarded up and fenced off buildings are eyesores and detract from our economy. We appreciate that this is an extremely challenging and also a national issue, however, action must be taken.

We thank you for your time reading our questions and comments and look forward to receiving a response in due course.

Kind regards,

Nicole Reschke

Riddoch Business and Community Association President

On behalf of the Riddoch Business and Community Association