



Why you should be angry about reckless election-season posturing

Description

If there was any doubt that the election silly-season is upon us, this week's Council meeting should leave you in no doubt.

Two things in particular stand out – variations on the same theme, one might say.

Two motions came to Council, calling for us to abandon our relationship in two regional bodies, WSROC and HRCC – one of which we have been a member of for 73 years. I regard this as lazy, reckless vandalism parading under the patina of 'reform'.

This subject matter may feel obscure, but it's really important to understand. Here's the shortest explanation I can give you:

The Problem

In the scheme of things, Hawkesbury is a small-ish Council. Huge in area, yes, but our revenue base is only one-third of that of our neighbours, like Penrith and Hills, and less than a fifth the size of Blacktown ([source data](#)). That means that there are times where it's better to band together with others to achieve good outcomes for our community.

Sometimes we do that to save money. [Shared-service models](#) are a proven way to achieve economies of scale in procurement, insurance or service delivery. In other words, bigger is better.

Sometimes, it's because there are some issues that don't stop at Council's borders, and good sense requires a regional approach, like ensuring the health of the Hawkesbury-Nepean river.

And sometimes, we do it to stand with other local governments and speak with a common voice. When bullies (usually other tiers of government) shift cost burdens to ratepayers, overlook the concerns particular to western Sydney, or issues are more appropriate for local governments to take the lead, then it's good to have friends.

All these reasons, among others, were why our Council has long maintained membership of HRCC and WSROC.

WSROC, the [Western Sydney Organisation of Councils](#) was created in 1973 and Hawkesbury may be a founding member. If so, we've remained associated with it for **48** years because it has been strongly in our interests to do so. Councils come and go over the years based on shifting assessment of value, just like it's always been an evolving patchwork quilt of political views. But for Hawkesbury, it remains a valuable relationship for us because of our size. Our former Labor Mayor, Councillor Barry Calvert is the President of WSROC, and [I am our Council's other delegate and Director](#), so I'd say we represent non-partisan representation. The positions are unremunerated.

Similarly HRCC, the [Hawkesbury River County Council](#) was founded in 1948 and looks after weed control and waterway health across a four Council [area](#) including Hawkesbury, Penrith, Blacktown and Hills. It's one of those bodies most people have heard of but know little about, despite the fact it serves over 830,000 western Sydney residents. It's a fully constituted Council in its own right and governed by the same legislation as other larger Councils. It just overlaps the jurisdiction of municipal Councils and has a particular focus – these days governed by the [Biosecurity Act](#). I have been a member of the HRCC Board since 2016 and Chairman [since 2019](#).

Hawkesbury River County Council

What HRCC does is an unalloyed good. In 2004 the Hawkesbury Nepean River was [hopelessly choked](#) with weeds. New resources allowed HRCC to clear it and another outbreak of that scale has never happened since. Recently, we kept the river clear of weeds so that our Olympic rowing team could train on the river at their facility at Penrith – and Rowing Australia have [been strident in expressing concern and support](#) for us while we've been [wrangling with the State Government](#) who have cut our operational funding for weed activities on the river. [I've taken that the fight directly](#) to the Federal Assistant Environment Minister, Trevor Evans.

There's so much good that HRCC and its staff do: It has been in the vanguard to sponsor bush regeneration schemes, like the [Blue Mountains Shale Cap Forest Project I launched at Bilpin](#) last year. I've raised awareness of its [Landcare](#) and [creek health](#) initiatives for years. Here's a lovely example of an [Echidna spotted by HRCC staff](#) working near the Friendship Bridge over Bardanarang Creek at Pitt Town, a location [I've helped clean up myself](#), and hopefully evidence of improving ecological health.

However, at this week's Council meeting, Labor Councillor Amanda Kotlash brought a motion to Council which proposed, in part to "ask the Minister to dissolve HRCC as a County Council but keep its structure and function and annex it to one of the constituent councils."



HRCC, headquartered in the Hawkesbury at South Windsor

I think that's an absolutely irresponsible proposition, and profoundly counter to our interests. Here are the facts:

Hawkesbury Council contributes ~\$200,000p.a. for membership of HRCC – about 0.2% of our income. The four Councils contribute equally despite the fact that the Hawkesbury comprises **73%** of the area covered. The County Council is headquartered in the Hawkesbury (in Walker St at South Windsor). Arguably we get the lion's share of benefit from this arrangement, to which the four member Councils are bound by legislation.

These membership dues make up roughly half of the HRCC's income, the rest coming from grants and funded programs. [A report we received in April](#) stated that works undertaken in the Hawkesbury LGA in the F.Y were valued at **\$471,510**. Further, if we were to "go solo" and become our own "Local Control Authority" it would cost Hawkesbury over **\$610,000p.a.** to get the same results, given that HRCC has significant economies of scale, unique plant and equipment, and access to grant funding.

In short: We get massive value, hugely in excess of our membership fee, for this long-standing relationship. It works, and it works well.

HRCC's successful model for service delivery has been confirmed and reaffirmed over and over: By a [NSW Independent Local Government Review](#) in 2013, by a [NSW Weeds Review](#) in 2014, in part by the 2015-2017 "Fit for the Future" process, and now through our own Council's assessment of the costs of exiting the partnership.

Dissolving the HRCC and gifting it to one of the member Councils (she doesn't suggest which), would break the very co-operative model that has grown up between the four Councils over many decades. I can attest that the Board I lead is, with this exception, ecumenical, friendly, and supportive. The proposition to dissolve HRCC has, at time of writing, zero support from the other member Councils.

I labelled the motion reckless because the debate simply sailed straight past these facts – *even the report commissioned specifically from our own staff that showed this partnership delivers outstanding value*

. Not a word was said that attempted to negate or contextualise that data as so wrong that breaking up HRCC after 73 years is the best option.

I'm not shy about questioning long-standing arrangements, and I have been very critical in this term of Council to ensure everything we do has an adequate justification and delivers value. There are no sacred cows for me. *Why* is my favourite question. HRCC wrestles with an increased regulatory and reporting burden, and like any organisation, balances the tension between admin overheads and front-line staff. But the motion suggesting that dissolving HRCC will release 'wasted' overheads for other uses is just not true.

This motion was, in my opinion, lazy and misguided. However, the motion passed. It is unlikely to result in the dissolution of HRCC given the zero buy-in of the other Councils and the legislative hurdles to unravelling. For those interested in such things, the other Liberal Councillors voted against me.

WSROC – The Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils

Five years ago, Council commissioned a report about whether Hawkesbury should remain as a member of WSROC. Frankly, that boggles me. *Five years*. Why this report has taken this long arrive was not explained.

Whatever the reason, the report laid out the case very well. WSROC membership costs Hawkesbury **\$92,000p.a**, or **0.08%** of our total income. Membership has allowed us to access *annual* joint procurement savings which exceeded **\$2.9M** across the member Councils.

Hawkesbury specifically saved **\$87,000** over two consecutive years through one initiative alone – the [Western Sydney Energy Program](#) (a program that saved Councils a cumulative \$15.8M over its lifetime and saved the emissions of 380,000 tonnes of CO2), and we saved a cumulative **\$145,196** through participation in the [Light Years Ahead](#) street lighting scheme.

Meaning, our membership *easily* pays for itself, to say nothing of the ability for Hawkesbury to punch above its weight as part of a larger voice for western Sydney.

WSROC has [pioneered a number of initiatives](#) involving urban heat, reducing the waste going to landfill and into waterways, hosted 48 forums on regional co-operation, met with Ministers over a dozen times to represent regional concerns, secured \$413,000 of funding beyond membership dues to deliver on strategic priorities, and led conversations with government over sustainability and resilience, including with [Resilience NSW](#) Commissioner, Shane Fitzsimmons.



WSROC Directors with former RFS, now Resilience NSW Commissioner, Shane Fitzsimmons.

Given these focus areas, I am baffled that the Greens and left-leaning independents would vote against ongoing WSROC membership. There is simply no better vehicle for our Council to pursue issues like urban heat, climate change, energy efficiency, resilience, sustainability, and waste than WSROC. But they were happy to throw it all away to score a political point.

Despite the findings of the report, Councillor Emma-Jane Garrow brought a motion to discontinue our membership in WSROC, effective immediately.

Clr Garrow never approached myself or Councillor Calvert to ask us if we felt our membership still represented value. She's never attended a WSROC meeting. She didn't address a single word to the report that Council staff wrote to cast doubt on its statistics laying out the cost-benefit of our membership. Vague sentiments were offered about our Council being able to participate in some of WSROC's initiatives in an ad-hoc fashion as non-members, but this was not backed with any data as to which, how, or why this would be a better option for us. Clr Peter Reynolds said that WSROC has an "East-West" focus when what we need is a "North-South" focus, when that's precisely what WSROC have been pivoting to, especially in relation to the airport rail link.

Those who supported Clr Garrow's motion offered ill-informed opinions, *but no facts*. Thankfully the motion was defeated, with a replacement motion tasking Council to write to WSROC to ask them to re-iterate the financial and other benefits of our ongoing membership.

Those who voted to withdraw from WSROC were Clrs Garrow, Rasmussen, Lyons-Buckett, Wheeler,

& Reynolds. Supporting retention were myself, and Clrs Conolly, Calvert, Richards, Kotlash, Tree and Ross.

Lazy, reckless, ill-informed decision making

I am sick of Council meetings where Councillors make decisions based on whims and personal antipathies rather than hard data. Sometimes, it's obvious they haven't read (or don't like) the data that Council staff include in the reports that come to Council. Just like I'm sick of Council staff holding workshops and briefings on key issues and finding I'm one of only 3 or 4 Councillors that turn up. This week we held the latest of eight different workshops for us to examine the decade-overdue revamp of our planning instruments (our DCP and LEP). It's a massive job, and the most consequential thing I'll do in this term of Council. I've attended all of them. Most, including this week's workshop had four Councillors in attendance for the bulk of that time. Not good enough.

In my view, this twice-delayed election can't come too quickly.

The audio of the debate that encompasses the two motions I discuss are at Council's [SoundCloud account](#). The Business paper for the Council meeting is [here](#).

Category

1. Uncategorized

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