



Tomaree Ratepayers and Residents Association Inc.

Full house for first Meet the Candidates Forum

190 people crowded into the Soldiers Point Bowling Club on Monday for the first of the Meet the Candidates Forums run by Tomaree Ratepayers and Residents Association for the September Port Stephens council elections. Mayoral and East Ward candidates presented their vision and priorities for the next term of Council and answered voters' questions.

Mayoral candidates Geoff Dingle and Sally Dover were present together with prospective candidates for East Ward – newcomers Nathan Warburton and Colin Howard and present Councillor John Nell. Geoff Brown was represented by Bob Westbury.

In his case for mayor Geoff Dingle stressed the need for a change in the ranks and for Council to plan in order to face the challenge of overcoming its deficit and operating within its means. He put emphasis on the need for Councillors to work together for the good of the Council. He stated that on his voting card for Mayor he would stand alone and not direct preferences.

Sally Dover's suggestion that she be Port Stephens' first female Mayor was well received. She listed the achievements of the past Council. However, there was a clear note of concern in the auditorium when in answer to a question she revealed her preferences would be directed to absent Mayoral candidate Bruce MacKenzie.

Greens candidate Nathan Warburton listed in his priorities the lowering of the current Council deficit, revitalisation of the Nelson Bay Town Centre and working for the Salamander Bay Masterplan. He rejected the high rise casino proposal for Tomaree Headland. John Nell called for a development Control Plan for this Headland to make it clear to the State Government what the community wants on this site.

Colin Howard stressed the need for new blood in Council and promised to bring greater transparency to Council's decision making. He advocated a more thorough business evaluation of Council decisions and money allocation as he had been used to in the business world. Current Councillors Nell, Westbury and Dover defended Council's performance though admitting mistakes had been made. They pointed to recent sustainability reviews which they claimed are helping to reduce the budget deficit situation.

Clr Nell promised he would continue his stance in favour of a Masterplan for the Salamander Bay Shopping Centre and believed that the Planning Principles now being workshopped should be formalised into a Development Control Plan. The need for a Masterplan was supported by the majority of candidates.

Candidates endorsed the Nelson Bay Town Centre and Foreshore Strategy. Clr Dingle stressed it was vital it be followed up with an Infrastructure Plan which would deliver key elements such as roads and parking.

Commenting on Council's high exposure to litigation costs, Colin Howard and Geoff Dingle both stressed the need to seek high quality legal advice at an early stage.

Chairman Geoff Washington, in summing up, urged all present to make an informed vote and to ensure they are aware of where preferences are being directed on the How-to-Vote cards.

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