

Port Stephens koalas in decline

BY BEN SMEE

20 Jul, 2010 04:00 AM

The koala population in Port Stephens is edging towards extinction, according to koala carers who have reported a dramatic drop in the number of rescued animals. Australian Koala Foundation chief executive officer Deborah Tabart was in Port Stephens yesterday meeting koala carers and campaigning for federal protection for the marsupials.

Ms Tabart said about 2500 injured koalas have been rescued at Port Stephens in the past 15 years.

But that number is dropping rapidly year by year. In some areas, the number of koalas found dead or injured has dropped more than tenfold since 1995.

“There would only be two causes for the decline in koala deaths and that would be either better habitat protection or a decline in the koala population,” Ms Tabart said.

“I have been visiting Port Stephens since 1992 and I can say with confidence that it is due to the latter.”

Port Stephens Council was one of the first in the state to adopt a Koala Plan of Management.

But Ms Tabart said development and illegal clearing meant that plan was having little effect.

Environment Minister Peter Garrett is considering a proposal to list the koala as a vulnerable species.

Council red-faced over Salamander Bay shopping plan

BY BEN SMEE PORT STEPHENS REPORTER

29 Jul, 2010 04:00 AM

A PLANNING bungle will force Port Stephens Council back to the drawing board with \$28 million plans to expand the Salamander Bay shopping precinct.

The proposal, which had been vigorously opposed by the Tomaree Ratepayers and Residents Association, was to be decided by a Joint Regional Planning Panel yesterday.

But the panel had to delay its decision when it was revealed the owners of the neighbouring Salamander Bay Shopping Centre had not been properly notified by the council.

Lawyer David O'Donnell, representing the centre's owners Colonial First State, suggested the error was either "a conspiracy or a stuff-up".

Mr O'Donnell told the panel the process followed by the council had been fundamentally flawed.

"It seems incredible that there has been no social or economic assessment for this proposal," he said.

"When you have two major commercial facilities side by side, that calls out for an integrated assessment and an integrated process."

The comments were supported by some panel members, who said a more detailed proposal was needed next time.

The comments delighted ratepayers association members, who had been calling for a precinct master plan for months.

Association chairman Bob Young said the meeting had vindicated the group's belief that the development was not properly planned.

"We've never objected to development, but we want it to be done properly," he said.

Panel chair Garry Fielding told the meeting it was only discovered on Tuesday that Colonial First State had not been notified about the plan.

Mr Fielding said the panel's decision could be delayed by several months because of the bungle.

The council's planning boss David Broyd said the situation was "very regretful" and said all parties would be re-notified about the plan.

Bad blood boils at Port Stephens Council

BY BEN SMEE

13 Aug, 2010 04:00 AM

Mud continues to fly around the Port Stephens Council chambers, as two warring factions prepare for a lottery to decide the next mayor.

The numbers in the council chamber are locked at six-six, and control will probably be decided by drawing names from a hat after a vote in September.

Mayor Bruce MacKenzie is standing down after two years, and said it would be an “absolute disaster” if the opposition faction gained the casting vote. “If any other name [than deputy mayor Bob Westbury] comes out of that hat, anyone who wants to do business in Port Stephens will find it much harder,” he said.

Cr Westbury is the only confirmed candidate, and will stand with the backing of Cr MacKenzie’s faction.

A nominee has not yet emerged from the opposition faction.

Cr Geoff Dingle, who has been critical of Cr MacKenzie for a lack of consultation, said he would vote for any person who promised to include all councillors when making decisions or meeting with developers.

“I don’t see the mayoral election as an exercise in who’s going to control the joint ... but who’s going to demonstrate they’re above that schoolyard mentality,” Cr Dingle said.

Hostilities between the two groups continued yesterday, after an ill-tempered council debate on Tuesday and revelations that councillors cannot sit together and share a meal.

Cr Frank Ward said he believed the heated exchanges were brought on because Cr MacKenzie’s faction lost a vote.

“If voting against the mayor’s wishes just once in two years means that his faction will not share their dinner with the rest of the councillors and staff,

I am sure I won’t be getting indigestion over the loss of their company,”

Cr Ward said.

Port Stephens 'the nastiest council' ever

BY BEN SMEE

12 Aug, 2010 04:00 AM

RELATIONSHIPS between divided Port Stephens councillors have become so bitter they can no longer sit together and share a meal.

The council's two opposing factions are now at loggerheads, after a heated meeting full of insults, threats and accusations on Tuesday night.

Mayor Bruce MacKenzie, whose faction controls the council through his casting vote, summed up the situation yesterday.

"It's the nastiest council I've ever been involved with."

Even a regular meal with staff after council meetings has become a stormy affair.

"I don't want to sit at the same table as them," Cr MacKenzie said of other councillors.

"If I sat with them I'd probably choke on my food and get indigestion just from having to look at their faces."

The situation reached boiling point on Tuesday night after the opposition group asked for staff to produce documents detailing their involvement in a private dispute between Cr MacKenzie's sand mining company and a Williamstown family.

Cr Sally Dover said the move was "politically motivated vindictiveness".

"It was a disgraceful dig at the council's integrity," Cr Dover said.

During the debate, Cr Ken Jordan called for a point of order, and said the motion was an "attack on the staff . . . and the mayor".

Councillors Geoff Dingle and Frank Ward led the call for documents.

Both denied the move was a personal attack yesterday, and said they were acting after a ratepayer had approached them with concerns.

More than 20 complaints about councillors have been made under the code of conduct since the council was elected and the Newcastle Herald has been approached several times in recent months by councillors from both factions trying to discredit rivals.

The opposition councillors have consistently voiced their frustration at being frozen out of the decision-making process.

Cr Dingle said the council had held only one workshop in the past two years. "In the previous council there were factions . . . and bloc issues, but on average we had one- to two-day workshops every two to three months," he said.

"We always sat down with developers as a group . . . [Cr MacKenzie] runs individual closed-door meetings.

The prospect of a change in mayor is also making councillors jittery. Since a June byelection, the factions each have six members and the balance of power has been held by Cr MacKenzie's casting vote.

When the September mayoral vote occurs, the position will likely be drawn from a hat.

Mayor on the attack

BY BEN SMEE
07 Sep, 2010 04:00 AM

A week before he stands down as Port Stephens mayor, Bruce MacKenzie has launched an expletive-riddled attack on a ratepayers group that has criticised his tenure and called for a new approach.

Tomaree Ratepayers and Residents Association chairman Bob Young wrote to councillors and asked them to choose a new mayor who could unite the bitterly divided council chamber.

"Our new mayor needs to be someone who can win community respect that has been significantly lost over the last two years," Mr Young wrote.

"We believe the council, split as badly as it has been, has not been focussed on policy, financial management or land planning decisions.

"A further two years of similar performance will bring the council totally into disrepute."

Cr MacKenzie, who has endorsed his deputy Bob Westbury for Tuesday's vote, described the ratepayers group as "a bunch of grubs".

"They just want to run the council with their own ideas," Cr MacKenzie said. "... but the six on my side won't take any notice of them."

He challenged the ratepayers group to run a mayoral candidate in 2012, when the job will be elected by popular vote for the first time.

"Pick out someone in 2012, put all your bullshit ideas up and I'll run against you..." he said.

"I want the people of Port Stephens to tell me if I've been a failure, not those dickheads."

Mr Young said the group was non-political and had no interest in standing a candidate.

"We're not trying to be anything other than, as we see it, a community organisation," Mr Young said.

"We were simply saying, let's run the council like a proper team of councillors, not two divided camps."

Mr Young said he was not endorsing one faction over the other, but wanted a candidate who could bridge their differences.

A draw from the hat is likely to decide the next mayor, with numbers split at six-all.

Port councillors struggling to find Mayoral candidate

BEN SMEE

08 Sep, 2010 12:00 AM

PORT Stephens Council's six opposition councillors are struggling to find a consensus candidate to run for mayor, and may have to deliver control of the council back to the ruling bloc.

Mayor Bruce MacKenzie is standing down after two terms and will honour a succession pact with his deputy Bob Westbury.

But Cr Westbury's ascension is not guaranteed, after a byelection earlier this year evened the numbers in the council chamber at six-all.

If the two bitterly divided blocs each support a candidate, the next mayor will be decided by a draw from a hat.

But the Newcastle Herald understands the six members of the opposition bloc have not yet agreed on whether to support a candidate.

John Nell stood against Cr MacKenzie in the past two votes and was widely thought to be the likely nominee.

Cr Nell said on Monday that he would not run because he did not have support. "I don't have the numbers," he said.

"If I get the numbers I might [nominate], but if I don't then I won't."

Cr Nell said he did not want to elaborate on whether his comment meant he could not win support from the five other minority councillors.

One opposition councillor said he had lost his enthusiasm after two years of personal attacks, and attempts to disgrace rivals reached new lows last month. "I honestly don't care anymore," he said.

Another opposition councillor, Geoff Dingle, who believes several councillors have been frozen out of the decision-making process in the past two years, raised the possibility of supporting no one, or even uniting behind Cr Westbury. "I can work with Bob Westbury," Cr Dingle said.

Port Stephens council breach alleged

BY BEN SMEE PORT STEPHENS REPORTER

09 Sep, 2010 04:00 AM

ALLEGATIONS that a Port Stephens councillor faxed confidential meeting minutes to the council's opponent in a \$20 million court case have been aired in NSW Parliament.

Opposition spokesman for intergovernmental relations Chris Hartcher asked Local Government Minister Barbara Perry to urgently investigate the matter.

"Anonymous documents are being distributed in Port Stephens accusing a Port Stephens councillor of serious breaches of confidentiality,"

Mr Hartcher said in Parliament.

"Confidential council minutes regarding a civil court case appear to have been sent by facsimile to council's opponent in that court case by that councillor," he said.

The Newcastle Herald has been aware of the allegations for more than a year.

Because the case has not reached court, and because council management discovered the alleged leak among documents supplied in preparation for the court case, they have been unable to take action.

The existence of the alleged fax has not previously been published on legal advice.

It can be revealed now as Mr Hartcher's question was asked under parliamentary privilege.

Mr Hartcher said an investigation was warranted "in the interests of the accused councillor and the fact that the council could lose tens of millions of ratepayers' dollars in damages in the civil action".

Port Stephens MP Craig Baumann said outside Parliament yesterday that he sought Mr Hartcher's advice after being sent a copy of the alleged leak document.

It was included in an anonymous dirt file targeting some Port Stephens councillors that has been sent to councillors, community members and the media.

He said he will also attempt to meet Ms Perry about the matter.

"Local government investigators should be coming to Port Stephens to get to the bottom of this," he said.

The councillor has denied the allegation.

Drama in Port Stephens mayoral lottery

BY BEN SMEE PORT STEPHENS REPORTER

15 Sep, 2010 04:00 AM

NEW Port Stephens mayor Bob Westbury won the lottery for the council's top job last night, after a dramatic meeting that resulted in a deadlocked vote.

On a remarkable night, one councillor left her hospital bed to attend the meeting and cast her vote.

Another revealed that the council's cash-flow crisis had become so bad that councillors had not been paid for more than two months.

Cr Westbury and Cr Geoff Dingle both nominated for mayor and both received six votes.

The name drawn from the hat was East Ward councillor Westbury, a former chairman of Port Stephens Tourism, who was elected to the council in 2004 and has been deputy mayor for the past two years.

Just hours before the meeting was due to start, it appeared the mayor's chair would be delivered to Cr

Macka steps down without regrets or apologies

BEN SMEE

11 Sep, 2010 12:00 AM

BRUCE MacKenzie said Port Stephens would come to a standstill if the wrong person succeeded him as mayor, as his dramatic and often-controversial "two years of turbulence" came to an end.

Cr MacKenzie's reign was punctuated by a bitter council split and frequent criticisms by opponents and vocal ratepayers.

He admitted to the Newcastle Herald yesterday that he was the type of mayor some people hated.

"I'm the sort of person that attracts criticism because I'm out there doing things, and out there doing things that don't always please everybody," Cr MacKenzie said.

"It's like water off a duck's back."

Rumblings of discontent were first heard when Cr MacKenzie used the support of his faction to push through a \$4 million loan to fund road and drainage works in November 2008.

It was an indication he was taking control of the council's strategic direction, which did not sit well with the group of councillors left outside his circle of influence.

Since then the two groups have butted heads constantly, mostly on development matters. The bitterness has grown into personal attacks, attempts by both factions to white ant opponents, and about 25 conduct complaints.

Cr MacKenzie said he didn't care about "personal popularity" and made no apology for his forthright style, or bending planning guidelines when he didn't agree with them.

"I've worked with dozens and dozens of small people who want to do things," he said.

"Ninety per cent of people got satisfaction. I've helped them, which I love doing.

"For every one who complains, there's 30 who tell me 'you're doing a good job'."

He will walk away from the mayor's job on Tuesday to honour a deal with his deputy Bob Westbury and will remain a councillor.

But he said this would not be the latest chapter in a colourful 40-year local government career that had its share of controversy.

Cr MacKenzie quit the council twice, in 1972 and 1986, and both times renominated for the subsequent election. He did a u-turn on a decision to quit in 1991, and his retirement in 1999 lasted nine years.

As for 2012, when Port Stephens residents will popularly elect their mayor for the first time:

"If I'm still alive, and still healthy and as fit as I am now, I'll run."

Port mayor to audit cash flow

BY BEN SMEE PORT STEPHENS REPORTER

16 Sep, 2010 04:00 AM

New Port Stephens mayor Bob Westbury says frugal money management and ending council feuds will be on his agenda as he takes the reins of a council that has sailed "close to the wind".

The council's available cash dipped below \$300,000 in July, but the council has steadfastly denied it is in financial difficulty or that bills have not been paid.

Cr Westbury said he would be receiving detailed financial briefings from council management in the coming days.

"The plans are in place to make sure the council lives within its means," he said.

"We knew we were close to the wind, but we knew we weren't broke."

The council said yesterday that claims councillors had not been paid for more than two months were correct, but not because the council had been unable to pay.

The council's commercial services manager, Jeff Smith, said this was due to a change in the pay schedule in order to comply with the Local Government Act. Councillors will now receive payments in arrears rather than in advance.

"Our general cash flow position is being managed effectively and is currently not impacting at all on our ability to pay any of our creditors," Mr Smith said.

Cr Westbury, who told the media after his election as mayor that he intended to be a mediator, will inherit the reins of a divided council and community.

"It is no secret that the current council have had more than their fair share of differences and hopefully I can bridge some of those during my time in this position," he said.

One of the most vocal critics of the council, the Tomaree Residents and Ratepayers Association, sent a letter to Cr Westbury congratulating him yesterday.