

# NAREMBURN PROGRESS ASSOCIATION

*Founded 1901; Incorporated 2004*

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The CEO  
Willoughby City Council  
PO Box 57  
Chatswood NSW 2057

14 November 2022

Dear CEO,

**Re: "Have your Say" Advisory Committees**

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1. Advisory Committees are an important point of **collaboration with the community** – collaboration is a key cornerstone of the council's Community Participation Plan (Nov, 20219) and is a different process to consultation as outlined by the plan: "*partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and identification of the preferred solution*". In line with this plan we commend the new council for seeking to re-establish Advisory Committee's which were suspended under the previous council however we do note that the community and council have missed out on valuable advice in the time they have been disbanded. It is disappointing to note that under the current plans we would not see any committee's reinstated until Mid-2023.
  2. **NPA highly valued the work of the Advisory Committees**, did not agree with their disbanding or the assessment that they were ineffective. NPA notes that we regularly followed up with the council to ask that they schedule meetings that were overdue and had to follow up to request meeting minutes of the Bicentennial Reserve and Flat Rock Gully Advisory Committee be submitted to council meetings. It was evident that the previous council's commitment to the committees played a part in the negative perception. Additionally there were proposed changes and restrictions to scope made by councilors/council officers during the committee's term – similar to the restrained scope being proposed now which is discussed below. Advisory committees are only effective where all parties are willing to commit to an independent process and where all relevant inputs can be considered to ensure fulsome advice is given.
  3. Rather than the "omnibus" large and unwieldy committees proposed, **the previously existing committees should be looked at in a new light as many have widespread community support**. To help council in applying the committee structure to the strategic plan, the previous committee names should be cross referenced to the applicable Strategic Plan area. For example the Bicentennial Reserve and Flat Rock Gully Advisory Committee could be cross correlated to "A City that is Green" and "A City that is Liveable" – the strategic plan area would be easy to note in terms of reference of each committee and on the website page pertaining to Advisory Committees. One committee may fit into more than one strategic plan area and outcomes could inform further decisions in these areas. If strategic level input is needed a combined meeting of all committees pertaining to a certain strategic planning area could be held but generally most committees had their agenda's full with the relevant operational level advice. It is noted that the council does not know the level of community commitment to all committees (NPA did not interact with all) and this needs to be tested. We have made some suggestions in the recommendations section.

4. Given that the committees members are **public appointments** rather than employees it would be more appropriate that the Mayor appoints committee members – the practice with State Government Advisory Committees is that the elected official i.e. Minister appoints members. Alternatively a panel of councilors might be considered. A full CV should not be necessary (and might be seen as an impingement on privacy) however relevant experience (including and equally importantly community based experience) should be submitted and referenced as well as any conflicts of interest.
5. We would like to see all committee's **attended by at least one councilor**. If council believes the contribution of expert members of the community is important then Councillors (within reason) should be more than willing to attend at least on a periodic or rotational basis ensuring all committees are covered. We recognise the time and contribution of our councilors and are happy to see flexibility as to who covers which committee and when, however attendance should be logged to be fair to those who make a greater time commitment.
6. The Stated Purpose of the Advisory Committees within the Draft Advisory Committee Policy is: ***“Advisory Committees are created for the sole purpose of providing advice on the development and implementation of strategic priorities of Council in a manner that complements staff, consultants and Councillor competencies.”*** We do not agree with this purpose and it does not align with the definition of collaboration stated in your Community Participation Plan. Advisory Committees are normally specific in nature providing objective technical or problem solving advice regarding a particular topic, restricting committees to operate in a manner that “complements staff” and others very seriously undermines the independence of an advisory committee and the competencies of it's members. This may lead to a perception that council is intending that the committees be an extension of council rather than an independent input to councils processes. Whilst advisory committees may inform an organization's strategic priorities as an input it is not an Advisory Committees role to **develop or implement strategy** nor should they be involved in that process. An advisory committee which is simply formed to agree with council rather than think critically and creatively is not a good use of valuable staff and community time not to mention an opportunity lost. One of the key advantages of an advisory committee is to consider all inputs, raise issues and perspectives that the council may not have considered and provide objective feedback regarding what they have proposed. Whilst it is agreed that the scope needs clear definition an over emphasis on restricting the scope will erode the usefulness of the committee and stifle contribution and a predetermined outcome i.e. a committee that wholly compliments rather than opposes is a committee formed with inherent bias. Ideas generation and true collaboration cannot occur under conditions that overly control, pre-determine outcomes and exclude relevant inputs. The Centre for Advisory Boards has some sound guidance that can be applied to committees ***“Advisory boards are most often used as a mechanism to gain strategic insight and advice to support critical thinking and robust discussions for organisational leaders. Decision-making and ownership of the outcomes rest with the organization. Best practice advisory boards are a problem-solving model as opposed to a decision-making model.”***
7. The **NPA strongly disagrees with the restriction of scope** characterised by ***“These Committees are not to focus on specific projects, sites, place based issues, operational issues or be management committees. These types of issues are managed by staff and will incorporate specific community engagement activities / avenues for the community to participate in and inform the process.”*** This effectively excludes the advisory committee from considering all inputs and impacts associated with a problem or strategy. In the case of Flat Rock Gully and Bicentennial Reserve committee this would mean no discussion about the tunnels, Willoughby Leisure Centre, sewerage works or projects to upgrade sporting facilities and would therefore render the committee useless and waste valuable community members and staff time. In the case of the Access Committee this would mean not raising issues or ideas on how to tackle an access issue created by a project. One has to ask, with so many major works and changes facing Willoughby why the council would not want to benefit from expert local knowledge to tackle these challenges – is

this not what sits at the heart of collaboration? Will this clause also exclude any active transport discussions around Chatswood for example given the discussion is triggered by the high rise development projects in the area. How far do these exclusions extend and hence will the Advisory Committees be able to provide any fully considered advice at all? Whilst it is agreed that community engagement does occur around projects (mentioned in response from the Mayor) this generally happens at the planning stage of a project. The committees can play an important part during implementation by providing ongoing technical feedback to council regarding a project and assisting with complex problem solving from a local perspective. A committee of well qualified advisors working with council can create very positive outcomes for both the community and council. Meetings should be able to be convened with majority agreement to deal with major issues related to a project or problems as needed. This approach is inconsistent with the approach of other government organisations, for example, NSW Department of Environment and Heritage demonstrates below that their advisory committees are generally specific and provide one way advice and recommendations. The committees cover a range of topics that are specific to a project ie Kosciuszko National Park/ Historic Site/ Quarantine Station, and/or are specific to a topic ie Wild Horses, or are more general policy ie Animal Ethics or place ie Regional. Willoughby Councils approach appears contrary to the approach of this NSW Government Department

## Advisory committees

Our advisory committees are appointed to give considered advice and recommendations.

- Regional advisory committees
- Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse Community Advisory Panel
- Hartley Historic Site Advisory Committee
- Quarantine Station Community Consultative Committee
- Animal Ethics Committee

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8. The core purpose of an Advisory Committee should not be *“Working with stakeholders to raise awareness and promote behaviour change within the community”* as stated in the Draft Advisory Committee Policy. In fact this clause undermines the integrity of the advisory committees. A recent article written by Business Advisor Stephen Wells can be applied from a business context: *“An Advisory Board, however, provides non-binding advice and members are not authorized to act for - or make decisions on behalf of - the organization. An Advisory Board is a problem-solving model to provide critical thinking, robust analysis and strategic insights to inform the business owner, executives or directors. It is the responsibility of the business to make the final decision based on the input provided by the Advisory Board.”* It should be noted here that the article is referring to a Board Level (which is generally strategic) vs Committee Level (which is generally operational/ project based). Whilst stakeholder awareness may occur organically via the process of collaboration the expectation should not be that advisors to council provide a service on behalf of council in the community. The development of programs and encouragement of “behaviour change” is the responsibility of council once they have made

a decision. The strategic decision is made outside the advisory committee structure and may go with or against the advice of the committee – it is therefore inappropriate to expect the committee to lobby the community on behalf of the council’s decision (and a potential conflict of interest perceived in the community). The Collins Dictionary defines an Advisory Group as “*An advisory group regularly gives suggestions and help to people or organizations, especially about a particular subject or area of activity.*” i.e. an advisory committee is providing advice to an organization about particular topics not acting as a proxy for the organisation. Willoughby Council appears to be moving away from standard and accepted practice by defining advisory committees as council advocacy groups under the umbrella of council rather than independent, robust and appropriate advisory groups that represent the issues independently to council.

9. At a previous meeting of the NPA members voted unanimously that the **Bicentennial Reserve and Flat Rock Gully Committee should continue** and members expect that the full breadth of issues facing the area are to be included in the scope. The reason why the committee needs to be continued is perhaps expressed best via the original Flat Rock Gully and Bicentennial Reserve Plan of Management of 1995: *“In many respects Flat Rock Gully and Bicentennial Reserve provide a microcosm of the many issues that prevail in the external environment of the densely populated cities of Australia in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century; pressure of use on open space, the need for a sense of naturalness in a highly structured environment, the certainty that open space is there and protected, even if one doesn’t use it, and the need for a sense of relief from increasing residential entities and the consequent reduction of private open space....It is, however beholden on all who read, assess and consider the strategies that are encompassed in this plan, to seek to appreciate that in such an urbanised environment a broad perspective is essential. No one user type, active or passive, local or district, can expect to monopolise such a major and important open space. Inevitably, some component of compromise will, therefore, be required of all interested parties if we are to benefit and share in the resource”*...it is in this context and for this purpose that the Bicentennial Reserve and Flat Rock Gully Advisory Committee was instituted. And it is for this purpose now more than ever it needs to continue. The issues raised in August 1995 are being felt now more than ever (Channel 9, Walter St, Willoughby Leisure, Sewerage Systems, Tunnels, Increased Population and Decreasing Nature) and we need a group with diversity of knowledge to come together to advise the council with regard to the full scope of challenges and opportunities to this area. The committee should not be restricted to what the council knows now in the face of so many pressures and considerations and it is impossible to consider anything in the area without considering the coinciding developments. This committee was not instituted to simply develop the site into what it is today – it was formed to provide a point of collaboration where various community stakeholders could come together and find solutions for all of the complex issues that face it. Issues that were predicted to compound as time went on. We have not moved past this committee, the need for it has intensified as our population has grown.
10. Essentially what the council appears to be suggesting through the new Advisory Committee structure is something other than advisory committees. The proposal is more along the lines of council advocacy groups who ratify the decisions of council within council’s defined bounds and promote council policy. This is not what the community are expecting the advisory committees to be and this approach will not provide the greatest benefit or enable collaboration.

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## Recommendations

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**Naremburn Progress Association recommends the following steps:**

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- 1. That the council immediately reinstate the 13 Advisory Committees – notifying the previous members, confirming delegates and advertising for additional applications where there are gaps on committees. By reinstating committees, work can get underway to start the first meeting sooner or see point 3.**
  - 2. Each committee should be linked to one or more strategic plan areas to demonstrate alignment with councils strategic planning process. ie Bicentennial Reserve and Flat Rock Gully Advisory Committee could be cross correlated to “A City that is Green” and “A City that is Liveable”.**
  - 3. Where it becomes evident that a quorum cannot be achieved within a reasonable time frame council may choose to permanently disband an individual committee via a vote at a council meeting. This should be done in an open and transparent manner citing what has been done to publicly seek membership.**
  - 4. That should the Draft Advisory Committee Policy be adopted it should be amended to ensure appropriate levels of committee independence from council, objectivity in appointments and advice, integrity in terms of being true advisory committees not advocacy groups, space for problem solving via a wider unrestricted scope that includes projects/place etc, removes the criteria for the advisory committee to “raise awareness” and create “behavioural change” in the community, the purpose of committees should be changed away from developing or implementing strategy to providing “considered advice and recommendations” regarding operational, place and project matters.**

We encourage Willoughby Council to acknowledge that the actions over the last several years around Advisory Committees has generated a significant lack of trust in councils intentions around collaboration. This trust will be further eroded by instituting what has been proposed for the reasons we have detailed above. Trust can be repaired by demonstrating that the council truly values it's highly educated and experienced community and by seeking out it's advice in an independent and well-structured way without imposing unnecessary restrictions that renders a committee's commitment time wasted. The intent of the community is to provide excellent advice that improves our area in partnership with council taking into account all inputs to a problem or opportunity. We are lucky to have such an engaged and qualified community wanting to contribute. The community understand that Councillors and council officers are free to take or leave advice (with reasons explained wherever possible) independently of the advisory committee. The Advisory Committees do not want to interfere with council processes but the community do want to see their advice treated with consideration and respect and to see that their input helps council achieve better outcomes. They want to see real value emerge from their advice. It is important that the Advisory Committee's maintain independence and integrity so as to be trusted by the community

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Yours faithfully

Interim Secretary, Naremburn Progress Association.

Cc: Cr Tanya Taylor, WCC Mayor  
Cr Nic Wright  
Cr Georgie Roussac  
Cr Anna Greco