

Budget and Rates Consultation – Why Bother?

ADELAIDE HILLS COUNCIL

I recall when first working in Local Government, that comments were made about rates consultation, “*why bother, they have to pay their rates anyway*”. How things have changed. Consultation is now recognized as an important part of the decision making process.

Why did we consult?

- Receive feedback on some proposed Rate Policy changes,
- Get community input into Budget priorities,
- Provide information to the Community on Council activities and services,
- Demonstrate customer focused culture.

An excellent Community Consultation Policy can be found on the ACT Government Website, refer <http://www.cmd.act.gov.au/community/consult/protocol/index.html>

What did we do?

The consultation process we undertook involved a professionally prepared brochure detailing our draft budget and proposed rating policy changes. This was mailed out to all Ratepayers, with a reply paid envelope. We also had the more traditional public meetings (four of them), web site access, hot line for queries and feedback and front counter displays.

Important elements of this approach included:

- Making the brochure easy to read (don't use detailed finance language);
- Make it look interesting, for example, use of photo's.
- Make it easy to respond to.

What were the results?

Over 2000 survey responses were received. Only a total of around 80 people came to one of the four public meetings. This gives a clear indication of the preferred method that the public wish to be involved in these types of consultations.

We engaged some additional resources to input all of the returned response sheets into a database. This allowed the data to be analyzed for reporting back to Council.

The information was extremely useful and influenced Council's decision making on Rates Policy and also Budget priorities. In addition, the information validated the Strategic Management Plan priorities, which in turn has confirmed our Long Term Financial Plan settings.

The community were given feedback on the results of the consultation in the Budget and Rates Brochure, distributed with Rate Notices, and also in our community newsletter, *The Hills Voice*.

Important Points

- Properly plan and Budget for the costs and time (\$16,000 – for 16,500 properties).
- Be clear about what process you want, small scale or large scale.
- Prepare *plain English* documents, avoid finance jargon or legislative terms.
- Make sure results are captured in a meaningful way, they must be able to be analyzed.

- Give feedback!

Summary

This was an extremely positive project for Council. We intend to do a consultation each year as part of the Budget process (whether this is mandated by legislation or not), however such a large process would only be embarked upon around once every three years.

Paper delivered by – Shaun Matters, Director Corporate and Community Services
Adelaide Hills Council
Ph 8408-0442
e-mail : smatters@ahc.sa.gov.au