

ELECTION CHATTER

March 2024 looms. Council election time.

STUDY 1 | DO COUNCILLORS (AND RESIDENTS) HAVE A VOICE?

This is the first in a series of three papers created to provide some data on topical themes for the upcoming election.

A common recent complaint is that people ask for a Council action and are often told, "I hear you Ken, but there is nothing I can do. The Executive make the decisions."

Are the Councillors able to highlight issues raised by residents and be heard? Is engagement working well?

For two decades, I was an advocate for the Aquatic Centre and often interacted with Council people. The ability to engage effectively does alter considerably when Council's change. My experience is that engagement is most effective when the Executives make themselves accessible and seek feedback themselves rather than relying solely on Councillor input.

In terms of engagement, the best Council period that I experienced was the 2012 – 2016 one and that was because one of the directors engaged well. Our community organisation was seldom able to obtain all that we wanted, but we were always heard and treated respectfully.

It's a toss-up for the worst Council period. The sacked Johnstone Shire Council of 2004 – 2008 had some Councillors who listened yet had many who were openly rude and contemptuous about Mission Beach. That was a good part of the reason for their sacking. Yet some of those Councillors popped up again and were re-elected. Probably the worst era though was 2016 – 2020 where there were some Councillors and Executives who were hostile to residents.

Has that aspect of Council activity improved this time? Yes. Councillors are generally accessible, polite and they listen. The weakness is a continuation from the previous Council practice of minimising the influence of elected representatives. Is that because the Councillors lack the will and/or skill to advocate effectively or is it caused by Executives who fail to listen? There is at least one case where it is the latter, but I will leave the question out there for voters to debate and decide.

I raised a small issue during this Council period. The experience was not great. Council chose to reduce the number of public waste bins. The reasons for doing so were sound and were belatedly communicated. Council placed a "Have your Say" map on their webpage as well. In theory they were listening. In practice they were not.

At the Ulysses Link beach walk from the toilet block at Clump Point to the Visitors Information Centre they removed seven bins and replaced them with one. This one:



Solve the bin overflow issue: blame the customer.

Unsurprisingly, the bin kept overflowing. Had Council bothered to look on this occasion, as I did; they would have seen that the refuse, placed carefully in double bags beside the bin, was beach debris. Some people collected this for the good of the community and its reputation as an attractive tourist destination. Did Council respond by providing more frequent collections or more bins? No. They chose to threaten and blame their customers with new fines “we are watching and we will be obeyed” stickers. Imagine the judge’s mirth (or indignation) in a court case if a resident collecting beach refuse were pinged for placing these bags beside a full bin.

That’s the current mindset. When I raised it with a Council person and spoke of the need for at least one more bin beside the busy amenities block, I was told that people should take their rubbish home and that some residents are placing household rubbish in the public bins. It is always a sign of Executive arrogance when they look immediately to the customers as the root cause of the problems!



Creative waste disposal.

We are a tourist town and it must be kept tidy. What are tourists supposed to do here? Council erected nine sets of picnic tables and four park benches on this 1.4 km stretch of walking path so they know it’s an intensive recreational use area. It’s a really popular place for walking dogs too. If a tourist has a dog and bags the droppings, what do they do with it? Take it back to their van bin? Not likely. They do not bag it. Probably. Alternatively, they dump the bag on the sand. One creative person hung their bag on a twig (above) recently.

Coastal Councils across Queensland usually do a good job of ensuring there are many bins in popular walking and picnic spots. This Council clearly has little understanding of the importance and realities of tourism.

This is merely an example of low grade outcomes caused by ineffective community engagement, and possibly an imbalance in power between elected members and Council executives.

It’s no Earth-shattering issue, yet our elected members should be strong advocates for their community and have some say in executive decisions.

Ken Gray
Customer Responsiveness Researcher
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