

Bastion blow up

The Bastion Point ocean access saga took an unexpected twist in a heated and at times pointed 11th hour debate at Tuesday night's East Gippsland Shire Council meeting.

In light of recent public statements about the economic benefit and claims of inaccurate figures in the Buchan Consulting report, former mayor Cr Mendy Urie attempted, unsuccessfully, to have council re-examine the economic case, building and management of the boat ramp.

In a move that seemed to take some councillors and the chief executive officer by surprise, the debate was played out in front of only a handful of council staff and the *Advertiser* reporter. This was in stark contrast to when council voted 5-3 in favour to submit its detailed design to the Minister for Environment in early August in front of a 100-strong public gallery.

On Tuesday night, only five of the eight councillors present (Cr Jane Rowe leave of absence) voted in favour of allowing Cr Urie to present her 'urgent' motion. Crs Michael Freshwater (mayor), Peter Neal and Marianne Pelz were against.

Cr Urie moved (seconded by Cr Bill Gamble) that:

In light of recent public statements claiming inaccurate information and figures contained in the Buchan Report that this council:

1. Re-examines the economic case for building and managing of the ocean access boat ramp known as Option 3B at Mallacoota, before

2. Reconsidering its role in building and managing of this boat ramp at its December 2010 ordinary council meeting, and

3. Subsequently writes to the Planning Minister, Environment Minister and Roads and Ports Minister or their equivalent in a new government to inform

them of the outcomes of such discussions.

The motion was lost, Crs Urie, Gamble and Dick Ellis in favour and Crs Freshwater, Marianne Pelz, Peter Neal, Trudy Anderson and Ben Buckley against. Cr Jane Rowe had leave of absence.

Cr Urie said the issue needed to be heard as urgent business because the claims had been made in public and since the last formal council meeting.

"Claims in the local press are that there are discrepancies in the Buchan Report used by council to make its decision in the building and managing of Option 3B at Bastion Point, Mallacoota," she said.

"The main discrepancy that's pointed to is that there has been a central assumption that each group of three boaters coming to Mallacoota would spend \$4240 over three days, even if they are camping."

Cr Urie said that on examining the details of the report, it seemed the consultants arrived at the figures by mistake, by multiplying the wrong numbers in the table, for an over estimate of \$2.8 million annually in the economic benefit to the community.

Cr Urie said that Buchan was also reluctant to use actual Tourism Victoria expenditure data. Those two factors combined, inflated the benefits by a whopping 400 per cent, it was claimed.

"I'm not saying these claims are accurate, but they have been made, but in the interest of good governance this council should take four weeks to reconsider its decision since its decision has been based on this Buchan Report," Cr Urie said.

Cr Gamble said there was "enough doubt in the Buchan Report to indicate a mistake has been made".

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Cr Neal, in speaking against reviewing the decision, admitted to not having read the Buchan Report on which council made its initial decision some three months ago.

"Because I am guilty and I haven't read the Buchan Report, I just wonder whereabouts in the Buchan Report these anomalies are so I can sit down and read it," Cr Neal asked.

Cr Urie said her fellow councillor's response highlighted "a very important issue".

"This council made a decision about what might be a \$6.5 million project. This council decided to go ahead and recommend this project to the Environment Minister and if this Buchan Report was not read and understood, there underlines my case," she said.

Cr Freshwater said "this has been brought up before and I was of the impression at the end of the day the Buchan Report balanced out."

"It's obvious to me the error of the number of people visiting has nothing to do with the build or maintenance. They could be millions of dollars out. There could be much higher economic benefit," Cr Freshwater said.

Cr Pelz said she would like to see the justification of the mistake and doubted Save Bastion Point's claims.

"I think it's just another environmental blow out of the truth," Cr Pelz said.

"We weren't requested to assess the report, rather receive it and hand it on to the Minister."

"I find this quite insulting that it has been brought back up. We've received the report and handed it on. We've made the right assessment."

"It's just an attack from the environmentalists; they should be taking it to the Minister."

In a tirade against economists Cr Neal said, in part, "economists are unregulated, not responsible and not accountable".

Cr Ben Buckley said the economic benefits were irrelevant to the argument.

"A 100 per cent error multiplied by four has nothing to do with the construction or maintenance of it. This is where we're getting it wrong. We can only assume the benefits. If it's as good as I think it is and as I've been told it is, the benefits are irrelevant," Cr Buckley said.

He also questioned why a motion to rescind the previous council decision had not been put forward.

"If some members of this council are intent on making a real issue of this, instead of this wishy washy stuff surely the mover should set up a motion of rescission of our previous decision," he said.

continued;

Bastion Point debate cont.

Cr Urie said she didn't think a rescission motion would be appropriate.

"The decision of council to go ahead has been acted on, which excludes the rescission motion being appropriate."

Rather, she said council needed to "take a bit of time to look at the figures for the sake of good governance".

"If figures are out by \$2.8 million annually, we need to know before actually taking on the job of management of this boat ramp if its built. We need to know accurate figures."

Cr Ellis said it was disturbing the error was in the public domain for three-and-a-half weeks and believed "somebody should have refuted the error" in that time.

"We're looking for the best possible outcome for the ratepayers," Cr Ellis said.

"It's not the issue of the boat ramp as much as a most serious cost to the ratepayers of East Gippsland," he said.

Director development Chris Waites said he was aware of issue the Save Bastion Point Campaign had raised, and had approached Buchan Consulting about a month ago.

Mr Waites said Buchan had found a line item "they conceded was in-

correct", but it didn't affect the cost benefit ratio. He requested a response from Buchan.

"I think its premature for anyone to say it's a mistake until Buchan has had an opportunity to respond...it's an opinion of an alternative economist, that doesn't make Buchan wrong," he said.

"We're jumping at shadows until we get an answer from Buchan."

However, Cr Ellis said 'jumping at shadows' was "a bit flippant".

However, that opportunity was first offered to Buchan on October 14 and no reply had been forthcoming.

Mr Waites said he requested Buchan to investigate the allegations of \$2.8 million black hole on October 14 and on October 22 had a response saying Buchan was "hoping to give me their review in a week".

Some 27 days later Mr Waites had not received a response.

The CEO said that following submission to the Environment Minister, Option 3B had been through a very rigorous process involved both in terms in peer review of design and the economic benefit.

"As part of consideration of Government in making the commitment for funding, it has undergone another level of scrutiny to what council undertook to submit for grant approval," Mr Kozlowski said.

Cr Gamble asked Mr Waites when Buchan was advised of the mistake.

"At least a month ago when the issue was raised by the anti-boat ramp people," he said.

Sharply, Mr Gamble replied, "they're not anti-boat ramp people".

"They're anti this form of the boat ramp, to be accurate," Mr Waites said.

Cr Trudy Anderson said she was "disappointed and upset" with the error and the lack of action to fix such an error, but said that council needed to hear from Buchan.

Cr Anderson also asked the CEO of the implications to the shire if Cr Urie's motion was successful.

"I guess whether it gets up or not, one of the implications will be that it will be on the front page of the newspaper, that is the first thing," the CEO said.

"The second thing, it probably demonstrates there is still division on the council in relation to the issue and therefore presents the council in that light to the community."

Thirdly, the CEO suspected there would be "some degree of - I won't say anything else other than - uncertainty in minds of the Government as well."

Cr Urie said she took "exception to the CEO warning us".

The CEO said he was asked of the implications: "That's my opinion."

"The effect is not to highlight division (in the council), but to reach the right decision," Cr Urie said.

"We actually need to take a breath and find out what the true figures are."

"This council must take responsibility. We're all unclear of what's being proposed."

"There is a need to test the assertion that there is an error. Mr Pallas (Minister for Ports) is not going to be the manager of the boat ramp. We need to get the most accurate figures we can and if there is already one acknowledged error and we're waiting a response for other claims from Buchan we must do that," Cr Urie said.

"We need to take a little bit of time to look at them carefully."

The debate and questioned degenerated into a tit-for-tat between the CEO and Cr Ellis about whether the CEO had raised the issue of Bastion Point in a meeting with Minister Pallas just a days before the \$6.2 million State Government funding announcement for the project.

Mr Kozlowski rejected the claims, but "was not impressed by the interrogation or the tone" from Cr Ellis.