



# Minutes

## Council Meeting

Tuesday 20 May 2025 at 6.00 pm

**Council Chambers (and by video conferencing)  
East Gippsland Shire Council Corporate Centre  
273 Main Street, Bairnsdale 3875**

*Councillors*

John White (Mayor), Sonia Buckley (Deput Mayor), Arthur Allen,  
Jodie Ashworth, Tom Crook, Barry Davis, Joanne Eastman,  
Bernie Farquhar, and Ian Trevaskis

*Attachments referenced in these minutes can be located in the meeting agenda on East Gippsland Shire Council's [website](#).*

## Vision

East Gippsland is an inclusive and innovative community that values our natural environment, puts community at the centre of Council decision-making, and creates the conditions in which communities can thrive.

## Our Strategic Objectives

1. An inclusive and caring community that respects and celebrates diversity.
2. Planning and infrastructure that enriches the environment, lifestyle, and character of our communities.
3. A natural environment that is managed and enhanced.
4. A thriving and diverse economy that attracts investment and generates inclusive local employment.
5. A transparent organisation that listens and delivers effective, engaging and responsive services.

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# 1 Procedural

## 1.1 Recognition of Traditional Custodians

Mayor Cr John White welcomed all to the Council meeting and acknowledged the traditional custodians.

*East Gippsland Shire Council acknowledges the Gunaikurnai, Monero and Bidawel people as the Traditional Custodians of this land that encompasses East Gippsland Shire, and their enduring relationship with country. The Traditional Custodians have cared and nurtured East Gippsland for tens of thousands of years.*

*Council values their living culture and practices and their right to self-determination. Council pays respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in East Gippsland, their Elders, past, present, and future.*

## 1.2 Apologies

Nil

## 1.3 Declaration of Conflict of Interest

Nil

## 1.4 Confirmation of Minutes

**Motion**

***That the minutes of the Council meeting held Tuesday 15 April 2025 be confirmed.***

***Moved: Cr Arthur Allen***

***Seconded: Cr Sonia Buckley***

***CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY***

For: Cr Arthur Allen, Cr Jodie Ashworth, Cr Sonia Buckley, Cr Tom Crook,  
Cr Barry Davis, Cr Joanne Eastman, Cr Bernie Farquhar, Cr Ian Trevaskis and  
Cr John White

Against: Nil

Abstained: Nil

## 1.5 Next Meeting

The next Council Meeting is scheduled to be held on Tuesday 10 June 2025 at the Corporate Centre, 273 Main Street Bairnsdale commencing at 6.00 pm.

## 1.6 Requests for Leave of Absence

Nil

## Procedural Note

Cr Arthur Allen noted his apology for the Council meeting scheduled on 10 June 2025.

## Procedural Note

At this point in proceedings, Mayor Cr John White acknowledged the following students who observed the meeting from the public gallery as part of their Rotary Junior Community Awards program:

- Evie Parker - Lucknow Primary School; and
- Ellie Mitchell - Lucknow Primary School.

To acknowledge their participation in this community program, the Mayor presented the students each with a Council pin.

### 1.7 Condolences

#### Motion

***That Council notes the recent passing of the Honourable Peter Nixon AO, a long-term Member for Gippsland and former Chief Commissioner of East Gippsland Shire Council, and extends its condolences to his family.***

**Moved: Cr Sonia Buckley**

**Seconded: Cr Ian Trevaskis**

**CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY**

For: Cr Arthur Allen, Cr Jodie Ashworth, Cr Sonia Buckley, Cr Tom Crook,  
Cr Barry Davis, Cr Joanne Eastman, Cr Bernie Farquhar, Cr Ian Trevaskis and  
Cr John White

Against: Nil

Abstained: Nil

#### Motion

***That Council notes the recent passing of Leigh Robinson of Paynesville, a highly respected community member and extends its sincere condolences to his family, friends and the broader community.***

**Moved: Cr Arthur Allen**

**Seconded: Cr Bernie Farquhar**

**CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY**

For: Cr Arthur Allen, Cr Jodie Ashworth, Cr Sonia Buckley, Cr Tom Crook,  
Cr Barry Davis, Cr Joanne Eastman, Cr Bernie Farquhar, Cr Ian Trevaskis and  
Cr John White

Against: Nil

Abstained: Nil

## **1.8 Open Forum**

### **1.8.1 Petitions**

Nil

### **1.8.2 Questions of Council**

#### **1.8.1.1 Budget Consultation Process**

Mr John Butler-Cole submitted the following questions which were read out on his behalf by Fiona Weigall Chief Executive Officer:

**Question 1:** “The draft budget has been delivered with a majority of Councillors including the Mayor having declared and announced a 2% rise. Why does this procedure depart from that confirmed and advised that allows for community consultation to be given and considered by Council?”

**Question 2:** “As the budget has been declared, what is the relevance of calling for public submissions when no changes are to be considered or introduced? This action fails to comply with the intentions of the Local Government Act 2020.”

Sarah Johnston General Manager Business Excellence provided a response which is summarised below:

**Response 1:** The draft budget is in active consultation at the moment and has been promoted in numerous ways including media releases, copies at all service centres and council newsletters in order to seek feedback including on the proposed rate increase. If you would like to submit feedback please use the link on our website, call us or send an email.

**Response 2:** To reiterate, the budget will be considered at the Council meeting on Monday 23 June 2025, it is still in draft form now.

### 1.8.1.2 Budget Revenue and Property Data

Mr Peter Jones submitted the following questions which were read out on his behalf by Fiona Weigall Chief Executive Officer:

**Question 1:** “The declared 2% increase in the 25/26 draft budget indicates on page 33 that a total revenue from rates and charges of \$76.254 m is budgeted representing a 6.6% annual increase in revenue over the \$71.536 m stated for 24/25. Can Council explain the need for an additional 4.6% escalation above the 2% stated by the local Government Minister as the required rates revenue cap?”

**Question 2:** “Can Council advise the total number of rateable properties in each category for 24/25 and 25/26 and the total billed municipal charge each year used in the development of the draft budget figures?”

Sarah Johnston General Manager Business Excellence provided a response which is summarised below:

**Response 1:** You can see the proposed rate increase calculation in the table on page 40 note 4.1.1 l and m. The table you are referring to includes growth from the previous year and the proposed rate increase of 2%. The rate cap calculation is audited annually by the ESC who provide a public report to Parliament on compliance across all Councils. I am more than happy to direct you to the compliance report for previous years.

**Response 2:** Yes, absolutely please look at table 4.1.1 d on page 39 of the draft budget for the number of rateable properties and the municipal charge is shown on table 4.1.1 g and h on the same page. Which shows the proposed increase on the MC of 2% and the total revenue to be raised which also includes growth. Please note that farms who have a single farm enterprise only get one MC, we have 970 of these in the Shire.

### 1.8.1.3 Staff Costs and Efficiency Measures

Ms Elsa Hodge submitted the following questions which were read out on her behalf by Fiona Weigall Chief Executive Officer:

**Question 1:** “Historically staff costs were 35% of rates revenue. The draft budget advises that staff remuneration has now reached 63% of rates revenue leaving less to actually address the needs of the community. What actions is Council taking to address cost containment in this area through full adoption of available technology and digitisation tools?”

**Question 2:** “When will Council publicise its policy and plan to action these very necessary efficiency and productivity measures?”

Sarah Johnston General Manager Business Excellence provided a response which is summarised below:

**Response 1:** Staff are one of the major cost items in the budget as they are the key mechanism used to deliver over 150 services to our community. Yes, staff costs have increased and that would be expected to address growth in our region. There were also significant numbers of new staff to support the recovery of the region from Black Summer – these positions were all funded through grants which would appear in the budget as either grants operating or grants capital income lines and offset the increases in wages in the expenses over various years. All bushfire funded positions finish at the end of June this year and you can see from the budget and the long-term financial plan that staff numbers reduce because of this – see page 35 of the draft budget. You can also see from our assumptions that staff numbers do not increase.

**Response 2:** The budget contains efficiency measures for the next 3 years, being 2.5 million for 2025/26, and 1.5, million for 2026/27 and 27/28. We have also committed to doing a financial sustainability strategy as we want to ensure a strong continued focus on being as efficient as we can – this is in line with the budgeting principles of efficient use of ratepayers’ money and keeping services and service levels at an acceptable level for the community. You can see further details on this in the Draft Long Term Financial Plan.

#### **1.8.1.4 Ballantine Solar Farm Concerns**

Ms Cosette Murphy submitted the following questions which were read out on her behalf by Fiona Weigall Chief Executive Officer:

**Question 1:** “Detail of Ballantine creek and the construction of Solar Farm effect on immediate area and downstream on neighbours. Potential contamination of aquifer that is directly under proposed site. Will Council approach East Gippsland Water and the East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority to ascertain questions regarding water?”

**Question 2:** “When faced with a Solar Farm fire we need to have a contingency plan. Without a plan we should not even consider a Solar farm proposal. If the airport is closed due to fire at Ballantine Solar Farm, does East Gippsland Shire Council have a suitable alternative site that can cater for all current users if airport cannot be used?”

Chris Stephenson General Manager Place and Community provided a response which is summarised below:

**Response 1:** Council is not the responsible authority for determining the application. East Gippsland Water and the East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority will have the opportunity as referral authorities to provide their comments on the proposal directly to the Department of Transport and Planning for consideration by the Minister.

**Response 2:** Council expects that the Minister for Planning will give consideration to fire risk in assessing the proposal and will also take account of referral advice from the CFA. We note that the CFA has published ‘Guidelines and Model Requirements for Renewable Energy Facilities’. We expect that, if approved, the facility will be designed and constructed in accordance with those guidelines to minimise and mitigate fire risk, including any risk to the operation of the airport.

### 1.8.1.5 Omeo Mountain Bike Park Impact

Mr Charles Connely asked the following questions:

**Question 1:** “Omeo mountain bike park proximity to my property and associated losses and problems this has caused me including loss of grazing area, and inability to use what's left with threats of removing that too even after the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action spent 4 months driving all over our property after the fires. Why can it not be moved after 9 years of opportunity to do so!? Access, emergency's or otherwise, trespass including by your own staff.”

**Question 2:** “How is trespass ok and what are your plans beyond using another property owner?”

Stuart McConnell General Manager Assets and Environment provided a response which is summarised below:

**Response 1:** The location of the trails was the subject of significant consideration through the VCAT consideration of the planning permit. VCAT directed a planning permit be issued for the trails in their current location. So, the independent body responsible has considered this issue and provided a determination. A critical issue in the location of the trails is the safety of crossing of Connley Road. I am advised this was very carefully considered in the design and location of the current trails, in addition to ensuring the effective operation of the trails. I have offered to have an independent person review this.

Importantly all of the trails are located on public land and already the trails are delivering benefits for the Omeo community, its economy and jobs in the context of a region that has been impacted through the loss of the native timber industry.

**Response 2:** Trespass is not okay as I have previously advised and will continue to take steps to address this. We are also currently working through the range of longer-term arrangements for access and other matters for the Omeo Mountain Bike track. Importantly appropriate arrangements are in place for the current operation.

### 1.8.3 Public Submissions

Nil

### 1.9 Items for Noting

Nil

## 2 Notices of Motion

Nil

## 3 Deferred Business

Nil

## 4 Councillor Delegate Reports

### 4.1 Cr John White

24/04/25 – Citizenship Ceremony – Bairnsdale  
24/04/25 – East Gippsland Ratepayers and Residents Meeting  
24/04/25 – Paynesville Cycle Path Project Meeting  
25/04/25 – ANZAC Day – Lindenow  
25/04/25 – ANZAC Day – Bairnsdale  
28/04/25 – Meeting with Fennings  
30/04/25 – Orbost Stakeholder Meeting  
02/05/25 – Site Visit – Proposed Subdivision 114-118 Stirling Road Metung  
06/05/25 – CEO Employment and Remuneration Committee Meeting  
06/05/25 – 2025 Events Masterclass – Bairnsdale  
07/05/25 – 2025 Events Masterclass – Lakes Entrance  
08/05/25 – Agriculture Sector Advisory Committee  
08/05/25 – Japanese Consul-General Furuya Tokuro  
09/05/25 – Launch of East Gippsland Community Directory and Afternoon Tea  
09/05/25 – East Gippsland Art Gallery – Exhibition Opening  
11/05/25 – Launch – Dragon Boat “Victory”  
12/05/25 – Youth Ambassadors Committee Meeting  
13/05/25 – TRFM Pre-record Advertisement  
14/05/25 – Foodbank Victoria Meeting  
14/05/25 – Grand Opening – Latitude Country Club Palm Lake Resort – Paynesville  
14/05/25 – LEADA Meeting  
16/05/25 – East Gippsland Children’s Expo 2025  
17/05/25 – Official Opening – Bruthen Recreation Reserve Oval facility opening  
17/05/25 – 2024/2025 Presentation Night – Surf Life Saving Lakes Entrance

### 4.2 Cr Arthur Allen

After a very enjoyable period of leave, it’s back to work!

On Saturday 17 May, along with the Mayor, I attended the opening of the new netball court and change facilities. What a credit to the Recreation Reserve Committee to source the funding and then manage the project to completion. And how fitting that the courts were named in honour of the Streeters, who have been the heart and soul of Bruthen sport for many, many years. Congratulations to James Nicholas and his hardworking committee.

On Monday 19 May, I attended the opening of the Gippsland Lakes Early Learning Centre in Lakes Entrance. This beautiful centre will cater for about 110 children, filling a great need in the town. Congratulations to Anne Maree and her team for making this a reality.

### 4.3 Cr Joanne Eastman

I recently met with a diverse group of people from Omeo and Benambra Districts to discuss a number of key issues. The extended drought is affecting farmers in the area badly and, according to many long-time farmers, is the worst they've ever seen. They were extremely disappointed not to have been included in drought recognition and relief funding recently announced for other Local Government Areas.

They fear that the Emergency Services Levy—on top of other taxes, the cost of fodder as they compete with so many other areas in drought, and destocking at rock-bottom prices—will push many farmers to the brink. The situation is dire for all, and particularly for younger people trying to establish farms.

I also took the opportunity to check out Livingstone Park, the mountain bike track (kudos to the artist who created all the wooden sculptures of bike-riders), Sam Hill and Connleys Road.

The Errinundra to Snowy Service Equity Project Governance Group met in early May. Since 2023, the Group has been overseeing a new model of remote healthcare servicing the communities of Bendoc, Bonang, Goongerah, and Tubbut. The highly successful pilot was designed in partnership with the community and demonstrates the importance of end users being involved in project design and implementation.

Bemm River was picture perfect for the opening of the Bemm River Footpaths—a project the community is immensely proud of. It was great to hear such positive feedback from the community about the support they've had from the Shire's Mallacoota works crew in the development and maintenance of the paths.

Other activities over the past couple of months have included:

- a community meeting about the possible future of the old Geriatric Centre;
- attendance at the end-of-term presentation of the Community Learning Projects at the Snowy River Campus of the Alpine Leadership School;
- attendance at a Bairnsdale Karts Event (what a fantastic set-up they have); and
- the East Gippsland Field Days.

## 5 Officer Reports

### 5.1 Place and Community

#### 5.1.1 Draft Position Paper - Renewable Energy Planning Applications

Authorised by General Manager Place and Community

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#### Motion

##### *That Council:*

- 1. endorses the draft 'Position Paper – Renewable Energy Planning Applications' as provided at Attachment 1; and***
- 2. notes that all referrals of Planning Permit applications to Council by the Minister for Planning will be submitted to a Council meeting for decision in accordance with section 6.2 of East Gippsland Shire Council's Planning Delegations Policy.***

**Moved:** Cr Tom Crook

**Seconded:** Cr Bernie Farquhar

**CARRIED**

For: Cr Arthur Allen, Cr Jodie Ashworth, Cr Tom Crook, Cr Joanne Eastman,  
Cr Bernie Farquhar and Cr John White

Against: Cr Barry Davis and Cr Ian Trevaskis

Abstained: Cr Sonia Buckley

#### Procedural Note

In accordance with section 61(5)(e) of the *Local Government Act 2020*, a Councillor who is present at a meeting and abstains from voting is to be counted as a vote against the motion.

**5.1.2 Planning Scheme Amendment C159egip - Erosion Management Overlay**

Authorised by General Manager Place and Community

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**Motion**

***That Council:***

- 1. requests the authorisation from the Minister for Planning to prepare and exhibit Planning Scheme Amendment C159egip to the East Gippsland Planning Scheme, in accordance with Section 8A of the Planning and Environment Act 1987;***
- 2. prepares the Planning Scheme Amendment C159egip to the East Gippsland Planning Scheme, generally in accordance with the documentation provided at Attachment 1, subject to Ministerial Authorisation; and***
- 3. places the Planning Scheme Amendment C159egip on public exhibition in accordance with the requirements of Section 19 of the Planning and Environment Act 1987, subject to Ministerial Authorisation.***

**Moved: Cr Ian Trevaskis**

**Seconded: Cr Sonia Buckley**

**CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY**

**For:** Cr Arthur Allen, Cr Jodie Ashworth, Cr Sonia Buckley, Cr Tom Crook,  
Cr Barry Davis, Cr Joanne Eastman, Cr Bernie Farquhar, Cr Ian Trevaskis and  
Cr John White

**Against:** Nil

**Abstained:** Nil

### 5.1.3

### Planning Scheme Amendment C165egip - Corrections to the Planning Scheme

Authorised by General Manager Place and Community

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#### Motion

#### *That Council:*

- 1. requests authorisation from the Minister for Planning to prepare and exhibit Planning Scheme Amendment C165egip to the East Gippsland Planning Scheme, in accordance with Section 8A of the Planning and Environment Act 1987;*
- 2. prepares the Planning Scheme Amendment C165egip to the East Gippsland Planning Scheme, generally in accordance with the documentation provided at Attachment 1, subject to Ministerial Authorisation; and*
- 3. places the Planning Scheme Amendment C165egip on public exhibition in accordance with the requirements of Section 19 of the Planning and Environment Act 1987, subject to Ministerial Authorisation.*

**Moved:** Cr Barry Davis

**Seconded:** Cr Arthur Allen

**CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY**

For: Cr Arthur Allen, Cr Jodie Ashworth, Cr Sonia Buckley, Cr Tom Crook,  
Cr Barry Davis, Cr Joanne Eastman, Cr Bernie Farquhar, Cr Ian Trevaskis and  
Cr John White

Against: Nil

Abstained: Nil

**5.1.4 Proposed new Pool and Spa Barrier Compliance Inspections and Fee**

Authorised by General Manager Place and Community

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**Motion**

***That Council:***

- 1. approves the introduction of pool and spa safety barrier compliance inspections as a service offered by the Building Services team; and***
- 2. approves the fee of \$385.00 for pool and spa safety barrier compliance inspections.***

**Moved: Cr Arthur Allen**

**Seconded: Cr Tom Crook**

***CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY***

For: Cr Arthur Allen, Cr Jodie Ashworth, Cr Sonia Buckley, Cr Tom Crook,  
Cr Barry Davis, Cr Joanne Eastman, Cr Bernie Farquhar, Cr Ian Trevaskis and  
Cr John White

Against: Nil

Abstained: Nil

## 5.1.5 Agriculture Sector Advisory Committee Confirmed Minutes 6 February 2025 and New Member Appointment

Authorised by General Manager Place and Community

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### Confidentiality Notice

The information contained in **Confidential Attachment 3** is confidential under section 3(1) of the *Local Government Act 2020* because it relates to: (f) Personal Information, being information which if released would result in the unreasonable disclosure of information about any person or their personal affairs.

Pursuant to section 66(5)(b) of the *Local Government Act 2020*, if released, the information discussed or considered in **Confidential Attachment 3** will disclose personal details of the applicants.

### Procedural Note

Cr Sonia Buckley nominated Cr Barry Davis for the position of Councillor member to the Agriculture Sector Advisory Committee.

Cr Barry Davis accepted the nomination.

### Motion

#### *That Council:*

- 1. receives and notes this report and all attachments pertaining to this report;*
  - 2. considers the recommendations in the Minutes of the Agricultural Sector Advisory Committee meeting held on 6 February 2025, at Attachment 1;*
  - 3. appoints the industry representatives identified in Confidential Attachment 3 to the East Gippsland Shire Council Agriculture Sector Advisory Committee for 2 years until 2027 with the option to extend for a further two-years;*
  - 4. notes that all applicants were assessed as suitable to be appointed;*
  - 5. authorises the Chief Executive Officer or delegate to advise all applicants of the outcome of their expression of interest;*
  - 6. authorises the Mayor or Chief Executive Officer to make a public statement on membership of the East Gippsland Agriculture Sector Advisory Committee;*
  - 7. appoints Cr Barry Davis a Councillor member to the Agriculture Sector Advisory Committee;*
  - 8. approves the changes to the Agricultural Sector Advisory Committee Charter to include Gippsland Agriculture Group as a sitting organisation member, adjust the industry representation to ten and bring the Charter into alignment with other Council Committees; and*
  - 9. resolves that Confidential Attachment 3 and all discussions in relation to it remain confidential until applicants have been advised of the outcome of their expression of interest.*
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**Moved:**        *Cr Ian Trevaskis*  
**Seconded:**   *Cr Sonia Buckley*

***CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY***

For:            Cr Arthur Allen, Cr Jodie Ashworth, Cr Sonia Buckley, Cr Tom Crook,  
                 Cr Barry Davis, Cr Joanne Eastman, Cr Bernie Farquhar, Cr Ian Trevaskis and  
                 Cr John White

Against:      Nil

Abstained: Nil

## **5.2 Business Excellence**

### **5.2.1 Organisational Performance Report July 2024 to March 2025**

Authorised by General Manager Business Excellence

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#### **Attendance**

Cr Sonia Buckley left the Council Chamber at 7.34 pm and returned at 7.36 pm.

#### **Motion**

##### ***That Council***

- 1. endorses the full year forecast changes for operating and capital budgets, as included in the Organisational Performance Report for the period to 31 March 2025, as provided at Attachment 1; and***
- 2. notes that if endorsed, the Organisational Performance Report for the period to 31 March 2025, as provided at Attachment 1 and 2 will be published on Council's website.***

**Moved: Cr Sonia Buckley**

**Seconded: Cr Barry Davis**

**CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY**

For: Cr Arthur Allen, Cr Jodie Ashworth, Cr Sonia Buckley, Cr Tom Crook,  
Cr Barry Davis, Cr Joanne Eastman, Cr Bernie Farquhar, Cr Ian Trevaskis and  
Cr John White

Against: Nil

Abstained: Nil

## 5.2.2 Council Meeting Resolution Register

Authorised by General Manager Business Excellence

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### Confidentiality Notice

The information contained in the confidential attachments is confidential under section 3(1) of the *Local Government Act* 2020 because it relates to: (h) Confidential Meeting Information, being the records of meetings closed to the public under section 66(2)(a).

Pursuant to section 66(5)(b) of the *Local Government Act* 2020, if released, the information discussed or considered in relation to this agenda item could undermine the integrity of Council decision-making processes, disclose sensitive discussions or deliberations, or reveal personal, legal, or commercial information that may prejudice Council or third parties.

### Motion

***That Council receives and notes this report and all attachments pertaining to this report.***

***Moved: Cr Tom Crook***

***Seconded: Cr Sonia Buckley***

***CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY***

For: Cr Arthur Allen, Cr Jodie Ashworth, Cr Sonia Buckley, Cr Tom Crook,  
Cr Barry Davis, Cr Joanne Eastman, Cr Bernie Farquhar, Cr Ian Trevaskis and  
Cr John White

Against: Nil

Abstained: Nil

### 5.2.3

### Victorian Electoral Commission - 2024 Election Report

Authorised by      General Manager Business Excellence

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#### Motion

***That Council receives and notes the report provided by the Victorian Electoral Commission on the East Gippsland Shire Council 2024 local government elections, provided at Attachment 1.***

**Moved:      Cr Tom Crook**

**Seconded:   Cr Arthur Allen**

**CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY**

For:            Cr Arthur Allen, Cr Jodie Ashworth, Cr Sonia Buckley, Cr Tom Crook,  
                 Cr Barry Davis, Cr Joanne Eastman, Cr Bernie Farquhar, Cr Ian Trevaskis and  
                 Cr John White

Against:      Nil

Abstained: Nil

## 6 Urgent Business

### Motion

***That Council admit the Advocacy for Extension of Drought Support Package Eligibility Report as an item of Urgent Business.***

**Moved:** Cr Joanne Eastman

**Seconded:** Cr Tom Crook

**CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY**

For: Cr Arthur Allen, Cr Jodie Ashworth, Cr Sonia Buckley, Cr Tom Crook,  
Cr Barry Davis, Cr Joanne Eastman, Cr Bernie Farquhar, Cr Ian Trevaskis and  
Cr John White

Against: Nil

Abstained: Nil

### **6.1 Advocacy for Extension of Drought Support Package Eligibility**

Authorised by Chief Executive Officer

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#### **Purpose**

This report seeks Council's endorsement to advocate for the urgent inclusion of the drought-affected communities of Benambra, Omeo, and surrounding high-country areas (such as Cobberas and St Helier) in the Victorian Government's drought support package, and to advocate for additional support measures that address both the immediate and long-term needs of local farmers.

#### **Key Points**

East Gippsland Shire Council is urgently requesting the Minister for Agriculture to include Benambra and Omeo in the State's expanded drought support package.

Announced late last week, the \$15.9 million package added 13 new areas eligible for support across the State, however Omeo and Benambra were overlooked despite these areas facing extremely difficult, prolonged dry conditions.

The communities of Omeo, Benambra, and surrounding areas in the high country of East Gippsland are experiencing severe drought conditions. Following a dry spring and summer and a failed autumn break, the region has seen no significant rainfall, extreme frosts damaging emerging crops, critically low dam water levels, exhausted fodder stores, soaring fodder costs and unavailability, and a major destocking.

This is significantly impacting agricultural production, community wellbeing, and local economies. Despite these conditions, they remain excluded from the expanded Victorian Government Drought Support Package.

This exclusion has caused considerable concern within the community. Without immediate support, the impacts on local farm businesses may become irreversible, with cascading effects on households, rural services, and regional economic stability. While many parts of East Gippsland have enjoyed favourable conditions, the diversity of the Shire's climate demands a flexible, region-specific approach.

Council has previously demonstrated its commitment through the 2019 *Gippsland Drought Response Proposal – Looking Ahead*, developed in collaboration with Wellington Shire Council. Building on this foundation, Council now seeks:

- inclusion of the Omeo and Benambra districts in the drought support package; and
- implementation of a broader range of relief initiatives including:
  - subsidised fodder and water transport, especially for high-country regions facing logistical challenges;
  - low- or no-interest loans for small and family-run farms;
  - increased rural mental health and wellbeing services, including outreach counselling;
  - emergency feed and water grants;
  - temporary agistment access on public or underused land;
  - utility concessions on water and electricity bills during declared droughts;
  - on-farm infrastructure funding (tanks, bores, pipelines, etc.);
  - support for regenerative land practices to improve soil moisture and resilience;
  - tailored drought support for small/hobby farms often excluded from traditional programs.

The Drought Support Package provides critical assistance, including infrastructure grants and advisory services, which offer both immediate relief and build long-term resilience for affected farmers. While the statewide *Look Over the Farm Gate* wellbeing initiative is welcomed, our high-country farmers urgently need formal recognition of their drought status and access to immediate, practical assistance to survive this crisis.

Given the severity of the conditions and the clear need for targeted assistance, it is both appropriate and timely for Council to advocate for the inclusion of Omeo, Benambra, and similarly affected high-country areas in the Drought Support Package. Strengthening this advocacy through engagement with peak bodies such as the Municipal Association of Victoria and Rural Councils Victoria will help amplify the concerns of impacted communities and reinforce the urgency of the request.

## **Recommendation**

### ***That Council:***

- 1. resolves to write to the Premier of Victoria, the Victorian Minister for Agriculture, the Minister for Regional Development, and the Minister for Local Government, requesting the extension of the Drought Support Package eligibility to include Omeo, Benambra, and other similarly affected areas within East Gippsland, recognising the significant and ongoing impacts of drought on these areas; and***
- 2. requests the Chief Executive Officer write to the Municipal Association of Victoria and Rural Councils Victoria to seek their support in advocating for this extension.***

## Strategic Alignment

This report has been prepared and aligned with the following strategic objectives set out in the Council Plan 2021-2025:

Strategic Objective 5: 5.2 Strong relationships with government, partners and stakeholders are maintained and strengthened to advocate for the community.

## Climate change

This report is assessed as having no direct impact on climate change.

## Conflicts of Interest

Officers preparing this report have no conflict of interest to declare.

## Attachments

Nil

## Attendance

Cr Tom Crook left the Council Chamber at 7.59 pm and returned at 8.01 pm.

## Motion

### *That Council:*

- 1. resolves to write to the Premier of Victoria, the Victorian Minister for Agriculture, the Minister for Regional Development, and the Minister for Local Government, requesting the extension of the Drought Support Package eligibility to include Omeo, Benambra, and other similarly affected areas within East Gippsland, recognising the significant and ongoing impacts of drought on these areas; and***
- 2. requests the Chief Executive Officer write to the Municipal Association of Victoria and Rural Councils Victoria to seek their support in advocating for this extension.***

**Moved: Cr Sonia Buckley**

**Seconded: Cr Ian Trevaskis**

**CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY**

For: Cr Arthur Allen, Cr Jodie Ashworth, Cr Sonia Buckley, Cr Tom Crook,  
Cr Barry Davis, Cr Joanne Eastman, Cr Bernie Farquhar, Cr Ian Trevaskis and  
Cr John White

Against: Nil

Abstained: Nil

## **7 Confidential Business**

Nil

## **8 Close of Meeting**

Mayor Cr John White declared the Council Meeting closed at 8.11 pm.