Mayoral Minute MM1
Ordinary Meeting

Venue: Administrative Headquarters
       Civic Place
       Katoomba

Meeting: 7.00pm 12 November, 2013
ORDINARY MEETING
12 NOVEMBER 2013

AGENDA

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ITEM NO:  MM1

SUBJECT:  BUSHFIRE RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

FILE NO:  F08049 - 13/181884

Delivery Program Link
Principal Activity: Civic Leadership
Service: Customer Service

Recommendations:

1. That the Council formally recognises the profound impact on those residents significantly impacted by the recent bushfires and on the Blue Mountains community;

2. That the Council reassures the local community that it will continue to play a significant role in supporting the State Government Recovery Program and advocate on their behalf where appropriate and provide ongoing support;

3. That the Council recognises that the recovery phase is the most immediate significant priority facing the City and that there will be a need to reprioritise projects, programs and resources accordingly;

4. That the Council supports the recommendations of the State Recovery Committee for the State Government to fund the holistic approach to ‘make safe’ and private property clean up;

5. That the Council approves and supports the many initiatives outlined in this report to assist residents in the recovery phase and recognises that other policy decisions may need to be made as issues arise going forward and delegates to the Mayor and General Manager the ability to use discretion in considering and resolving such policy decisions, where there is no legal impediment or significant financial impact on the Council operational budget;

6. That the Council formally and sincerely thank the Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner and Blue Mountains District Manager of the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) response team and all Emergency Services Agencies involved including the NSW Police Local Area Commander;

7. That the Council acknowledges and thanks all the community service and charitable organisations that supported and comforted those significantly impacted;

8. That the Council also acknowledges and thanks the local school Principals, Springwood Sports Club, Springwood Golf Club, Lithgow Workers Club and the many others involved in supporting the local community in the response and recovery;

9. That the Council discuss with the organisations involved in the response, the timing of an appropriate event to formally thank them, having regard to the fact that the bushfire season has just commenced.

10. That the Council also thanks the Premier of NSW for declaring a State of Emergency and establishing a State Recovery Program led by Freeman of the City, Phil Koperberg to support the Blue Mountains community and especially those significantly impacted;
11. That the Council thanks all the local authorities who have assisted and offered assistance and support at this time of need and makes particular note of the staff deployment at very short notice from Penrith City Council, Oberon and Warrumbungle Shire Councils to support the recovery effort;

12. That the Council thanks the significant number of staff who have responded and participated in supporting the bushfire response and recovery around the clock and on weekends in support of our community, and acknowledge the need for ongoing support;

13. That the Council acknowledges the supporting role of all Councillors and recognises the efforts of Councillor Luchetti, Deputy Mayor for his support of the Mayor, Councillor Fell for his involvement in the set up and ongoing support for the Disaster Recovery Centre and representing the Mayor on the Recovery Committee, Councillor Van der Kley for attending the RFS Headquarters and keeping everyone informed on a daily basis of the fire situation, Councillors Begg and McGregor for their efforts as RFS active members and Councillor Christie for supporting the social media response; and

14. That the Council advocate on behalf of the community to bring about resolution of the emerging issues outlined in the report.

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**Mayoral Minute**

**Reason for Report**

Firstly, to acknowledge that the Blue Mountains community has been significantly impacted by simultaneous devastating bushfires across the City resulting in several hundred residents losing their homes, or having their homes and property severely damaged, resulting in the NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell declaring a State of Emergency on 20 October 2013.

Secondly, to acknowledge those involved in responding to the bushfires in the extended response phase.

Thirdly, to reassure the community that the Council remains heavily involved in supporting the State led Recovery Program and advocating on their behalf.

Lastly, to reassure the community that the Council, in all its capacities, has transitioned from the bushfire response to bushfire recovery phase as its major priority and continues to look at ways to support those significantly impacted and to simplify the necessary regulatory processes.

**Background**

On October 17 the Blue Mountains and neighbouring local authorities were simultaneously impacted by two significant bushfires in what can only be described as the worst weather conditions possible. These fires were swiftly and bravely attended by the relevant emergency services with the support of other agencies, including Council.

The resulting loss by local community members of 203 homes, and a further 110 or more damaged homes and properties, is almost unprecedented. Fortunately, there was no loss of life and for that we can all be thankful.

The immediate supporting effort that I witnessed from everyone was astonishing. It is difficult to single people and organisations out for fear of leaving someone out. The social welfare and charity agencies were all supporting the immediate situation as it unfolded.
At times like this the responsiveness and resilience of our community is most evident.

The events of that day and those that followed have had a profound impact on the Mountains community. The extent and ferocity of these major simultaneous fires across the Mountains will see a rebuilding of social, economic, private and community infrastructure and environmental aspects of our City that will take many months, if not years to address.

These bushfires triggered the NSW Government to take extraordinary steps to declare concurrently a Section 44 under the *Rural Fires Act 1997*, a Natural Disaster Area and a State of Emergency. The Premier has appointed Freeman of the City, Phil Koperberg as the Blue Mountains Bushfire Recovery Coordinator. The Council acknowledges the bushfire incident response and the recovery program of the State Government and has pledged its full support.

The Council itself has had up to a third of its work force supporting the efforts of the Emergency Services response and thereafter moved into supporting the recovery phase. In matters that are the responsibility of the Council it has taken a leadership role.

**Support to the City and Community**
The City is so fortunate to have magnificent emergency service organisations that respond so effectively. Given the significance of the event the local organisations were ably led and supported and by their state agency headquarters and interstate equivalents. I will be writing to them all to express our gratitude on behalf of the community.

Similarly our great community service and charity organisations responded to provide immediate assistance and comfort to affected residents. In a show of real community spirit our community clubs including the Springwood Sports Club, Springwood Golf Club and the Lithgow Workers opened their doors and facilities to support the response and recovery effort and for that we are all grateful.

I would also like to thank on behalf of the parents and general community the principals and the staff of the schools impacted for their management of a very confronting and difficult situation in keeping their pupils safe.

The Council has also been supported by Councils within and outside the State some of whom have been through there own disasters in relatively recent times. I will be writing to each of them.

**Support to the Mayor and Community**
I would like to recognise the strong support that I have received from fellow Councillors at a time when the Council needed to provide leadership and support for the community. I would like to thank Councillor Chris Van der Kley for attending the RFS Headquarters and briefing me on a daily basis, the Deputy Mayor for backing me up with my commitments and Councillor Mick Fell for taking on the task of representing the Council at the setup phase of the Recovery Centre and representing me on the Recovery Committee. Also thanks to Councillors Michael Begg and Don McGregor who took an active role as RFS members in combating the fires and Councillor Christie for his social media skills.

**Brief overview of Council involvement in the Blue Mountains bushfires and current status**
The Council has:
1. Provided and facilitated the accommodation for the State Recovery Coordinator and his support team at Council’s Springwood Office and the State Agency Disaster Recovery Centre in the Presbyterian Church Hall, Springwood.
2. Provided key senior staff to represent Council on the State Recovery Committee.
3. Provided clear and concise public communication and media management support to me in my role as Mayor, to the community and to staff.
4. Supported State Recovery Coordinator’s Public Meeting at Winmalee on the 25 October with over 400 attending, with staff responding to relevant questions.
5. Developed and implemented a database of fire affected residents, being critical to the recovery program.
6. Supported the State Recovery Committee’s recommendation for a holistic approach to funding and completing the ‘make safe’ and private clean up efforts.
7. Maintained traffic control to significantly affected streets in the interest of residents’ privacy and to minimize public risk.
8. Sent a letter out with the quarterly rate notice to advise rate payers affected by the bushfires of assistance options relative to rate payments and reduction in waste charge for those significantly impacted by the fires.
9. Provided 120 frontline staff to the response phase, with support from Penrith and Oberon Councils, and offers from other Councils.
10. Provided resourcing for the Incident Operations Centre (12 hour rolling shifts).
11. Instituted free green waste disposal over a critical fire threat period for residents.
12. Provided plant and resources to active bushfire response tasks including mechanical repairs.
13. Provided additional waste collection, cleaning and temporary amenities for response and recovery efforts.
14. Provided traffic control in the response and recovery phase.
15. Closed walking tracks and undertook risk management approach to Council assets.
16. Undertaken green waste collection in significantly affected areas.
17. Established as Mayoral Bushfire Relief Fund that is the subject of a separate Mayoral Minute.
18. Met with the Red Cross at their request to discuss a partnering arrangement in conjunction with the Mayoral Bushfire Relief Fund.

The Council is currently:
1. Managing and resourcing the Recovery Centre 7 days a week and providing key support staff and call centre contact facility with grateful assistance from Penrith City Council.
2. Actively participating and supporting the State Recovery Committee and its associated Sub Committees.
3. Providing resources for the development of the plan and supported the implementation of the initial site stabilisation work via state agency task force include Rapid Impact Assessment.
4. Supporting ‘make safe’ works arrangements that have commenced under the direction of the State Recovery Coordinator.
5. Planning the dedicated BMCC rebuild information and approval advisory service and working with State regulatory authorities to streamline rebuild processes.
6. Reviewing fee assistance from Council and other authorities.
7. Implementing Council public domain cleanup works.
8. Ongoing communications and media management.
9. Coordinating bushfire fundraising event approvals.

Emerging Issues at the time of preparing the report
1. The impact on the Council’s Operational Plan 2013-2014 as a result of the level of resources committed to date, and considering ongoing commitments, is yet to be evaluated and reported. Given that the Council accepts that the recovery is our current priority that report will be in the New Year.
2. The priority for the State Recovery Plan to be completed and lines of authority and accountability to be identified along with timing, resourcing and funding.
3. The priority for State government agreement and funding of the holistic approach to the total cleanup of private property and for all the fire generated waste to be taken out of the
City so as not to seriously and detrimentally impact the operations of Council’s waste facilities and impact on the Council financial sustainability.

4. The priority to have as part of the State Recovery Plan a decision to fund and finalise the approach to making safe private swimming pools.

5. The priority need for definition and understanding around costs that are recoverable in a State declared Disaster Recovery Program is unfolding. The Council has been proactive in its response and has not been side tracked in supporting our community at this time. Good recording and accounting measures are in place however it is inevitable that there will be some unforeseen and unbudgeted costs to Council.

6. Council is conducting a forum in collaboration with RFS and others, for owners, builders, architects and designers on the contemporary building requirements, the proposed support mechanisms, streamlined approval processes and the like on the 14 November and this has been publicised.

7. There is a need to ensure that there is a coordinated approach by the various funding relief and charity organisations to maximise the long term benefit for fire affected residents and communities.

8. The need for continued clear public communication to support the community, and media management.

9. Continued coordination of bushfire fundraising event approvals

**Support in the payment of Council rates**

Council has sent out a notice to all ratepayers with the quarterly rate notice advising anyone with difficulties resulting from the bushfires to contact the Council. While the rating legislation does not permit the Council to abandon rates and charges that are levied, the Council is able to provide residents who have been directly affected with assistance in many ways depending on their individual circumstances.

In addition there is a separate Mayoral Minute being considered in regards to the Mayor Fund and method of distribution. While the specifics in regards to the distribution will be left to the Mayoral Relief Fund Advisory Committee the intention is to provide direct relief to those significantly impacted. That financial relief may well be used to offset financial commitments at the discretion of those directly impacted.

**Conclusion**

The Blue Mountains community has been impacted by a catastrophic event that has significantly impacted the lives of many. Given the scale of the impact on the community the State Premier Barry O’Farrell declared a State of Emergency and set up a State Recovery Program and Committee with Phil Koperberg appointed Blue Mountains Bushfire Recovery Coordinator.

Events like this bring a community together and I would like to recognise as best I can all those who have contributed large and small to the response and recovery efforts to date. Yet again a significant disaster has shown us what a responsive, resilient and compassionate community we are but also how all Australians pull together for each other in these times.

The Council has deployed significant resources to support the response and recovery phases of the bushfires. The Council welcomes the Premier’s recognition of the need for a State Recovery Program given the enormity of the task and the resources required.

There is much to do and a long way to go. I would like to assure the community that the Council will be here for the long haul and will continue to advocate strongly on their behalf.