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Councillors say 'no' to water restrictions

AFTER a debate lasting more than 20 minutes, Wentworth Shire Councillors voted 4 to 3 at their February monthly meeting last week not to introduce water restrictions in the Shire.

Debate on the issue was prompted by an Operations and Infrastructure Department report that sought Councillors' advice on the issue following a rash of telephone calls during the recent weeks of soaring summer temperatures.

O&I Director, Peter Turner, said his staff had received "quite a few phone calls" from people confused about water restrictions in the Shire.

"They have obviously been influenced by Lower Murray Water's (LMW) 39 degrees Celsius campaign that has now run for many years." Mr Turner said, "And which we have been party to in the past."

"Generally they wanted to know if Shire residents were subject to the same water use restrictions on days forecast to be 39 degrees or more."

In his report to Council, Mr Turner offered Councillors three alternatives:

Option 1: Council resumes its ties with Lower Murray Water and runs with the same 39-degree water restriction policy as Lower Murray Water. We previously chopped and changed the policy but really achieved little.

Option 2: Council continues the present policy of not having any water restrictions thereby placing the onus

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Water was certainly under the spotlight at the February monthly meeting of Council. It seems this precious resource is becoming as much a talking point in our region as it is around the globe. Councillors considered the pros and cons of water restrictions and found out, as a water supply authority, the true cost annually to run its water supply systems. It is a wake-up call for our Shire that we can no longer take water for granted and we have to come to terms with the fact that this commodity is likely to increase in price as the years pass. See 'The real cost of water revealed' starting on Page 4.

Rates & water charges due

WENTWORTH SHIRE COUNCIL ratepayers are reminded their third rates instalment payment is due at the end of this month.

The deadline for payment is Tuesday, February 28, 2006 at 5pm.

It is also due date for this financial year's first water account.

Both rates and water charges can be paid in person at the Shire's head office at 26-28 Adelaide Street, Wentworth, via the telephone or Internet using BPAY, or by Australia Post Billpay at any post office in the country.

In-person payments will be accepted in cash or by cheque and credit card.

Anyone seeking more information about how to pay their instalment or water charges can contact the Shire's Rates Clerk on 5027 5030.

As per the Local Government Act, 1993, the interest rate on overdue rates has been set at 9 per cent per annum.

Ratepayers having difficulty paying their instalment or water charges for any reason should contact Council's Corporate Services Department on (03) 5027 5027 as soon as possible for more information.

Letter of thanks

THE Shire will forward a letter of thanks to former volunteer Wentworth Aerodrome caretaker Eddie Smith.

Cr Warren Ward suggested at this month's meeting that Mr Smith deserved to be recognised for his sterling work.

Shire alerts residents to Census jobs

THE Australian Bureau of Statistics is offering Wentworth Shire residents a job during the upcoming national Census of Population and Housing.

The Census will be conducted on August 8 this year.

The information gathered by the census process is vital for planning services by Local Government and for understanding communities across the country," Wentworth Shire Deputy Mayor, Cr Mark King, said.

"For the Census to be a success, it is important that the ABS is able to fill more than 10,000 Area Supervisor and Collector field positions in New South Wales alone,"

Councillors reject restrictions

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on ratepayers to use common sense in regards to water usage.

Option 3: Act on information from DNR and introduce restrictions when water levels in service reservoirs such as the Hume Weir and Dartmouth reach critical levels. This option will probably be placed on Council by the water agencies as required.

Cr Brian Wakefield was first to speak, saying he was keen for Council to have a policy on water use and conservation in the Shire.

"I think we need to take a lead role," he said.

Cr Sue Nichols was keen for Council to adopt Option 2 as its preferred stance on water.

She argued that there were too many variables in the LMW model, including weather prediction inaccuracies.

"Too many times they predict 39 and we have a 33 degree day."

She also claimed the Shire could not afford to have everyone watering at the same time, "like 10pm to 2am" because "we have water pressure problems in some areas like Cadell Street".

Cr Warren Ward was unhappy that the water restrictions debate had raised its head again.

"We had a workable set of restrictions in place a couple of years ago but as soon as a very few people complained some

Councillors went ducking for cover and the restrictions were removed.

"Let's keep it simple and go with LMW on this. It will make it easier for people to understand and I think the majority of people would be relatively happy with those guidelines."

Cr Wakefield said he was happy to adopt the LMW restriction regime, agreeing that it was simple and claiming that many people were used to it.



"But I think we, as a Council, in this day and age need to be leading the way," he said.

Cr Sue Nichols was adamant Option 2 was the way to go and she won the support of Cr Bill Wheeldon.

He said the water pressure in areas of the Shire was not sufficient to have everyone watering at the same time and that the elderly found the regime restrictive.

Little old ladies, he said, did not want to be watering late at night and in the early hours of the morning.

When Option 2 was put to the vote Crs Wakefield, Ward and Deputy Mayor, Mark King, voted against the motion, wanting Council to take a leadership role in wise water use and conservation.

However, they were outvoted by Mayor, Margaret Thomson, who said she was confident residents could be relied upon to make their own decisions on water use, and Councillors Jim Macri, Sue Nichols and Bill Wheeldon.

NOTE: Cr Peter Crisp was not present for the vote having left the meeting earlier to fulfil another commitment while Cr Cherie Ribarits was an apology for the entire meeting.

Meetings are held on the third Wednesday of each month from 9am. The public is welcome to attend.

Pride of the roads repair fleet arrives

COUNCIL has taken delivery of its new, state-of-the-art Jetpatcher road maintenance unit.

And during its short time at the Shire, the unit has already proven an effective alternative to the previous, labour-intensive methods of spot maintenance for sealed roads.

Extolling its virtues at the latest Council monthly meeting, Operations & Infrastructure Director, Peter Turner, said two staff members were now undertaking on-the-job training to operate the \$300,000 machine, that can also effectively seal prepared surfaces.

Mr Turner said the truck would result in substantial labour-savings, but was quick to point out that this did not mean job losses.

"Some of the road gang will be reassigned while the overall outdoor staff will be rationalised through natural attrition.

The Jetpatcher was part of Council's major equipment purchases for 2004/2005 & 2005/2006. The remainder of the 2005/2006 budget was spent on items including two light trucks with purpose-built bodies and a plant trailer for smaller items of Council's earthmoving equipment

The trucks, due next month, will be assigned to the signs and line marking gang and the second for the civil works gang.

One truck will include a tailgate lifter for items including the line-marking machine and the other will include a light crane for lifting items such as concrete pipe and lids, Mr Turner said.

"The purchase of the plant trailer will free up the larger float and allow it to be better utilised by the major works gang."

Through careful equipment purchases this year Council has been able to achieve savings against budget estimates.

"This has been achieved by rationalisation of our purchase program and higher than anticipated trade-in prices due to the exceptional condition of Council's plant," Mr Turner said.

The plant budget was reduced from \$600,000 to \$400,000 this financial year as Council strived to reduce the plant

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Shire leads charge to save region's horticulture sector

WENTWORTH Shire Council is "leading the charge" to save its struggling horticulturalists.

That's the assurance from Mayor, Cr Margaret Thomson, who told her fellow Councillors, senior staff and the public gallery at last week's February monthly meeting that the Shire had joined forces with Mildura Rural City Council to commission a study into the plight of the region's struggling primary producers in the wine and table grape industries as well as dried fruit and the citrus sectors.

"This is a real chance to get together the

Amendments made to pets Act

WENTWORTH Shire Council has moved to alert pet owners in the municipality to recent changes to the Companion Animals Act.

Wentworth Shire Mayor, Cr Margaret Thomson, said the Shire was committed to working with pet owners to understand the changes.

In a recent letter to the Shire, the Department of Local Government said it expected many positive benefits from the amended Act.

Mayor Thomson said residents owning restricted dogs under the Act, or dogs that had been declared dangerous under the Act, should make themselves familiar with the changes as soon as possible.

"Many of the Act's new provisions affect dogs in these categories," she said.

The Act has also increased the fees payable for the registration of pets.

While the compulsory micro chipping fee remains at \$25, a non de-sexed animal now costs \$150 to register, up from \$100.

The charge for a de-sexed animal has risen from \$35 to \$40 with the same applying to recognised breeders.

The pensioner registration charge for a de-sexed pet remains at \$15.

All are one-off fees. Both procedures are for life.

More information: 5027 5027.

solid facts and figures we need to lobby the Government for assistance for our residents as well as those in the Mildura Rural City area," the Mayor said.

The study will examine the current situation facing each major sector of irrigated horticulture and through this analyse the long-term viability of the region's economy.

The study will also include:

- Projections modelling the position of irrigated horticulture in the future.
- A report that will enable the Councils and industry groups to back up funding applications for support, such as Exceptional Circumstances funding.

Mayor Thomson said both Councils were taking a major leadership role by initiating the study.

The Mayor said the current downturn was "a problem for the community, not just producers".

"The immediate priority is ensuring this research is thorough and can be used to build an undeniable case for Government assistance," she said.

"It's a very positive move."

The study will be undertaken by Bendigo-based RMCG and include an industry and community forum to develop responses to the challenges horticulture faces, a final report and other material that could be used to engage all levels of government.

"We see it as the most practical way we can help," the Mayor said.

"We are not in the habit of tinkering with the industries themselves, but rather as a partner to lobby government.

"This is being done as a matter of urgency."

Mayor Thomson said the cost of the study would be borne by both Councils and their respective contribution would be based on population.

"I think that is fair."

There were no arguments from the Chamber, with all Councillors agreeing that something needed to be done quickly to save the region's ailing horticulturalists and ultimately the region's economy.



Marking the 50th anniversary of the infamous 1956 floods!

Dust off the old tractor...

TRACTORS of all shapes, sizes and colours will take centre stage in Wentworth this July to mark the 50th anniversary of the infamous 1956 floods.

The weekend set aside for the event is Saturday, July 22 and Sunday, July 23 and it will be both a celebration and commemoration.

The weekend will commemorate the infamous 1956 floods that came very close to washing away the township and celebrate the humble tractor that underpinned the Herculean volunteer effort to save the town.

The Great Wentworth Tractor Rally will be a feature of a comprehensive schedule of events now being organised to mark the occasion under the umbrella of "The Festival of the Flood".

It will be a weekend of vintage vehicles including cars, trucks, motorcycles, boats and stationary engines as well as more modern kit including cars and motorcycles.

Once again the tractor rally will include a Grand Parade. To start in Buronga, the parade will pass through the horticultural areas of Boeill Creek, Coomealla and Curlwaa before heading for Wentworth, a distance of about 30 kilometres.

Vintage vehicles are expected to pack out the Wentworth township, including the historic port area while there will be several flood-related displays and exhibitions throughout the town.

Event co-ordinator, Louise Funnell, said now was a good time for people to diary date the weekend and begin to prepare their vehicles.

"It promises to be a great weekend of vintage vehicles with a large helping of hospitality," she said.

Expressions of interest can be made by phone on (03) 5027 5040; by fax on (03) 5027 2199 or email:

fergie@wentworth.nsw.gov.au.

For more information contact Louise Funnell on mobile 0429 937 450.

The real cost of water revealed

THE true cost of building, maintaining and running the Shire's water supply and sewerage systems came to light during Councils' latest monthly meeting.

Spurred by the assertion of Cr Jim Macri that there was a problem with the lack of raw (unfiltered) water pressure in some areas of the Shire, Director Operations and Infrastructure, Peter Turner, outlined the pressures on Council when it came to maintaining the ageing system.

Cr Macri claimed at Council's February monthly meeting that he had received numerous complaints about the lack of pressure that was so bad, in some areas, he claimed that it would take "five minutes to fill a thermos".

To add weight to his case he outlined the case of a resident in Churchill Street, Buronga, who had complained of water pressure that was unable to run his pop-up watering system*.

Cr Macri said now that residents were being asked to pay for both their filtered and unfiltered supplies, they had a right to expect a decent service in terms of both volume and pressure.

Mr Turner agreed, but said his department had received very few complaints in recent weeks.

"My department has received no complaints during the past six weeks, despite increased water use due to the hot weather," he said.

Welcoming residents to contact his department with their water concerns, Mr Turner took the opportunity to explain that the raw water pressure was generally based on the water level in the Shire's water towers.

"The more water in the towers, the higher the pressure," he said.

"We aim to keep them about 95 per cent full at all times, however, sometimes this becomes impossible if the demand exceeds the ability of our pumps," he said.

"However, I should point out this is very rare and they seldom drop below 75 per cent capacity."

Asked by Cr Bill Wheeldon about the continuing frustration of residents in Cadell Street, Wentworth, annoyed by a lack of supply pressure, Mr Turner replied that it was the main in Cadell Street that was the problem.

"The main is too small," he said. "It is a 100mm main that runs for about four kilometres."

"There is a fix. We replace the main. However, this is a job we simply do not have the money to do at this time."

He explained that was one of the reasons Council was now trying to run both its water systems and its sewerage system on a full cost recovery basis.

"It is also one of the reasons that we needed to introduce a 'user pays' system for raw water. People are paying so that we maintain the system we have and we plan, in the future, to accumulate funds to undertake the kind of project that will fix Cadell Street.

"It costs this Council \$1.5million a year to supply (raw/filtered/both) water to our townships.

"And another \$750,000 for sewerage. That's a grand total of \$2.25million.

"That's a lot of money to recoup. The plan is for 'user pays' to provide us with the funding to both maintain our present system and upgrade it in the future.

"All the monies raised by water and sewerage charges are required by Government regulation to be put back into those systems.

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Pride of the roads repair fleet arrives

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replacement costs.

But Mr Turner sounded a warning.

"The reduction has reduced our ability to replace major plant at the most advantageous time and this has the potential to impact on the standard of our plant and increase both maintenance and changeover costs.

"It should be recognised that Council's plant is fully utilised and a major source of income.

"We are currently evaluating the plant and are seeking advice from other local government bodies on a structured replacement program so that we can provide Councillors with best practice advice and the costs involved in implementing such a policy."

Lobby for a Lower Darling Road upgrade

A GROUP calling itself the Lower Darling Road Users Group has made a presentation to Council to substantiate the need for the future development and maintenance of the unsealed portion of the group's namesake road.

The submission was prepared to lobby all three tiers of Government and Garston Station's Tony Douglas represented the group February's Council meeting.

Councillors were told "the economic development on the Low Darling Road has been substantial over the past ten years and is set to continue".

"This has meant a significant increase in traffic on the road, particularly heavy vehicle traffic due to the ongoing development," the submission says.

"This has meant the road is continually in a sub-standard condition.

"The road has also been recently been subjected to significant mining traffic which continues."

The group claimed the road was presently full of exposed rocks and large potholes and was causing excessive wear and tear on the vehicles of residents living in the area and had raised concerns about safety.

"A school bus route was initiated in 2005 (starts at Ron Gol Station) and undertakes two trips each morning and afternoon to cater for both primary and high school students," the submission states.

"The bus driver has logged hazardous driving conditions a number of times in the past year and all residents feel the road is in as poor as it's ever been, despite the improvement works the Shire has undertaken including the removal of grids and building up low-lying areas.

"The Wentworth Shire undertakes grading of the road two times a year, however it is usually just a matter of weeks before it is in a poor state again."

The following summarised results were provide by the group to justify

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Changes to Act cause for gravel extraction doubt

RECENT amendments to the NSW Native Vegetation Act have the potential to severely limit Council's ability to open and operate new gravel pits, used to provide the raw materials for repairs to the municipality's rural unsealed roads network.

Councillors were told at their latest monthly meeting an amendment to the NSW Native Vegetation Act had

"Extracting gravel locally reduces costs at least ten fold and allows the construction of more roads with the funding available to us."

There was little doubt all Councillors could see the possible ramifications of the Act changes.

In a nutshell, Council would have to buy gravel from external sources and transport it to the work site thereby chewing through its rural roads budget in

A Shire maintenance crew loads gravel for road maintenance



dramatically altered the conditions governing the consent for the clearing of native vegetation.

"This has a direct impact on Council's ability to obtain quarry licenses as in most cases vegetation clearing (although minimal) is necessary when obtaining gravel for constructing road pavement," Director Operations and Infrastructure, Peter Turner, wrote in his report.

"Gravel is vital to construct a suitable pavement for a sealed or unsealed road and although Council attempts to source gravel from already cleared areas because of the positive environmental and cost impacts, gravel deposits are becoming scarce throughout our region.

"Council has always utilised local material by extracting gravel itself as close to the work site as possible to avoid the additional expense involved in purchasing gravel from alternate sources and transporting it long distances.

short order and leaving the Shire's rural residents with a greatly degraded road network.

In short, Mr Turner explained, the new legislation requires landowners/occupiers to comply with a system of offsets.

"This involves locking away parcels of complementary land at a rate of at least 1: 20. Therefore a proposed 4 hectare gravel pit requiring clearing and would need at least 80 hectares of untouched, native vegetation to be set aside indefinitely.

"This poses an immediate problem. Council does not possess land that can be utilised for this purpose.

And, Council cannot expect landholders to voluntarily lock away large parcels of their land for the sake of extracting gravel for the maintenance of our roads.

"Although there are other clearing avenues available to landowners/

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The cost of water

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“So every time a ratepayer makes a payment, they can be assured the money will be used to ensure they have water on tap and their sewage disappears as it should.”

(* Council has since rectified the Churchill Street problem. On inspection Shire staff had found the complainant had removed the filter sieve from the inlet side of his water meter and this had resulted in a severe blockage further along the line.)

It should be noted the Shire’s raw water system now includes filters at each of the pump out stations and blockages of the meter sieve have been substantially reduced. It was found that problems with the sieves in the past were directly related to the amount of water residents were using. Blockages were generally occurring when residents were using vast amounts of water.

The sieve is readily cleaned and if residents have any questions regarding the procedure they should contact the Operations and Infrastructure Department on 5027 5040.

Gravel doubts

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occupiers, Council is exempt from all of these as they are related to farming practices only. It is therefore obvious that Councils in the Western region have, in relation to the amendments to the NSW Native Vegetation Act, been overlooked.

“As a consequence of these amendments, we are currently unable to apply for vegetation clearing consent, which ultimately prohibits Council from clearing vegetation for the purposes of constructing a quarry.

“This has left an unfair and impossible financial burden on Council. We simply do not have the opportunities for funding to counter these enormously inflated extra costs.”

Deputy Mayor, Cr Mark King, who also sits as chair on the Lower Murray Darling Catchment Management Authority, said he was confident a solution could be found.

“There are nearly always ways and means around things,” he said.

His fellow Councillors certainly hope so.

Lobby group in drive for a Lower Darling Road upgrade

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the road being prioritised for an ongoing upgrade:

- The permanent population of the Low Darling Road is 58 persons. 21 of these people are aged less than 18 years. Projected population growth is two per cent or two persons per year.

- Fourteen full time employees live on the properties providing an employment benefit of \$455,000. Seasonal employment currently provides work for 650 people during the year. In excess of \$1 million is paid to these workers per year. The majority of these seasonal workers travel to and from work each day although at peak pruning, vine training and harvesting times, a number of small buses transport workers to the largest wine grape properties.

- During the past five years (2000 - 2005) private landowners have planted 267 hectares (1995-2000 - 246 hectares) of horticulture at an investment cost of \$6 million dollars. Anticipated plantings over the next five years are 75 hectares at an investment cost of \$1.5 million. Crops include premium wine grapes, citrus and almonds.

Mr Douglas said the group was looking for several things from Council:

- Communication from the Shire to the Low Darling Users Group as to the annual plan to keep the road in an acceptable condition.

- Road counts to confirm traffic numbers.

- A strategy to be put in place to secure extra funding from the RTA and State Government to ensure the safety of the bus run.

- A long-term plan for further bitumen as the current population, development and road usage warrants this.

- Involvement in a solution. “Our group can lobby with the Shire as necessary,” he said.

Mayor, Margaret Thomson, thanked Mr Douglas on behalf of her fellow Councillors for the effort the group

had put into the submission and promised it would “certainly be taken into consideration” when Council sets its road works priority list for the 2006/2007 financial year.

However, the Mayor also pointed out the limited funding Council had at its disposal for the upkeep of the Shire’s vast unsealed rural roads network.

“We will certainly be chasing more funding for this area of our ongoing roads program,” she said.

The Mayor also said there were other avenues for funding that could be explored and said these could also be looked at in time for the budget.

Shire contacts

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email: council@wentworth.nsw.gov.au

Libraries

Wentworth: (03) 5027 5060

Dareton: (03) 5027 4258

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mobile: 0428 488 862

For matters concerning stray stock
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5027 5050

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