Rural City of Wangaratta

Community Engagement Strategy

June 2008

Our Vision, Mission and Values

Our Vision

The Rural City of Wangaratta, a vibrant, diverse and secure place to live

Our Mission

We will provide the leadership necessary to ….

- Ensure the long term financial security of the Council
- Deliver quality Council services
- Facilitate a growing and sustainable economy and employment base
- Promote a cohesive, dynamic Rural City of Wangaratta community
- Maintain open communication and consultation
- Preserve and enhance our heritage and environment

Our Values

Excellence:

We aim to achieve the highest standard in everything we do.

Trust:

We have confidence in the ability and commitment of others and ourselves

Respect:

We see all people as being valuable acknowledging individuality, opinions, needs and abilities.

Equity:

We treat all colleagues and customers fairly and consistently. We promote equality and ensure resources are allocated according to need.

Enjoyment:

We promote a harmonious and productive workplace by celebrating achievement in an environment where everyone feels they belong

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Council is committed to working in partnership with the residents and ratepayers of the Rural City of Wangaratta to achieve our shared vision for the future. Working together can only be achieved through Council proactively engaging the community.

The Rural City of Wangaratta Community Engagement Strategy was developed following a consultation process to determine the community's expectations. It builds on Council's existing approaches to community engagement and provides a consistent approach which will be applied across the organisation.

The Strategy's purpose is to:

- Maximise the benefits of community engagement for Council, the community and other levels of government or community agencies;
- Provide a consistent approach that is clearly understood by all parties; and
- Support Council to engage with a wider cross section of the community, including groups that are traditionally harder to reach.

A continuum identifying four levels of community engagement, each of increasing complexity, has been developed. These are:

- providing information to the community;
- consulting with the community;
- involving the community in decisions or working in partnership; and
- empowering the community to make its own decisions.

Undertaking the community engagement process consists of three steps:

STEP 1 – PLANNING

- Identify desired outcome and scope of project
- Identify impact on community/residents
- Identify appropriate level of engagement
- Identify stakeholders (internal & external) and develop plan to engage them

STEP 2 – IMPLEMENTATION

- Identify methods to inform / consult / involve / empower (as appropriate).
- Implement plan and monitor process

STEP 3 - EVALUATION

- Evaluate the process and identify future improvements.
- Provide feedback to stakeholders

A number of factors have been identified as crucial to successful community engagement. These include:

- Good communication (both internal and external);

- Identifying stakeholders (including those participating, those who should be informed and those who can influence the outcome);

- Identifying the appropriate level of engagement and managing the process accordingly;

- Allowing adequate resources, including time, to allow the community to participate meaningfully;

- Trying more creative methods of engagement to involve groups who have not traditionally been involved; and

- Providing feedback on the outcome of the engagement and any decisions made.

Staff will use this Community Engagement Strategy in conjunction with a toolkit which will support them in its implementation. Council's Communication Strategy and policies are also key reference documents. In addition, key staff will receive training in community engagement and will act as mentors to other staff within the organisation.

2.0 Background

Local government is the level of government closest to the people and day to day life. This means, on one hand, that residents have a sense of ownership of their local council and, on the other, that decisions made by councils have a significant impact on individuals and communities. Therefore, it has always been important for Council to inform, consult with and involve residents, ratepayers and other stakeholders on issues.

Council's role is to provide leadership and plan and manage on behalf of the community, ensuring all interests are represented. The expectations and demands placed on local government continue to develop and change. One of the developing trends of the past few years has been an increased emphasis on community engagement. This is based on:

- Recognition that strong and resilient communities have the capacity to generate local solutions to problems;
- Renewed interest in local democracy and people having a say in decisions which effect them;
- An expressed desire that individuals and families wish to experience a sense of community and belonging in day to day life;
- Recognition of the benefits of a sense of community connectedness for individual wellbeing; and
- The growing recognition that governments do not have the resources to provide everything their constituents aspire to.

These changes have been mirrored by an increasing recognition of the value of harnessing community resources within other levels of government. This is demonstrated by policy changes such as:

- Local accountability and community consultation have been identified as Best Value principles which local government has been expected to report on;
- Emphasis on community building and the development of local partnerships as a key component of many State and Federal Government funding programs; and
- Moves toward the integration of community and Council planning following the model implemented in the UK and New Zealand.

The Rural City of Wangaratta has been moving towards a greater level of community engagement through a range of activities.

- Involvement in the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) Lighthouse Project, Community and Social Planners Network (CASPN) and LGPro Corporate Planning Network;
- Commencement of local area consultations, such as the Rural Towns Development Program;
- Support of local area planning initiatives in some rural communities; and
- Partnerships with State Government departments around specific community consultations.

Between August and November 2007, Council commissioned SuccessWorks to consult with the community, Councillors and staff about their needs and aspirations regarding community engagement. The research undertaken has informed this Strategy.

A Community Engagement Toolkit, Communication Strategy and Public Participation Workbook have also been developed. These documents support the implementation of Council's Community Engagement Strategy.

3.0 Aim, Purpose, Objectives And Benefits

3.1 Aim

Contribute to the development of a strong ongoing relationship between Council and the community and foster opportunities for local people to take an active role in planning for their current and future needs.

3.2 Purpose

The purpose of this Community Engagement Strategy is to:

- Maximise the benefits of community engagement for Council, the community and other levels of government or agencies;

- Provide a consistent approach that is clearly understood by all parties; and

- Support Council to engage with a wider cross section of the community, including groups that are traditionally harder to reach.

3.3 Objectives

Specific objectives of the Strategy are to:

- Ensure a consistent and planned approach to community engagement across the organisation which is of an agreed standard;

- Provide the tools to support Council representatives to achieve desired outcomes when engaging with the community on Council's behalf:

- Inform the community about Council and how to work with Council to achieve the desired outcomes;

- Support the use of creative approaches which are intended to engage people who have not be engaged by more traditional approaches; and
- Evaluate community engagement activities on an ongoing basis to facilitate ongoing improvement and strengthen the partnership between Council and the community.

3.4   The Benefits of Successful Community Engagement

The benefits of successful community engagement for Council and the community are:

- Better outcomes can be achieved when the people impacted on by a decision are involved in making that decision;

- A more consistent approach to community engagement will result in better communication and understanding between Council and the community;

- Community engagement can foster a sense of empowerment and ownership within the community that encourages and supports self help; and

- Integrating local knowledge into decision making can lead to better use of resources.

4.0 Definitions

4.1   Community Engagement

For the purpose of this Strategy, community engagement is defined as:

"the mutual communication and deliberation that occurs between government and citizens"
(Cavaye 2004)

Community engagement is characterised by the provision of a range of opportunities which allow members of the community to take part in planning and decision making by Council or other levels of government or community agencies.

The process of community engagement implies that the community's contribution has the potential to influence the decision. The research undertaken by Council's consultants (SuccessWorks, 2007) indicates that the Rural City community sees engagement as a two way process. As well as the community engaging in Council decisions or activities, community respondents identified a need for Council to engage with them on issues important to them.

4.2   Community

There are literally hundreds of definitions of community.

A defining feature is that a community is marked by a characteristic which its members see as binding them together and which they see as distinguishing them from other groups. This understanding of community emphasizes that a community defines itself. It may or may not be seen as a community by others. This implies that:

- Within the wider Rural City of Wangaratta are a number of smaller communities;

- Residents may belong to a number of different communities and relate to them in different ways at different times (e.g. communities based on locality, culture, work role or hobby); and

- Council cannot always assume that an identified group of people see themselves as a community.

The types of community which local government is most likely to work with are based on:

- Locality;

- Culture (e.g. religion, ethnicity);

- Interest (e.g. work association, shared need or hobby)

5.0 Features Of Successful Community Engagement

The key principle underpinning community engagement is that:-

People have a say in decisions that affect their lives.

Council intends to:

- Work collaboratively with the community;

- Recognise and acknowledge the breadth of knowledge within the community;

- Involve people as early as possible in the planning of a community engagement process so that they can decide how they will participate;

- Strive to ensure the community engagement process meets the needs of all participants and communicates their views;

- Listen to the community and demonstrate it is listening;

- Ensure the purpose of any community engagement activity is clearly understood by all parties;

- Communicate with the community in plain English;

- Actively attempt to involve everyone who may have an interest in the decision;

- Provide the community with the information needed to make a decision, including any constraints that exist;

- Ensure that, when seeking community opinion on a decision, consultation will take place before a decision is made and contributions from the community will inform decision making;

- Inform the community of the outcome of the engagement process

- Actively work within the community to build community strengths; and

- Ensure staff who work with the community have the skills they need.

6.0 Communication

Effective communication is integral to successful community engagement.

Effective communication is a two way process that generates a mutual understanding between the communicator and the recipient(s). It involves providing relevant, timely and accessible information to a clearly identified audience and listening to the opinions and information of others.

Council's Communication Strategy and Community Engagement Strategy share many common features. The Communication Strategy is used in conjunction with this document.

6.1 Features of Good Communication

Council intends to ensure that communication is:

- Clear and understood by all;
- Inclusive and timely;
- Open, honest and based on mutual respect.

7.0 Scope And Level Of Community Engagement

7.1 Scope of this Strategy

Councillors and staff engage with the community every day as part of Council's ongoing operations. This interaction builds Council's relationship with the community and the Features of Successful Community Engagement (listed in Section 4.0). together with Council's Values, must be part of the way we interact with the community at all times.

Some of this engagement is informal, other activities are planned. The approach listed in this Strategy focuses on planned engagement activities and, most specifically, those that involve decision making around a particular issue, policy or plan.
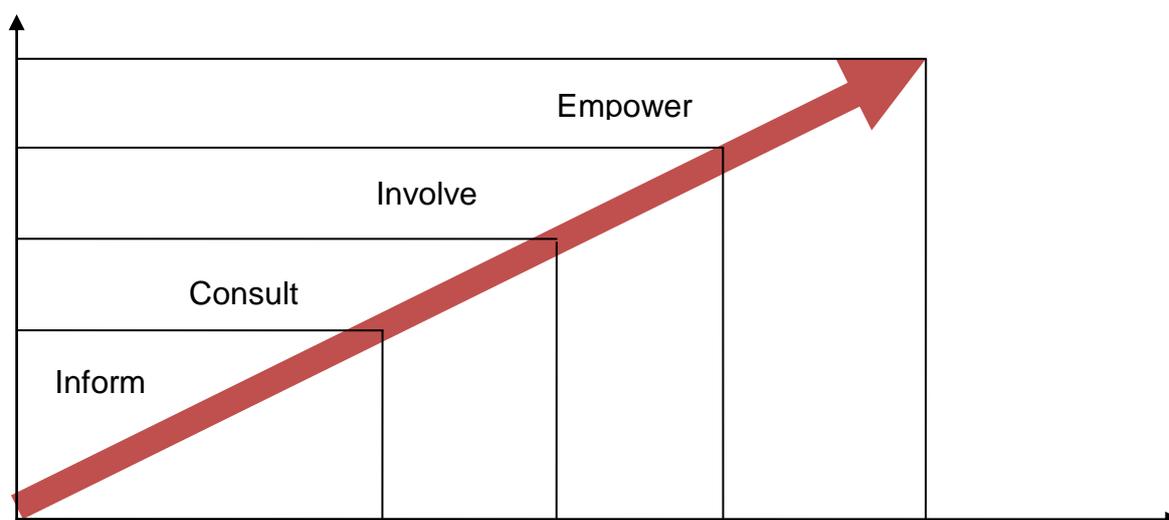
7.2 Level of engagement

The four levels of engagement which this Strategy focuses on are depicted on a continuum from:

Inform	Consult	Involve	Empower
Ensuring residents, ratepayers and other organisations are well informed	Consulting with the community	Involving the community in decisions or working in partnership with the community on specific issues	Empowering the community to make its own decisions

7.3 Using the Continuum

The engagement process is a continuum. Engagement at any level will always start with providing information (*Inform*) and then move through consultation (*Consult*)
stopping at the level of engagement planned.

At any time Council engages with the community, it is essential that all involved (Council representatives and the community) understand clearly the level of engagement proposed, what we hope to achieve and any constraints. The process must be managed accordingly. This will minimise the possibility for misunderstanding.
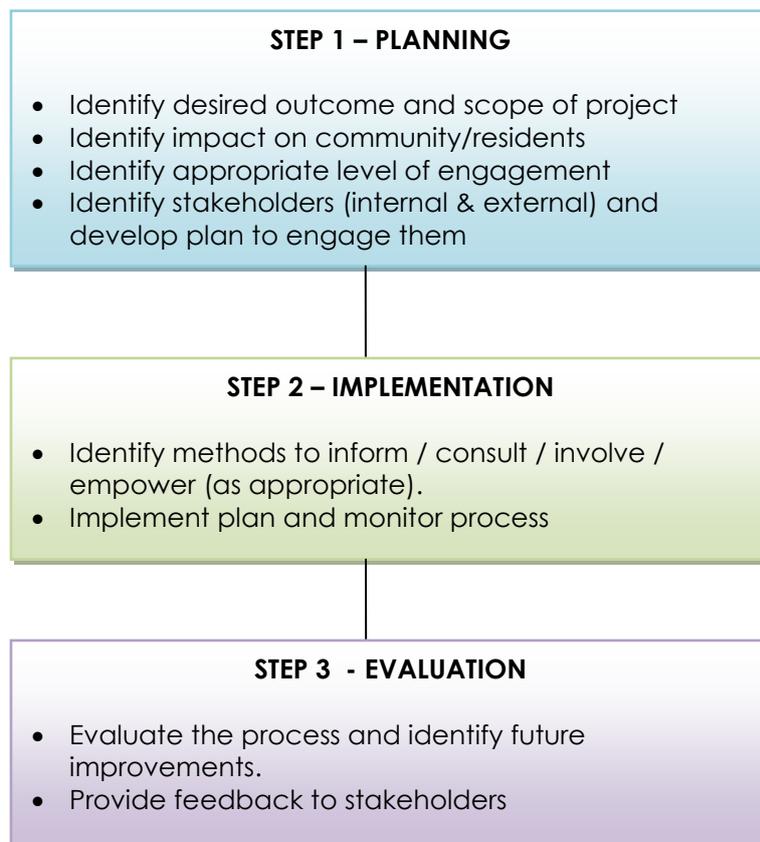
While the level of engagement is planned at the outset, ongoing monitoring is vital during implementation so that both opportunities to develop stronger partnerships with the community or problems are identified and acted on.

8.0 The Community Engagement Process

This community engagement process was developed to:

- ensure a consistent and effective approach across the organisation; and
- increase opportunities for the community to be involved in decisions which affect them.

The process has three components. These are:

STEP 1 – PLANNING

- Identify desired outcome and scope of project
- Identify impact on community/residents
- Identify appropriate level of engagement
- Identify stakeholders (internal & external) and develop plan to engage them

STEP 2 – IMPLEMENTATION

- Identify methods to inform / consult / involve / empower (as appropriate).
- Implement plan and monitor process

STEP 3 - EVALUATION

- Evaluate the process and identify future improvements.
- Provide feedback to stakeholders

8.1 Planning

Planning the process is crucial to its success in achieving the outcomes Council seeks. While planning takes time, it also reduces the potential for issues to arise.

Planning includes:

- ***Identifying the desired outcome***

- ***Scoping the project.***

The scope of the project will help establish the methods of engagement to be used and the resources to be allocated to the process.

The scope is largely determined by the scale of the impact that the decision and/or proposed activity will have on the community. This could range through:

- ❖ an individual site (impacting on neighbours);
- ❖ a township plan (impacting on residents, local business, visitors); or
- ❖ a major development (impacting throughout the municipality).

- *Identifying the impact on the community and residents and developing strategies to address any issues*

- *Identifying stakeholders.*

It is **vital** to ensure that the all stakeholders are identified. This is a good investment in time as failure to do so is often associated with ongoing issues. Identification includes:

- ❖ both internal and external stakeholders;
- ❖ those directly involved or impacted on;
- ❖ those less directly involved, but who need to be informed;
- ❖ those with capacity to support the project (e.g. a funding body); and
- ❖ those with capacity to block the project.

Once their relationship to the project is identified, an engagement plan for each group of stakeholders can be developed. The different groups are likely to require different levels and methods of engagement.

- *Identifying the level of engagement.* The appropriate level of engagement (inform, consult, involve or empower) will be determined by the desired outcome and the decision making process that will be followed. While Council intends to encourage the community to have greater involvement in decisions affecting them, there are many situations where Council is required to make the final decision and informing may be the only option.

- *Evaluation.*

It is important to determine how the process will be evaluated in order to:

- ❖ Determine whether the community engagement process has been adequate; and
- ❖ Identify future improvements to the process.

- *General Issues*

Other issues to be addressed to ensure a positive relationship with the community include:

1.   Check if other engagement activities are planned with the identified groups of stakeholders and coordinate activities with the other organisers so that demands on the community are minimised.

2.   Allow adequate time to:

> ❖   promote activities;
> ❖   allow people to arrange their commitments and become involved; and
> ❖   receive and consider community feedback.

8.2   Implementation

During the implementation process, there can be unanticipated pressure to take different directions. At all times, the process must be managed in a way that ensures all activities are consistent with the level of engagement identified and the outcome desired.

Whatever level of engagement you plan to use forms part of the continuum and starts with .providing information (*inform).*

Therefore:

> ❖   to consult you must also inform
> ❖   to involve you must also inform and consult
> ❖   to empower you must also inform, consult and involve

- *Methods*

Identify the methods appropriate to the scope and level of engagement identified and to the stakeholders. More creative approaches may be used to attract those not always engaged by standard methods.

- *Providing information*

At the outset of the process, all stakeholders need to be informed of

> ❖   the nature of the project;
> ❖   the level of engagement intended;
> ❖   how decisions will be and who makes them;
> ❖   what is and is not negotiable; and
> ❖   when and how feedback will be given.

- *Monitoring*

The process requires ongoing monitoring and review to:

> ❖   ensure the desired outcome is being achieved;
> ❖   identify whether the process has been adequate;

- ❖ identify unanticipated issues arising and any action required;
- ❖ identify whether methods require adjustment;
- ❖ identify whether opportunities to work more closely with the community exist; and
- ❖ recommend change if required.

- • ***Identifying and addressing issues:***

If the issue is complex or contentious, a simple issues paper or statement of intent may need to be developed.

- • ***General issues***

Other issues to be addressed include:

1. Ensure adequate resources including mail outs, meeting spaces, catering.

2. Ensure adequate staff resources to manage any public processes.

8.3 Evaluation

The evaluation process is vital to determine whether:

- • the engagement has been adequate to achieve the desired outcome;.

- • additional activities are required (particularly if engagement has been limited and the impact is significant);

- • things learnt have been documented so that future processes can be improved;

- • feedback has been provided so that stakeholders are aware of the outcome and how and why any decision was made; and.

- • any issues raised by the community have been referred to the appropriate staff to be addressed.

- • possible improvements to future processes have been referred to the Community Engagement Internal Working Group

8.4 Other Resources

Staff will use this Community Engagement Strategy in conjunction with the Community Engagement Toolkit which has been developed to support them in its implementation. Council's Communication Strategy and policies are also key reference documents. In addition, key staff will receive training in community engagement and will act as mentors to other staff within the organisation.