

SUBMISSION to the REVIEW OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT

By Beth Hewitt,

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Until 18 months ago, I, like most of my fellow ratepayers, had little interest in Local Government beyond how much the rates would go up each year and when was bulk collection happening.

That was until I received a phone call from a fellow neighbour about a proposed block of flats in Chipala Court Edgewater. We all knew that the Council had told us, back in 2010, there was to be a change of zoning from R20 to R30 but how could a block of flats be built in a quiet cul de sac? The truth is that our council voted to not inform us of the substantial change they undertook through our Local Planning Scheme, changing the zoning from R20 to R20/R40, but the developers knew and had pounced on our area to be “densified”.

Suddenly I, and many of my neighbours, were starting well behind in the battle to save our suburbs from poorly designed, poor quality “social” housing schemes. During those battles I have learned a lot about what is the reality of what is happening in Local Government, and I am appalled at the state of things, in what is clearly a broken system, where CEO’s are demi gods and councillors who try to do the right thing by the ratepayers are shot down, where the real power lies not in the Elected Members but in WALGA, an organisation that works more for its own purposes than for the community.

Here are some suggestions for an improved system

1. Elections need to be compulsory to all voters.

The current system allows for much abuse by interest groups to gain power. At the last election of the City in which I live, a former state minister tapped his mate, the current Mayor, on the shoulder and told him his time as Mayor had come to the end and over a cup of coffee at the local Dome café (with photos taken and published by the local newspaper) the two set about organising a smooth transition of power. The sheer arrogance of the now Mayor in “knowing” he would win the Mayoral election race shows the power of the interest groups in non-compulsory elections. The Mayor has the backing of a political party; however he also has the backing of many members of the mega church, of which he is also a director. With so few ratepayers taking part in the election, a few hundred votes saw him elected. By ensuring all ratepayers participate in the elections you will limit the special interest groups from gaining a position of power that exceeds the weight of the community’s wishes.

2. Voting needs to be preferential.

There are many candidates in a local government election but with a first past the post system you do not end up with the candidate that is most preferred by the electors. The preferential system works well at both State & Federal level to provide the best outcome and should be used at Local Government level too. During the last Mayoral Election, the combined votes for other candidates outnumbered the mayors votes and if they had been a preferential system the outcome may have been harder for him to determine his victory weeks ahead of the vote, and with so much arrogance.

- 3. All Elected Members should be up for a vote at the same time.** Under the current laws only half the Elected Members come up for election every 4 years, with the remaining Elected Members still have 2 years to run on their terms. This creates an opportunity for factions, cliques and cabals to be created. The Mayor only has to keep half the elected Members on his team and using his casting vote will get to follow his own agenda. Those members, not part of the cabal, are relegated to being ineffective and they learn very quickly that it doesn't matter what they think or how they vote as the decision is made well in advance of the meeting.

By ensuring all elected members can be dismissed at any election, or re-elected, the community will have a greater chance that the wishes of the community will be carried out.
- 4. Maximum terms should be for no more than 8 years.** I strongly believe that being securely in power for too long creates an arrogance and sense of comfort at the public teat. I was in the Council Chamber making a delegation only the other night when one councillor asked me if I thought they were doing a good job, to which I said "no" and his response was "well I have been re-elected for 20 years so I guess the community thinks I have been doing a good job". I strongly disagree with this notion that re-election means the community is happy with your work. It means you have enough friends, connections and associates to ensure you are voted in under the current system, it has nothing to do with the quality of the outcome.

By ensuring a limited tenure in the role you will find people seeking election who will want to make the effort to work for their community, rather than turn up for the paycheque, allowance or committee fee. Some get so used to sucking the public teat that they forget what it is like to live in the real world, where your pay and employment are based on your ability to do the role.
- 5. Elections should be conducted by the WA Electoral Commission.** Currently postal votes are not secure, being posted to the Council. Opportunities are rife for votes to go "missing".
- 6. Community Consultation is not a small ad in the local paper during the Christmas holidays.** I find it amazing that our council can organise door to door checks of household pet numbers yet cannot ask our community face to face on issues that are significantly more important to their lifestyle and amenity, such as the failure of the City of Joondalup to adequately consult the community over the changes to the zoning of our properties. No or little response to a consultation through a small ad in the local paper does not equate to acquiescence by the community, it means the community has not been adequately addressed on the issue. We need less tick the box and more conscious and meaningful consultation on all issues. A Set of minimum standards, including response rates needs to be put in place, but with encouragement to go above and beyond on significant issues such as planning and zoning.
- 7. Beneficial Enterprises** – Now there is something that sounds plain dangerous. If ratepayers money can be taken away from providing the services it already should be used to provide, and "invested" (and I use the term loosely) in businesses that some CEO sees as being needed or a possible income earner I would argue it should not be. Our CEO and the Council have been proposing a Performing Arts Centre for over 20 years in Joondalup. Even the latest business plan for this "essential community infrastructure" shows that the ratepayers will be borrowing to build the facility and also paying additional rates for the next 40 years (the intended life of the facility) to

cover the ongoing costs of running the business. There is no business case to build the facility, there are no concert promoters keen to bring music to the neighbourhood, we are after all less than 20 minutes from the CBD by train or car. Yet the City continues to carry the item in its forward planning, complete with all the money it has wasted investigating the costs and getting the facility rescoped. Imagine if they had been given free rein on this project through calling it a “beneficial enterprise”. All of us ratepayers would be paying for a white elephant. To be honest if there was a burning need within the community to have such a venue someone in the private investment world would have already made a move to secure the business. Whether it is a coffee shop or a performing arts centre, the same issue stands. Let the private sector create the wealth that government in all its levels benefits from and which makes our economy go around. Local Government should stay out of the private sector.

8. **Accountability** – honesty integrity and clear information are needed for the community to understand the workings of the Local Government Sector. Enough “Sir Humphrey” language and more plain English. I would propose that all Local Government documents be written in plain English so that it is clear what is meant. No more equivocal, misleading, confusing language. Give us the information we need in a straight forward, down to earth and clearly understood language. I believe that the new regulations should have a “Plain English Policy” for all dealing with the community.

There are many other issues that I could write for ages on but given my time constraints I will leave these ideas with you.

I strongly support the submissions of Larry Graham, the Marmion Sorrento Duncraig Progress Association and the Edgewater Community Residents Association. All of which seek improvements in communication, integrity and accountability within the Local Government Sector.

I strongly oppose the submission made by the City of Joondalup, the City merely copied and pasted their response from the direction of WALGA. They did so without giving their Elected Members an opportunity to communicate with the ratepayers on such an important issue. They chose to leave the ratepayers out of any consideration of the issues and did not seek to engage with the community. Just providing another exemplar of the lack of respect extended to the community by a small group of arrogant individuals within the City.