

Lowest rates remain our continuing commitment

By TONY FOSTER

BRIGHTON Council has an ongoing commitment to offer the lowest rates as well as the full range of services and facilities for our community.

Ratepayers will be aware that in response to the impact of the COVID-19 emergency, Council was determined there would be no increase in the general rate for all ratepayers in the municipality this financial year. At the same time, we approved record capital works spending of \$12.5 million.

In this way, Council is doing all that it can to stimulate the local economy, generate opportunities for the local workforce while providing enhanced services for our community and playing a positive role supporting economic recovery.

Over the past 25 years, our Fair Rating Policy has ensured Brighton Municipality has enjoyed the lowest per capita rates in Tasmania and benefited from the most efficient local government operations in the State. At the same time, we are one of Tasmania's fastest-growing municipalities and this development has imposed additional costs as we have had to provide the services and facilities necessary to support more people, homes and a growing number of businesses.

While this development growth brings the potential for additional activity and revenue, it also comes with considerable new servicing and infrastructure costs.

That we have been able to achieve this growth and at the same time continue to improve community amenities throughout the municipality is a credit to our Council's efficiency and determination to ensure that Brighton is a great place to live, work, invest and bring up a family.

Issues such as the reduction and subsequent loss of TasWater dividends, extraordinary COVID-19 impact costs, as well as our decision not to increase rates, have placed considerable pressure on Council's budget.

Back in 2016, as owners of TasWater, councils agreed to a significant reduction in dividends to fund a major water and sewerage capital works program. More recently, TasWater's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was to cut its charges to business, resulting in a net loss to the corporation of \$15 million for the past year, and no dividends for the council owners.

As a result, the Local Government Association of Tasmania has warned councils may have to readjust their rating policies if the promised payment of dividends from TasWater continues to be drastically altered in the future.

Brighton's annual dividend is equal to some eight percent of our rate revenue so it is an important component. The loss of that dividend has quite definite implications. We've absorbed the cuts to date, but there is a limit to our capacity to do so into the future. We believe it is in Brighton's and all of Tasmania's best interests that TasWater becomes a sustainable and profitable business that can pay its agreed dividends as soon as possible.

Until this occurs, Brighton Council will need to be careful, clever and continue to work as efficiently as possible. I am confident that we can do this, but we may have to make some readjustments along the way.

We have already made advances such as reducing our energy costs through the installation of new energy-efficient street lighting, solar panels along with other initiatives and we are continuing to look at how we can do things better and smarter across the entire field of council operations.

Brighton's fair rating regime remains fundamental to what we do and our elected Councillors and all our staff are proud of our reputation as Tasmania's lowest rating and most efficient council.

Maintaining this will underpin our considerations as we move forward and we are determined to continue the trend we have established and which has served us well over the past 25 years.

Later this year, I will be sitting down with our Council General Manager and Deputy General Manager to examine exactly where we are at financially to ensure we are in a position in April to form a budget for 2021 - 2022 that is in line with our current policy.

Yes, we may have to change some approaches, but despite, at times, difficult circumstances, Brighton's ratepayers can be assured that they will continue to benefit from the full range of services at the lowest possible costs.

I can only repeat that we are unwavering in our commitment to maintaining this approach in the current environment and into the future.