



“Dysfunctional” council beats a rubber stamp

Description



What do want from our elected officials? Robust debate or rubber stamping? Image: Delimiter.com.au

ANALYSIS – Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]T [/dropcap]here was a headline just begging to be written a fortnight ago and it would have read something like this: "Cr Ermacora votes with rogue councillors!"

Or maybe it should have been this: "Shock move: Cr Sycopoulis abandons faction!"

Because despite a sense that the Warrnambool City Council is hopelessly divided 4-3 between two opposing factions who can never see eye-to-eye, they do.

And they sometimes agree on the most surprising and controversial of issues, such as in the case of **Cr Jacinta Ermacora** voting with the supposed "rogue" councillors **Peter Sycopoulis**, **Brian Kelson** and **Peter Hulin** to refuse a permit for a 2km sewerage pipeline to be built by Midfield Meats from its rendering plant to an existing sewer pit.



Cr Peter Sycopoulis. Image:
Warrnambool City Council.

This was a significant decision in terms of Midfield Meats – one of the most successful and powerful companies in Warrnambool – being able to press ahead with its plans to upgrade the rendering plant which sits in the heart of a sensitive environmental zone because, when it was first approved 40 years ago, nobody cared about such things. They do now.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]A [/dropcap]n hour later, in the same meeting, Cr Sycopoulis stepped away from his supposed rock-solid faction and voted with Crs Ermacora, **Askew**, **Neoh** and **Gaston** to preserve the controversial Rolf Harris mural at the Lighthouse Theatre.

He didn't have to, they had the numbers, but he did it because that is what he believed should happen.

In other words, both Crs Ermacora and Sycopoulis voted on principles rather than politics and this is exactly as it should be, and it happens more often than you think, but the dramatics that are also part

of the current Warrnambool City Council gain much more attention than these occasions.

And nobody is denying that there is conflict and drama, borne from frustration, ideological differences, wrong-doings (perceived or proven) and lapses in leadership, but this is what happens when seven, very different individuals are elected to represent the many different people that make up our city.



Cr Kylie Gaston. Image: Warrnambool City Council.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]W [/dropcap]orking in the media in the past 26 years, I have sat through literally dozens of council meetings in various parts of Australia and watched them transform from stuffy, ultra-formal and dull gatherings made up of mostly businessmen keen to push private interests, into dynamic, diverse forums where not only the councillors are engaged, but the people.

To see the Warrnambool City Council chamber packed for council meetings is a victory for democracy.

And to see our elected officials made up of men and women from different cultural backgrounds, ages, political leanings and occupations is also not only a victory for democracy, but a big beautiful breath of fresh air.

Even if we don't agree with everything they do or say – should we? – every councillor has to be admired for, as US writer **Bréne Brown** calls it, *stepping into the arena*, because that arena is very public, very demanding and, at times, bruising, and that is why most people remain on the sidelines.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]W [/dropcap]hat I don't understand is why our robust, vibrant and, yes, occasionally dramatic council is considered dysfunctional?

It is in good financial shape and surely it is far less important that councillors sit down and have a convivial meal at the end of each meeting, than it is for important issues to be dissected, debated and thrashed out in public.

Judging [by his recent statements](#), newly elected MP and former Moyne mayor **James Purcell** is among those who claim our “dysfunctional” council could stop jobs growth in Warrnambool because it has had the temerity to question the building of an enormous milk processing plant and cold storage facility by Midfield Meats in Merrivale.

Midfield's plans are passing through due process and the elected councillors are doing exactly as they should: watching that process unfold while also listening to the hundreds of people in and around Merrivale who have concerns about the single greatest change to their neighbourhood in decades.

Leaving aside for one moment the handful of jobs that will actually be created by this expansion, surely a council is not elected to be a mere rubber stamp for developments and developers?

If so, they should be more rightly described as corporations, not councils.

The day our councillors start to fall silent on the significant issues within our city is when we really need to begin to worry, not when they are making too much noise.

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