

Tightening the tap on council leaks



Analysis – Carol Altmann

We heard it was coming and it has arrived – the clamping down of councillors being able to speak freely to the media and a whopping fine if they leak what a council considers confidential information.

Tomorrow night (July 4) the Warrnambool City Council will use a special meeting to vote on a new code of conduct that, among a raft of other things, demands that councillors tell the communications manager, **Nick Higgins**, if they talk to a journalist.

It also includes a provision to fine councillors \$18,200.40 (!!) – or charge them with serious misconduct – if they leak confidential information to a journalist, or anybody else for that matter. This change is one that had been recommended for councils across Victoria under changes to the Local Government Act.

In another change under the Act, all councillors must sign the code of conduct if they wish to remain on council.

The changes to the Act make no secret, pardon the pun, that they are intended to improve accountability and “standards of behaviour” which is another way of saying that “rogue” councillors will be dragged further into line.

I am not in favour of councillors running amok, but this clamping down comes as more and more information is kept from the public, or carefully massaged by council media units before release, and will only make it even harder for journalists to tell you what is really going on.

In fact, at the time of writing, if you try and find the agenda for tomorrow night’s special meeting [on the council’s website](#), it is not there. Nor is a copy of the draft Code of Conduct so that we can see what the councillors are being asked to consider.

More importantly, [as we have already written](#), there has been a string of critical information that has been considered “confidential” by the council that surely should be in the public domain.

This includes:

- full [details of the CEO’s salary](#) package
- the full financial results of the Fun4Kids Festival
- the full financial results of Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village
- the [purchase of Porter’s shed](#) in Wangoom
- the [cost of retiling](#) the Aquazone changerooms
- the [guest list for the council’s May Race](#) marquee

...and on it goes.



The exact salary package of WCC chief executive Bruce Anson is one of the many items considered confidential. Image: ABC.

All of the stories we have written about these issues have relied on sources, leaks and Freedom of Information applications – the bread and butter of any good journalism, but also becoming the only way to find out even the most basic of information (eg. how much is council CEO **Bruce Anson** actually paid?)

You may recall that the internal panic about leaks from Warrnambool City Council came to a head after the leaking of documents to *The Age* [about the expansion of Midfield Meats](#) and the political connections of boss **Colin McKenna**.

That saga [led to an investigation and public shaming](#) of three councillors that, locally, generated more heat than the vastly more important story about links between Mr McKenna and then Premier **Denis Napthine**.

It also led to this latest move to stop councillors from saying anything to journalists without the council's media

adviser knowing about it.

You have to ask – who is this policy designed to benefit?

Only those who want to keep you, the ratepayer, in the dark about the potentially controversial, embarrassing or debatable decisions that are made behind closed doors.

As a wise person once said: “news is what somebody, somewhere doesn’t want you to know. The rest is advertising”.

And I, for one, believe we need far more news.

