



# Mt Barker & District Residents' Association Inc.

PO Box 19 Mount Barker, South Australia 5251

*For the Community*

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26 June 2024

Mr Andrew Stuart, CEO

Mt Barker District Council

Dutton Road, Mt Barker, 5251

**Dear Andrew**

**RE: Mt Barker Council DRAFT Annual Business Plan (ABP) submission**

## **Introduction**

The Mt Barker & District Residents' Association (MBDRA) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the 2024/25 Mount Barker District Council Annual Business Plan and Wastewater Plan.

This submission has been broken down into a range of themes and areas and instead of being an overly detailed analysis of the Annual Business Plan, it aims to provide an overall commentary of where the Council should move directions wise for the wider public benefit with the Annual Business Plan taken into account.

As a Council it is important to take a leadership role, work with the public, other partners, nearby Councils, State and Federal Government and strategically plan now for the betterment for people today and for future generations – and this is where the 2024/25 Annual Business Plan has a key role to play.

## **Consultation process**

The 21-day consultation period has left little time for meaningful time to contribute and for the Council to take on board feedback and to implement changes based on community input. This is something that must be changed in terms of future consultation in this area.

The Council can achieve good things via their ABP, but they need the community on board with them to make things happen. We would appreciate more collaboration for the community up front to inform the Annual Business Plan. The workshops conducted for the Integrated Transport Plan are an exemplar of community engagement which we applaud. The MBDRA would also like to see the Council introduce participatory budgeting and some other set principles for the development of future Annual Business Plans. We will be taking this matter further with the Council in 2024.

The MBDRA would also like a response to our individual concerns and points raised and not simply a generic response from the Mount Barker District Council.

In terms of Elected Member input, in the interests of transparency we would also like to see what Council Members budget submissions were, with an indication of those that were approved (i.e. where in the draft ABP they would sit) and those not, with the reason given for not approving them.

This submission covers the following areas:

1. Projects, development and town planning
2. Environment, sustainability and wastewater
3. Community development, tourism and economic activity
4. Collaborating with nearby Councils and other partners
5. Council operations, Council rates and financial matters

### **Projects development and town planning**

Projects and town planning are important and it is vital the Council targets the right areas, but also allows the public to participate at the same time. Many people in Mount Barker feel disillusioned about the lack of input in terms of the future of the area and any action the Council can take differently in this area will only be seen as a positive. That said, we do recognise that Council is improving its Consultative processes.

#### Town Square Masterplan and Town Square works

This \$150,000 project (masterplan) and \$1.916 million (Town Square works) needs a Community Reference Group to be established immediately to drive discussion and consultation in the key public areas regarding the town square project - public land, spaces and facilities. It is imperative the Council has an action in its ABP to see the establishment of a Reference Group in place as soon as possible. There is little clarity around the \$1,916million for expenditure. Please describe this more clearly in the ABP.

#### Town Centre planning

A \$50,000 town centre planning process is supported by MBDR along as it connects to previous town centre planning strategies. We, alongside many others, look at the new housing estates in Mount Barker and surrounding towns and want to see more leadership from the Council for better planning and to see a planning framework created based around positive community outcomes. Council needs the public on board to make it all happen.

### **Environment, sustainability and wastewater**

Although it is challenging to distribute limited resources across competing demands, we note that environmental initiatives do not generally get the level of interest, coverage and funding compared to other projects. For example, two of the current Council strategic projects are sports related. Though investment in sport and recreation infrastructure is important for any community, so is a healthy, natural environment, which provides widespread benefits to the public at large often not recognised or considered by decision makers at a local level.

We note that in its Long-Term Financial Plan, Council indicates: "that one of the key challenges is environmental pressures. Nature conservation and regeneration, water resources management and waste are the key environmental issues that will need more investment in the future" (p20, draft LTFP).

We also remind Council that the Community highlighted environmental concerns as a priority in the 2023 Community Scorecard. Nature conservation and environmental management rated in the top 5 Council priorities.

Council needs to make serious environmental investment at an appropriate resource level now and for the long term.

#### Environment and sustainability strategy

We strongly support the completion of the Environmental and Sustainability strategy as a priority along with the native vegetation roadside management plan, and the development of biodiversity action plans.

The environment strategy, costing \$60,000 should see the Council commit to specific recommendations from any work undertaken in this area.

We look forward to the time that Environment (nature conservation and regeneration) is a strategic project and put at a higher level at Council to see more action come to reality. It is heartening to see that in its Community Plan 2044 Council have listed Environment as a key pillar. However, the aspirations outlined in that plan will not be achievable without the appropriate level of resourcing.

We also request that Council sponsor regular local environmental group networking activities like the recent establishment of the artists networking events. This would assist to create a sense of community and connection across the district and allow for new collaborations and mentorships.

### Wastewater

This is an important and complicated area to address, currently at a huge cost burden to residents and ratepayers across the Council area. The admission that a reason for continuing rates increases (and this one in particular) is the on-going and urgent need for a new and extremely expensive waste water treatment plant is disturbing. The Council needs to stand up for residents and ratepayers of the area and demand that this cost be shared by the government and developers due to the costs involved coming from a forced rezoning of land for housing in the area in 2010.

The constant inaction at a Council level here to get other levels of government involved will continue to hit residents and ratepayers of the area financially. We call for immediate action by the Council to reduce financial pressures on the Council in terms of its overall wastewater operations. Councils interstate are beginning to stand up for themselves and question the weight placed on them by Federal and State Governments, including that coming from population growth and it is time the Council at Mount Barker did the same.

We look forward to the Council taking a leadership role to reduce the financial impacts on residents regarding wastewater matters in the district.

### **Community development, arts, tourism and economic activity**

We have an urgent need to invest in community development, as more people move into the area. We will find people searching for much to do, beyond existing activities, programs, workshops and events. Our new residents should be seen as a source of new creativity that Council may facilitate with supporting resources both administrative and physical (venues, etc.) It is as important to keep people mentally stimulated as physically active.

We also have an increasing number of people moving into the area (particularly Mount Barker) of diverse cultural backgrounds and it is important to cater for these people and to provide them with options in terms of activity, creating friendships and volunteering opportunities and so enrich our community. We also have a huge gap in providing activities for young people and those isolated across the Council.

Whilst there are some increases in funds in terms of the arts and this is welcomed, it is only making up for huge shortfalls in investments in this area in previous years. Figures have shown the Mount Barker District Council to be one of the lowest Councils to invest in arts and community development for example.

At present we also have developer contributions going towards area such as transport, wastewater, recreation, sport and community infrastructure like footpaths. Yet we see little going into actual facilities people can use who are not into sport, like a community centre or new usable spaces for hiring out for community events. This is something the Council should investigate and consider as we face a need for more community spaces for individuals, groups and organisations to use.

Tourism and economic development are also important to the Adelaide Hills area and need direct investment that will make a difference to the lives of local people.

### Youth places feasibility study

The MBDRA hopes to see some positive and tangible outcomes from this study.

### Library options analysis

We believe that this analysis is far too narrow in scope. Instead, the Council should undertake a comprehensive review of library services, covering all areas, akin to library services review undertaken by the City of Victor Harbor, encompassing the Mount Barker Community Centre and possible facilities in the Mount Barker Town Centre Development. A direct link has been provided, see below:

<https://www.yoursay.victor.sa.gov.au/your-library>

### Festivals and events

This is referred to in the ABP as a proposal, with no exact costings of how much it would cost the Council. Many music festivals have had to cancel their events due to lack of ticket sales and repetitious content, so the Council should clearly define what it wants to do in the events area before committing any funds or staff time in terms of attracting a major music festival to the area.

We also need more funds allocated to existing community events many facing financial difficulties in terms of their operations having to heavily rely on volunteers, outside sponsors and Council funding each year that is not consistent in terms of grant funds provided at a Council level.

### Visitor information centre and other visitor servicing options

Following the closure of the Adelaide Hills Visitor Information Centre by the Council it is imperative we have a clear direction in terms of what they will do in this area, not just for Hahndorf, but across the whole Council, in collaboration with nearby Councils and tourism bodies.

### **Collaborating with nearby Councils and other partners**

We see several initiatives which could be done in collaboration with other partners and organisations in the annual business plan to save on duplication and costs and encourage the Council to address this as an issue across their entire operation.

### Regional Impound Facility Study

This initiative comes across premature and financially questionable. The Council could support existing shelters like the Hahndorf Interim Animal Shelter and collaborate with other regional councils (like Adelaide Hills Council) to explore affordable options for a true regional facility. After all people own dogs in both Adelaide Hills and Mount Barker District Council areas. We do, however, recognise the possible particular need locally as our population increases.

### Skills Expo

Collaboration with existing organisations and schools could get some good outcomes in this area (for instance, Cornerstone College already run a skills expo at their school). Such an event could be expanded over time, for example to cater for more people. Facebook link: <https://shorturl.at/qDHXO>

### **Council operations, Council rates and financial matters**

#### The creation of three new positions

Three new positions proposed, a grants officer, youth officer, and events officer are welcomed.

#### **Council rates**

The restraint in 'smoothing' rates increases over three years was welcome, but given current Cost of Living stress, could the 'smoothing' be extended over one or more years extra, as a recognition by Council of this financial stress on residents and businesses?

**Conclusion**

It is hoped the Mount Barker District Council takes the comments from this submission into account and we look forward to the individual replies provided to our points raised in this submission. When we receive such replies, we can then plan on how our Association will collaborate with the Council into the 2024/25 financial year which not only be good for the Association, but also for the Council at Mount Barker, and the wider community at large.

Yours sincerely

*Douglas McCarty*

**Douglas McCarty**  
**Chairperson**