
10 EXECUTIVE SERVICES

10.1 COVID-19 PANDEMIC PLAN

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SUMMARY

This report highlights Mitchell Shire Council's approach to supporting staff, community and business during the current COVID-19 pandemic and presents options for Council to increase support for the recovery process.

Since the breakout of COVID-19 Council has been continually evaluating how we deliver our front-line services to the community, adapting to the new situation, as well as the type of support Council can offer the community including our valued business sector.

The long term, wellbeing, social and economic health of the communities across the Shire, are at the heart of Council's service agility and recommended proposals.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT Council:

1. Support a waiving of fees for the following items in the 2020-2021 Financial Year:
 - Statutory Planning: Pre application planning fees
 - Extension of planning permit fee (business only)
 - Local Laws Fees (for businesses) including A-frames; Outdoor dining; Displaying goods; Roadside trading
 - Environmental Health (for businesses) Food businesses (including mobile), (Cafes, Restaurants, hairdressers, beauty salons, tattooists)
 - Public Land Hire Fees
2. Support a tourism activation campaign up to \$50,000.
3. Support the Great Victorian Rail Trail (GVRT) Strategic Plan Signage Implementation \$20,000.
4. Investigates further the opportunity to support an acquisitive sculpture prize of \$5,000.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC PLAN (CONT.)

5. Note;

- Property owners will be provided with payment extensions for all rates charges until 30 September 2020 with no penalty interest applicable.
- The efforts of front facing staff have put in to continue vital community services including kindergarten programs, waste disposal, maternal and childcare services, environmental health, animal services and school crossing supervisors, library deliveries.
- Council has been a central point of contact in referring community members to locally based support services;
- Libraries and leisure services ability to provide on-line services and interactive activities, to ensure the communities stay active and engaged.
- Council has been successful in attracting \$3.8 million under the Work for Victoria fund to assist the Shire's critical response to the COVID-19 pandemic

BACKGROUND

Mitchell Shire Council has led a strong response to the COVID-19 pandemic across the Shire. A commitment by the organisation to create a robust and agile business continuity plan over the last two years set a strong foundation for Council's response so far.

As a Council we truly understand the pressure and the need for services this pandemic has placed on our community. As a Council we have been committed to the safety and wellbeing of our community and staff at this time.

From early March 2020, Council's Crisis Management team was enacted to focus on responding to the pandemic, and subsequently Council has transitioned to a establishing a Recovery Team, with a focus on the here and now as well as the long-term recovery of the community.

A proactive and engaging approach has been the key to successfully supporting community and business, keeping them informed of support services, continuing to deliver front facing operations including maternal and childcare services, waste disposal, continuing to maintain roads, footpaths, parks and gardens, keeping school crossings safe and continuing animal management.

Council has also played a key role in community relief including the support of residents who are in non-mandatory isolation, who are vulnerable. This support has included the coordination of relief packages and linking in to local social, community and health support services.

Council has also worked to create a package to support community and business moving into recovery. This has included a successful grant application to Working for

COVID-19 PANDEMIC PLAN (CONT.)

Victoria which will see additional staff engaged, at a minimal cost to ratepayers, to assist with the recovery process.

It has seen a change in the way we conduct business and provided new and innovative ways of working. It has taken away some direct interaction with our community, an area we will look forward to once again engaging once restrictions provide safe interaction to do.

We have seen:

- Library Home Delivery Service commenced
- Online story time through Facebook
- Kindergartens running as normal, plus offering remote learning and engagement opportunities
- Leisure services providing online exercise classes
- Youth Services online engagement
- Maternal and Child Health – virtual clinical consultations plus face to face weigh-ins
- Call Centre support to vulnerable community members
- Waste – introducing a short term COVID-19 collection service
- Our outdoor crews, stepping up cleanliness across the Shire.

Customer and Library Services Staff have been:

- Triaging callers to the relevant service
- Contacting vulnerable people (identified through our Library service)
- Contacting individuals identified through Red Cross who have required additional support.

Partnerships:

Council has partnered with Beyond Housing, Nexus Primary Health, FamilyCare, Lower Hume Primary Care Partnership, The Kilmore and District Hospital, Seymour Health, and The Bridge Youth Service to support our community through COVID-19 with a range of services.

Support of staff

In terms of our operations our number one priority has been the safety and wellbeing of our staff. Presently, many staff are working from home with flexible working arrangements. Where possible positions impacted by the pandemic has seen a redeployment of staff, unfortunately some casuals have lost opportunities. We have made all efforts to support impacted staff and making available employee assistance programs and professional help.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC PLAN (CONT.)

Residents

- Residential property owners may be provided with payment extensions for all rates charges until 30 September 2020 with no penalty interest applicable.
- Residential ratepayers can enter into a payment arrangement or apply for financial hardship to support fourth quarter rate payments.
- No interest will be raised on rates until 30 September 2020.
- Animal Registration Fees extended.
- Library staff contacting more than 7000 vulnerable persons.
- Customer services staff assisting community agencies and linking in community members.
- Ongoing commitment to completing capital works projects.

Businesses

- Business property owners will be provided with payment extensions for all rates charges until 30 September 2020 with no penalty interest applicable.
- Business ratepayers can enter into a payment arrangement or apply for financial hardship to support fourth quarter rate payments.
- No interest will be raised on rates until 30 September 2020.
- COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Business Support page designed and launched on Mitchell Shire Council website as a central information point for Local, State and Federal Government support.
- Launch of MitchellEats, highlighting food and hospitality businesses providing takeaway services across the shire during the pandemic.
- Development of a Small Business Expert Advice Support Program to support local small business owners under the Working for Victoria fund which will provide information and advice on deciphering Government assistance packages.
- Support for businesses with grant application writing under the Working for Victoria Fund.
- On-going regular business 'Eco Dev Updates' to more than 2000 email subscribers.

ISSUES AND DISCUSSION

While Council has already made changes to operations and provided community and business support, there is the opportunity to further extend support and recovery options through the following means.

Waiving fees and charges (Statutory Planning, Local Laws and Environmental Health): Cost approximately \$230k

The waiving of the following fees:

COVID-19 PANDEMIC PLAN (CONT.)

Statutory Planning \$15k approx.

- Removal of pre application planning fees
- Wavering extension of planning permit fee (Businesses only)

Local Laws Fees (for businesses)

- (A-frames; Outdoor dining; Displaying goods; Roadside trading) \$8K approx.

Environmental Health (for businesses)

- (Food businesses (including mobile), Cafes, Restaurants, hairdressers, beauty salons, tattooists) \$200K approx.

Public Land hire fees \$5K approx.

Tourism Recovery: Cost \$50,000

Council is also being asked to support a tourism recovery package. A 'Welcome Back to Mitchell' Promotional Campaign would promote Mitchell and assist with recovery in the initial stages of the lifting of travel and isolation restrictions. The campaign will be complemented by other Council activities such as the on-going publication of visitor information brochures; stocking of visitor information points; and a 'beautification blitz' by Council's outdoor crew staff to ensure our towns are looking their best as visitors return. It would target the Melbourne market highlighting the opportunities for day visits to our region's attractions. It would be guided with assistance of Visit Victoria. Under this program Council would seek professional assistance for development and delivery of a predominately digital campaign. Cost up to \$50,000.

Great Victorian Rail Trail (GVRT) Strategic Plan – Implementation (Signage): Cost \$20,000

One of the key short-term priority actions in the GVRT Strategic Development Plan is to develop and install consistent signage along the rail trail for trail users. The rail trail continues to be used for exercise during this pandemic and increased and better signage will improve the visitor experience with directional and interpretive offerings. This investment can further entice visitation in a safe and social distanced environment. This is also supported by submitters to Council's draft 2020-2021 budget.

Public Sculpture Prize \$5000

Continue to explore opportunities to support an acquisitive outdoor sculpture prize. This will support local artists and potentially commence an annual event that builds the profile of the Shire.

CONSULTATION

Consultation has taken place with business leaders and business owners regarding the impacts of COVID-19. Council has been the lead advocate in working with service provision stakeholders and assistance to the community. Consultation and engagement will continue to be a key component of the Shire's recovery response.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC PLAN (CONT.)

FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND ASSET MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

This report contains several financial implications for the Shire, totaling \$305K. It will have an impact on budgets moving forward, however the key initiatives have been aimed to support our community and businesses during this once in a generation pandemic.

Work is also progressing on the 2020-2021 Draft Budget and 2021-2024 Strategic Resource Plan. The initiatives discussed within this report will be adjusted within the current draft 2020-2021 budget. At a later stage Council will assess and address the longer-term impacts of the pandemic.

As part of the 2020-2021 Budget adoption Council will receive further information relating to the impacts to Councils financial sustainability.

POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE IMPLICATIONS

The 4th Instalment Rates Notices have been sent to all property owners. Although a decision to provide community members with an extension of payment terms until 30 September including the cessation of penalty interest until that time, Councils do have a legislative requirement to ensure rates notices are sent each quarter.

Council will continue to meet policy and legislative requirements whilst supporting the Mitchell Shire Community.

RISK IMPLICATIONS

Risk Ranking is determined using [ROHS201-G1- Corporate Risk Matrix](#). Risk is identified as Low, Medium, High or Very High.

Risk	Risk Ranking	Proposed Treatments	Within Existing Resources?
The support treatments have an impact on Council's budget.	Medium	Officers continue to work within budgets to support appropriate savings.	Yes
Council needs to continue to advocate for business and community as part of COVID-19 recovery	High	Continue to advocate and support initiatives that support community and business	Yes

SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS (SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL)

Council has a responsibility to keep community and staff safe and connected. A commitment by the organisation to create a robust and agile business continuity plan over the last two years has set a strong foundation for Council's response to the current pandemic. Social and environmental implications and supporting community and business through the impacts of the pandemic, have been key factors in developing a community response to COVID-19.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC PLAN (CONT.)

CHARTER OF HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

The rights protected in the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* were considered in preparing this report and it's determined that the subject matter does not raise any human rights issues.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IMPLICATIONS

Council's response to COVID-19 has impacts for whole of community. The response and recovery phase will support across our shire including children and young people. This has included specific youth-focused initiatives to combat the stresses of isolation.

OFFICER DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No officers involved in the preparation of this report have any direct or indirect interest in this matter.

CONCLUSION

Through Council's Crisis Management Team and now Recovery Team, a thorough and measured response has been developed to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the health and wellbeing of our community, while providing direct and ongoing support to our local businesses that are experiencing extraordinary levels of disruption and uncertainty.

Council has provided strong leadership and kept the community informed of changes to what we are doing and why. We will continue to monitor our situation and adapt as required to support all through this crisis. Recovery will continue to evolve and build on actions and directives of the Federal and State Governments, so we do not duplicate efforts.