

[REDACTED]
KATHERINE EAST NT 0850
[REDACTED]

20th September 2021

Dear Councillor

Firstly, I would like to congratulate you on your election and inauguration as a member of the Katherine Town Council. You have taken on a considerable responsibility, which will at times no doubt be onerous, but hopefully, also rewarding. Katherine is a town with a number of pressing issues facing it, and as the Councillors, you have the opportunity to help determine the direction in which this community will go.

As the new Council, you also have a wonderful opportunity to foster a new relationship between the Council and the municipality. I know that it has been fractured in the past, but I believe that the community wishes nothing more than to see confidence and trust restored between the two entities.

On the basis of that belief, I am requesting that a few items be added to your initial agendas. They are as follows:

1. ***Restoration of the Public Forums.*** The public forums were an essential line of communication between the municipality and the Council. Cancelling them was probably the greatest public relations blunder of the previous Council, because it severed the last line of trust between the Council and the residents. The relationship was already very fraught, because the Council had engaged in large spending projects that had not been put out for public comment and that most residents didn't want. One of the public forums saved the town's museum, because the residents had the opportunity to voice their concerns about the impending closure and the loss of the items that represented the town's history.

I realise that the excuse for shutting the forums down was that they were 'too negative', but the negative matters are the very ones that the Council needs to know about and address. The response to the impending closure of the museum was probably one of the issues that the Council saw as negative, because about 200 very distressed and angry residents turned up to a public forum to protest, but the fact that there was a public forum made the Council very aware of the value the people of the town placed on their history. Without the public forum, there is no saying what might have happened to the items in the museum and that would have been tragic.

The Council is in existence to serve the needs of the municipality; not the other way around. If the negative matters aren't addressed, they fester and start to erode the confidence of the residents that the Council will listen to them and take their concerns seriously. That is what happened with the previous Council.

The substitute measures did not go anywhere near compensating for the removal of the public forums. They were too infrequent and were conducted like social occasions, outside of the Council meeting timetable and usually with an accompanying barbecue. The ones conducted on a Saturday were inaccessible to people who have their Saturdays already fully allocated to other activities, such as the market, sport, children's activities or other matters. (Mine is fully allocated, because I tutor all day.) Putting a couple of Councillors in the Shopping Centre meant that people who were rushing to get shopping done had to factor in time for a chat, but a chat with a couple of Councillors is not the same as putting a question to the whole panel of Councillors in a formal setting. A chat doesn't provide any certainty that the concerns of the shopper will ever make it back to the Council meeting, and the setting means that only the people who are in the Shopping

Centre that day have the opportunity to chat. If people from out-of-town shopped on another day, they had no voice at all.

Restricting matters to agenda items required people to gain access to the agenda and comb through it to see if their concern matched a particular agenda item. Speaking for myself, I never managed to get the agenda link to work, and I know that others had the same issue. Acquiring a copy of the agenda would have required a trip to the Council office to try to get hold of a paper copy, but unless you went early, they were all gone, and busy people just don't have the time. The Council opening hours are the times when people are working. There are many elderly people here who do not use computers and therefore are cut off completely. Telling them that they can write a letter or make a phone call does not address their situation. Some don't drive, some find writing letters difficult, and some are deaf and therefore are unable to use the phone option. The elderly residents are the ones who particularly need consideration, because they're the long-term residents and the ones who are most affected by what the Council does – many of the younger people in town are transient and really don't care too much about what happens here.

I am aware that shutting down the forums was partly directed at one person who was, at times, pretty blunt in his criticism of the Council, but being in public office means that it will be necessary to deal with all types of people and situations, and depriving the town of its communication with the Council just made matters far worse. It seemed that the Council was retreating into a little insulated bubble at the end of town and ceased to interact with the people it was tasked to serve. The question arises, 'If you can't stand the heat, what are you doing in the kitchen?' The resident concerned needed to be listened to, because the issues he raised were in the interests of the community, and some of his bluntness was as result of frustration that those issues were being ignored.

As a new Council, you have a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate that the Council will listen to everyone and take all questions seriously. Restoration of the public forums will clearly demonstrate that intention. Even if no one attends them, it is an act of faith that they are there and available. It will also demonstrate that the Council is willing to keep all avenues of communication open. The town became very suspicious of the retreat behind restrictions in the manner of communication by the past Council, because it begged the question, what was there to hide? In fact, the town pretty much gave up on the Council and just waited for the next election to see a change.

The other aspect of the public forums is that they provide an opportunity for public presentations. We had a number of those in the past, and with the issues of fracking and cotton now looming large on the horizon, it is critical that the Council have an avenue to invite speakers to put their point of view to interested members of the public. A forum is the ideal situation for that to occur. The Wet Season is just around the corner, and I believe people would appreciate another presentation from the engineer who spoke before on flood mitigation measures – that was a particularly interesting presentation and very relevant to the town's needs. At the moment, there is almost no possibility that such presentations will happen, but if the Council issues an invitation to a public forum, the town is far more likely to have a favourable response from possible speakers, because the invitation has come from the Council.

2. ***An audit of Council property.*** At the moment, the municipality has no idea what property is owned by the Council (which really means, owned by the municipality). If an audit is conducted, the location, usage, income stream and possible future usage should be considered. Rates have been significantly increased over the past few years to ensure an adequate budget for Council services, but perhaps more income could be derived from assets that are currently owned by the Council, so that rate increases are kept to a minimum.

3. **Dogs.** The roaming dogs around the town are a serious problem. It means that responsible dog owners are unable to safely walk their dogs around their local neighbourhoods, for fear of their dogs being attacked by roaming unsupervised dogs. Unsupervised dogs are also a threat to people, particularly young children, using the footpaths. The time of biggest risk is when people come home from work, which is when they are most likely to want to walk their dogs, and when others seem to leave their gates open for their dogs to go out and wander the streets. Early evening seems to be the time when most unsupervised dogs are out and about and some collect in packs. However, that is outside the time when rangers are around the town, picking up unsupervised dogs. A lot of the roaming dogs have no collars, so may be unregistered. Perhaps a campaign advocating registration, proper supervision, properly maintained gates and fences and control of numbers would help address this. There probably is no need for households to have 6 or 7 dogs, but some do. It may mean that there needs to be an after-hours ranger service to ensure the safety of the residents and their pets, but at the very least, the issue needs consideration.

4. **Guaranteed public comment opportunities on large spending.** The town was forced to accept items that it didn't want, because those were not put out for public comment and the contracts were signed and sealed before the residents even became aware of the projects. The half-million-dollar turtle was one, and the 50-Cent Park development was another. I don't think too many people can see the value in those projects, and the money could surely have been spent on things that the town urgently needs, such as repair of the footpaths, sign repainting and updating, garden renovation, etc. The old clock in 50-Cent Park was an historical item, and so was the Wave Wall, which indicated the level of the great flood. No one knows what happened to those. The rate payers were forced to pay for the shade over the turtle, which amounted to thousands of dollars; money which could have been used to either reduce rates or pay for other services. The container coffee shop in the redeveloped park was seen as competition to the current businesses in town. Most have been struggling through the COVID crisis just to stay afloat, so a coffee shop that would take trade away from the established eateries was particularly unpopular with both the business community and the long-term residents. We value the businesses that have remained loyal to the town and stayed, even in the face of hardship. Some of those rely on their coffee sales to stay afloat, and the pop-up shop was a very unwelcome intrusion. I am not suggesting that these items should now be removed; merely that in future, the situation not arise that would see large spending projects foisted onto the town without any opportunity for the public to say yes or no, and if they say no, that the decision is respected. The time frame for public comment needs to allow for a redirection of money to an alternative project, which should also have time to go out for public comment, so that there isn't the pressure to spend it in a rush or it will be lost

I hope that these matters can be added to the agenda soon. I realise that as a new Council, you will be 'finding your feet', but the matters I've raised are urgent and need attention at the earliest opportunity. There are a number of other matters, such as homelessness, lack of accommodation and law and order, which also need to be given attention, but which cannot be dealt with in the short term.

I wish you every success as a Council, because your success is also the success of the municipality. We need to move into the future together.

Regards

Shirley Crane