

INTERVIEW WITH STEVE COOPER (VLGA) - 6/10/2020

Connection Matters Radio (CMR):

Last week on Connection Matters Radio I spoke with Steve Cooper, the Chief of Staff at the Victorian Local Governance Association. And we spoke about the process of postal voting for Victoria's local government elections.

With postal voting now open and closing at midnight on the 23rd of October, as Steve informed us last week, most Victorians are already receiving their ballot packs this week. We welcome back Steve, to chat a bit more about the process of local government and about the role of the councillor. Steve, welcome back to Connection Matters Radio.

Steve: Yeah. Good to talk again Charles, thank you.

CMR: Steve, let's get this one over and done with, nice and quickly because we have yarned about it quite a number of times, whether either on camera or on air with different programs, but what is the role of local government beyond roads, rates and rubbish?

Steve: Oh, Charles, there's a quirky little legal definition in the Local Government Act. It talks about the peace, order and good governance of the municipal district. In some ways that means that the council has to do the things that you expect the council to do - it has to have a building office and do town planning and public health.

But the other part of it is, it needs to make and deliver on a council plan. And the council plan should be the document that really shapes the impact that the council will have on its local community

across the whole range of services that the council provides.

CMR: Now you're touching on a point there, the range of services that council provides. Typically how many services does a council provide to community?

Steve: Look I know in the city of Melbourne, on their website they talk about over 120 services. I would've thought even the smallest council in Victoria would be in the range of 70 to 80 services. And that's everything. From the ones that I've already discussed: the maintenance of infrastructure and assets, recreation services, human services from cradle to grave. So that whole range of services that impact on quality of life for people in their local community, Charles .

CMR: Steve, I'm sure you, and pretty well everyone else listening to this program, will have received by now, I certainly have, the ballot pack and all the electioneering material that we also often find stuffed in the letter box at this time.

Steve, how much of this stuff from the candidates can we really believe? I've got one in front of me now from a candidate who says that he will ensure that rates are either dropped or they maintain their current level, but are not taken up. Can we really believe the word of just one person on this? What power do they have?

Steve: It's a fabulous question, Charles, because it goes to the role of the councillor. I guess, in a really simple way of putting it, is that an individual councillor is like a non-executive role on a board. An individual councillor can't

necessarily promise that they'll deliver on a particular outcome, but they can undertake to support an objective. So it's not unreasonable that the councillor will promise lower rates or better planning and development or better services or more efficient services.

This sort of question for ratepayers or for electors, that's more difficult to unpack is how much has the candidate thought about those things? And inevitably there's an impact for those actions. And what is the impact if that comes about?

CMR: How much power does an individual councillor have on the floor of council?

Steve: Let's go back a step Charles. And as I said, the individual councillor is one of the group. And the decision-making at the council level is based on how do the majority vote. So as much as anything, it's about the quality of the ideas, it's about the capacity of individual councillors to be persuasive with their colleagues. And it's about the whole council thinking through the impact of the decision.

If we take the example that you've provided around rates, and it's pretty common for candidates to promise lower rates; and certainly in the last 12 months, a number of councils have responded to COVID by effectively reducing the rate bill. Remembering of course, that the state of Victoria has a rate capping environment. So councils are limited to the extent that they can increase the rates.

And also remembering too, that the rates for most councils would comprise

70% of the income of the organisation. And it can be pretty difficult for councils to drop much loved services that they've already got. So a question for me in terms of rate reduction would be, how are you going to meet your obligations to ensure the ongoing financial viability of the organisation in a lower rate environment?

CMR: I suppose, especially when you're all set, I'm looking at one of another document here from one of the candidates in a local ward not mine, fortunately, where that person is also promising that they will seek to achieve more social housing, community buses, more community clubs, all these things which cost money, but where's that money going to come from? So how answerable to the community during these candidacy stages, should these candidates be? In other words, can we actually go to these people and say: great promises, but how do you envisage these will be funded? Where's the money coming from? What services will be cut to fund it?

Steve: Most candidates, Charles, will have an email account. Most, these days of course, have a social media account. And those are quite reasonable questions to ask. And I know when we at the VLGA do candidate workshops, we alert candidates to the fact that there are members of the community who will ask those difficult questions, just to test the mettle of the candidates.

It's sort of Economic Theory 101 that everything you do has an economic cost. It means there's something else that you won't do. So finding a way to prioritise those services is really important. And all of those things need to sit in the context of a council plan. And that's really one of the changing elements of the role of council is it's really a requirement for councils to be more strategic than just politicking on the floor of the chamber.

So I'd absolutely encourage electors to contact their councillor. Make a comment

on a Facebook post in a respectful way as to how the promises are going to be achieved and what will the costs be?

CMR: What are some of the other things that people should be looking for in evaluating where their vote is going during these elections?

Steve: Charles, often the effectiveness of a councillor will occur in ways that are under the radar if you like. The things that achieve publicity in the local newspaper aren't necessarily the measure of the most effective councillor.

You talked about social housing and community buses and things like that. And often projects require funding from other levels of government. And one of the ingredients for a council to be able to acquire government funding is to be trusted by government.

But where there are competitive processes underway, it's less likely that a council that's dogged by infighting that is unreliable it's handicapped in terms of its capacity to get government funding. So the effective councillors will act in a way that builds trust internally with their council colleagues, with the community, in terms of the reliability and the way that they make decisions and with government that where it promises to undertake a particular project, that the council is able to do that.

So it's really important in that sense Charles, that elected councillors are able to fulfill their roles in a business-like manner. And we touched on right, at the start, the fact that local government is a very complex environment.

CMR: Yeah. Steve, that's all we have time for today. I think it might be appropriate if we catch up after the elections, and look back at the process and how effective it was during these times of COVID and what lessons maybe local governments and the state government, or the VEC at least could take going forward. Thanks so

much indeed, wishing you all the best and we will catch up soon.

Steve: Look forward to it, Charles. Thank you.

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