



## **Charles Sturt Council budget feedback: WACRA [Via Your Say]**

Dear Mayor Evans, CEO, Paul Sutton, Council staff and councillors,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the 2024-25 draft budget.

### **1. Tree Canopy Initiatives – proposed funding**

#### **a. WACRA fully supports all greening initiatives in this budget.**

It has been a long time coming but it is a start that will hopefully address some of the increasingly vocal criticisms from local residents through to the SA government around the impacts of climate within CCS due to loss of canopy. (To mention just a few: LIDAR data, the July 2023 DEW Urban Heat and Social Vulnerability Analysis that states CCS as having “highest mean and maximum Social Vulnerability Index”; In Daily “Adelaide left in the shade over tree canopy goal” and of course your own Oct 23 Tree Canopy progress report that has informed this budget bid, and states 10,000 large species trees are required each year to meet our canopy target of 25% by 2045.)

#### **b. WACRA does not support the singling out of necessary expenditure to address all the canopy and urban heat concerns as a “Tree Tax” and questions the 2% figure**

WACRA appreciated meeting with finance staff to discuss the proposed budget. It was mentioned to us that by emphasising that council rates would be increasing by 2% because of the tree expansion plans, it would be a good marketing strategy, thereby demonstrating council’s commitment for greening the environment.

We stated that CCS were inadvertently entering a potential “blame game” mentality thereby justifying the increase in the council rates just because of trees. Mentioning many times throughout the draft budget document is effectively saying to residents “We hear you want trees, but you need to cop the cost”. This surprised staff and they said that they should speak with their marketing people to correct this strategy!

It is unfair and unnecessary to single out tree expenditure in this way. Do we have a Library Tax or a Streetscape Renewal Tax, or a Sporting Club Improvements tax? All initiatives far more expensive than tree canopy – and not as important if we want a habitable city for our children.

There is no precedent for such a specific allocation of funding out of the general budget. The itemised budget measures do this already, so why then make the point of promoting it as a 2% tax on everyone’s rates bill?

Is it testing the water to see what residents are willing to pay? You already have a mountain of evidence proving the need to address what has been several decades of negligence, and budget

cuts in real terms around biodiversity and canopy. So to now blame trees for higher than necessary rates increases is deceptive.

We have tracked CCS budget expenditure in open space for many years now. The money that should have been put into open space management just to keep up with rates growth is tens of millions of dollars so maybe a more truthful angle would be “Tree planting initiatives begin to address years of inadequate funding concerning canopy and biodiversity loss”. Or “Tree planting initiatives draw on budget windfall gains from subdivisions and developments that continue to add to the canopy decimation.”

Trees always suffer from being an “operating” expense rather than the accountants preferred “investing” spend (buy now pay later via depreciation). It is time the accounting treatment was de-prioritised, and the true long term asset value was emphasised. Even in a purely economic sense it makes sense to have suburbs where crime is lower, people are happier and temperatures are lower. All clear cost benefits to council of improving tree canopy, and another reason your methodology of treating tree expenditure as a tax is so wrong.

A ‘tree tax’ methodology makes it an easier target to cut the expenditure, on the basis that residents (understandably) don’t want another excessively high rates increase? (See below commentary regarding overall rates). Why do you not do this for every other item in the budget that *are* genuinely discretionary initiatives? There is a lot of room in this budget for trimming/removing “nice to have” initiatives, or pushing the expenditure over 2 years to avoid *any* rates impost.

The 2% figure also seems to be an inaccurate amount when your own October 23 report modelling refers to it as a 0.5% impost to the budget. Basic maths even using the \$2.2m budget figure has it as more like 1.58% of the rates revenue and \$1.4% of total Council forecast revenue. So is this a case of adding as much as you can (eg normal operational expenditure?) to this figure to make it sound more expensive and easier to dismiss?

#### **c. Biodiversity**

There is no mention of plantings that address biodiversity loss. We hope that this ongoing commitment also considers the need for improved biodiversity through the choice of native species where possible, and additional under-story plantings.

We are pleased to see that it does factor in additional resourcing for tree maintenance and watering which have also been lacking – and the cause of too many stunted tree saplings across our city.

#### **d. Collaborate planting efforts**

Your Oct 2023 report correctly states that changes are required both within Council Owned and Privately owned land to meet canopy goals. Initiatives such as the Treebate and the Heritage Conservation Program could be expanded and made much more effective and attractive for a relatively low budget commitment. Every mature tree on private land that helps meet our canopy targets is a good deal for council over its life, so encouraging private planting and retention makes financial, social and environmental sense.

State agencies with large landholdings - such as Department for Education of course also need to step up more strongly to help in this area, so we hope Council continues to lobby the SA Government.

We congratulate council in the way they have recently voted against the recommendation to accept the "SANFL Deal." It does show that this council, in the majority, are in favour of better outcomes on community use and additional space for plantings and shading. WACRA supports CCS for taking the Football Park deal back for consultation. "

Ongoing support of community groups to undertake climate positive initiatives is also welcome and excellent value for money given their ability to use volunteer labour. This is an area CCS has done well in through Janet Willoughby. Further promotion of this, and encouragement of residents to adopt areas for re-vegetation would be of benefit to our local biodiversity and create more community connections for very little cost to the budget.

The My Tree Project that has been a focus of WACRA is another example of an excellent program that could be expended considerably with more support from CCS. It provides skills and passion, so essential for our children to help revitalise the planet that current and past generations have largely destroyed, as well as wider awareness of trees through public exhibition. The WACRA "My Tree" commitment supported by Council, schools, teachers, kids and curriculum additions is a pathfinder that must continue to be built on. Some great work has already been achieved that has included up to 600 kids in addition to their parents developing a greater understanding of the extreme need for more trees. Any cuts to the tree canopy budget will send out a negative message.

#### **e. Legislative compliance**

WACRA see and hear of so many cases where developers, businesses and residents have willingly defied legislative requirements for tree retention and/or replacement. Where is the value of legislation and bylaws if they are not enforced? WACRA would like to see strengthening of Council responsibility to make the tree removal and replacement requirements far more accountable. The Urban Tree Fund, involving tree cost removal or plant recovery, does not appear to be operating appropriately. Fining the offenders after a set time needs to be reinforced if you are committed to climate change. The cost of an additional Compliance Officer would likely be paid for many times over by fines revenue based on the current non-compliance.

#### **2. 6.25 % rates increase**

The additional expenditure on trees is necessary and well past time – and in reality, only costs around the amount you have forecast for rates growth through urban consolidation (which directly translates into loss of canopy – so it SHOULD go towards canopy restoration).

There are many other more discretionary "Nice to have" items in the budget (not singled out of course) that should be pushed out or reconsidered so as to minimise the rates increase to CPI, rather than the additional \$9.3 million currently budgeted over 23-24 forecasts.

#### **3. Other climate positive measures**

WACRA acknowledges some other budget initiatives that work towards carbon neutrality, such as additional solar - noting the high cost of this that could be spread over 2 years which alone would make a big difference to the overall projected spend given the size of this initiative.

Water Sensitive Urban design is critical to capture and not waste our increasingly precious rain events. They should be standard across all engineering works – but seems they are still only very specific projects.

#### 4. Performance indicators

We note that one of the Strategic Priorities listed in the Business plan is to “Protect and Enhance the tree canopy” (BP pp13). With the additional commitment provided in this budget for tree canopy, why then is there nothing in the “Measuring Achievement” section of the business plan relating to canopy improvement? This is something easily measured – especially via new Lidar technology, and definitely should be included.

Your October 2023 report states that 10,000 trees are required each year in order to meet this goal (assuming they all survive?) Even with this new 3,000 annual tree commitment, you are well short of meeting this goal – especially if the current urban consolidation and development continuous it’d destructive path. It doesn’t provide an excuse not to measure and publicly report on progress.

We also note there are a number of achievement goals in this section referring to 2022 and 2023 achievement dates.

#### **In summary:**

CCS prides itself on being a leader in Local government. However, it has failed to date to address the key issue of canopy cover and biodiversity. The current tree commitment is a great opportunity to reverse this trend and show true leadership in your commitment to the climate emergency declaration.

It seems that too much “nice to have” expenditure has been pushed into this budget to make the next pre-election budget an easier sell. Playing politics with ratepayers’ lives that have already been hit in the last budget with a high rates increase doesn’t seem fair.

From a local, state, national and global perspective the world is in an environmental crisis. There is no doubt an overwhelming need to get priorities right. The question must be asked as to whether each and every budget bid improves our ability to live and reduces our carbon impacts.

Kind regards,

Paul Laris and Bert Brown

Acting Chairpersons

Western Adelaide Coastal Residents’ Association (WACRA)