



Shire of Donnybrook Balingup

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Commissioner's Update (#2)

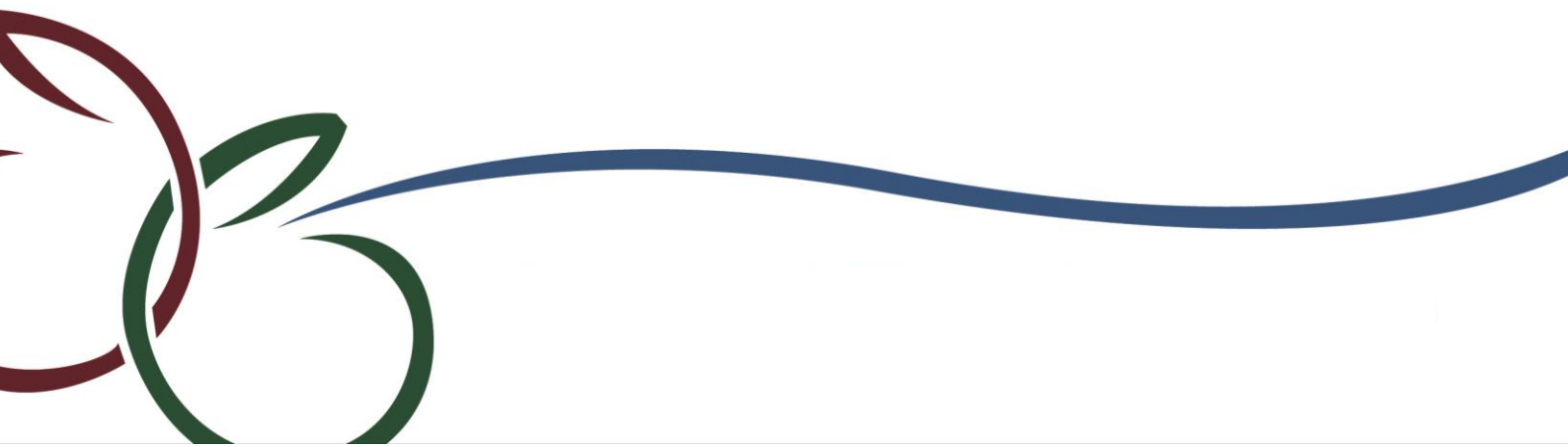
4 January 2022

Over the break I managed to spend a few days in Donnybrook and surrounds.

My priority was catching up with former Councillors. They were incredibly generous with their time and I certainly appreciated their openness and support. I have now met with all nine of the immediate past Councillors.

People have very different responses to what has happened but the common thread seems to be a desire to see a bit of a reset and for the focus to remain firmly on working to deliver great outcomes for current and future residents and businesses in the Shire. There are certainly a range of emotions at play and it will take time for these to work through. That said, I couldn't help thinking as I was following updates on the fire around Mumballup that when there is a threat or crisis, the differences somehow disappear and everyone pulls together.

My focus has been on trying to understand the key issues and untangle some threads. If I were to share my New Year's wish it would be for people to think about what makes the region so great and also all of the things people have in common. My initial impression is that areas of agreement far outweigh the disagreement. Equally there seems to be room for some improvement in communication though this is very much a two way responsibility.





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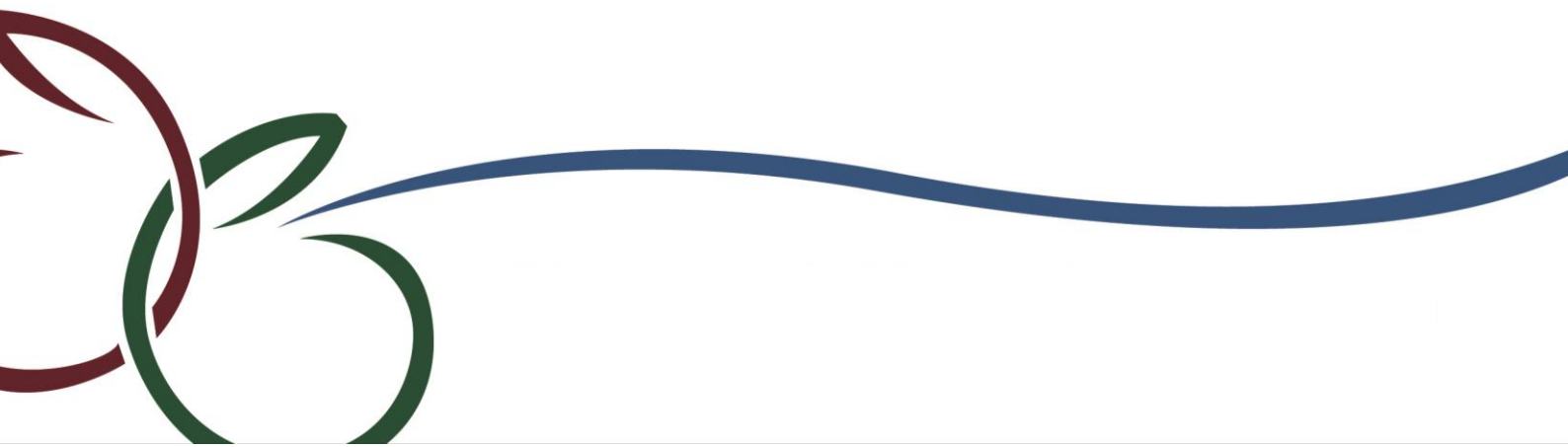
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As someone looking from the outside in, I marvel at the pristine nature of so much of the Shire which to me speaks volumes of the pride that comes from a community working together. From the fabulous gardens and well maintained streets, the Apple Fun Park and Station Square precinct, the amazing Brookhampton Hall, nestled in what now seems to be the middle of nowhere and the quaintness of the Balingup Village. I've also loved discovering the Santas in Kirup and reckon the Australian selectors will have no trouble replacing all our injured cricketers!

In my former role running a fairly large Government agency, I made a number of public comments about how tough public life is, regardless of the nature of the role and my despair at the loss of confidence and trust in those who take on public roles. I have shared with a number of those I have met in the last couple of weeks, that possibly my biggest concern at this time is how to encourage good people to stand for public office or to pursue careers in the public service. This will be especially important as the time comes to form a new Council in a few months' time. We can all be a bit inclined to leave these things to 'someone else' and then throw rocks over the fence. While I can and will make decisions in my capacity as Commissioner, the long-term future will rest with each of you.

As well as meeting with Councillors I have watched and listened to recordings of Council meetings, read lots of documents and followed a bit of social media. There are some 'burning platform' issues to be addressed but overall from what I have heard, seen and read so far there have been some fantastic outcomes achieved but these seem sometimes to be overshadowed by the areas of tension.

That said, integrity and accountability are very important values and there are some built in protections to help us achieve this. Two I want to draw attention to in this update centre on the areas of misconduct and public disclosure. In simple terms the Corruption and Crime Commission deals with serious conduct while the Public Sector Commission investigates allegations of minor misconduct.





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It is one thing to disagree or be dissatisfied with a decision that has been made or to have a personal grievance. It is entirely another when you believe or have evidence that there has been wrongdoing. There is a lot of information available online or from the Council about how to make a public interest disclosure and also what might amount to wrongdoing. There is also information about the rights and responsibilities of those making a disclosure. By all means, make contact with me if you want to discuss further.

There is also really good guidance available on the Corruption and Crime Commission website about serious and minor misconduct. Serious misconduct in general terms deals with corrupt activity while minor misconduct has a broader definition. Again it is important to note that these avenues only deal with public officers and not elected officials.

Over the course of the next week or two I am setting up meetings with representatives of various groups or individuals who have reached out to me as part of my effort to bring context to my decision making. I'll initially be prioritising community groups but if you would like to chat with me, please send me an email and I will get back in contact to organise something.

One question I will be posing to those I meet with is what in their eyes constitutes a good outcome and why? People look at issues and challenges through different lenses and my job will be trying to look at both what the law says and what is in the public interest. Something you will hear me say often is that I will be required to apply the law as it stands, not as people would like it to be. That doesn't mean you need to be rigid as my experience in working with policy and legislation over many years is that there is generally flexibility and a way to achieve a good outcome. The other aspect is that sometimes people look at a law or policy in isolation rather than how things work together. My job will be to look holistically at each situation.

My immediate priority has been on the VC Mitchell Park project and I hope to provide a bit more of an update over the next few weeks.





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On a personal note, can I say thanks to whoever made the great knitted 'Bluey' I got from the Village Pedlars in Balingup and to those from the Donnybrook Artisans who provided the other gifts I relied on as Christmas presents. My 20 month old granddaughter loves her Bluey (even though she calls it Bingo) and is carting it everywhere!

Special thanks to the amazing volunteer and career firefighters for their work in dealing with the recent fires and in keeping us safe more generally – I'm just sorry I missed the lolly distribution!

Finally, thanks also to those orchardists who have provided the amazing cherries and apricots, I have consumed in vast quantities over the past couple of weeks.

Gail McGowan

Commissioner of the Shire of Donnybrook Balingup

