



**BOURKE
SHIRE
COUNCIL**

“From the Acting General Manager’s Desk”

18 May 2023

COVID

It was 30 January 2020 when COVID-19 was first declared a global health emergency by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Since that initial declaration, some 6.9 million people have died around the world as a result of the disease. In Australia there have been more than 11 million confirmed COVID cases. Life as we know it changed. Economies were disrupted, face masks became the norm, as did working from home with teleconferences and livestreaming of a variety of events becoming common place. I was pleased to hear that the WHO recently declared the COVID-19 pandemic over as a global health emergency. In saying that, the WHO was also quick to say that “COVID is here to stay.” With a peak in January 2021 of more than 100,000 people dying per week around the world, the death rate in April 2023 has slowed to just over 3,500, according to WHO data. Whilst a massive reduction in numbers, it is still sad to hear of these number of fatalities.

Here to stay it is and in NSW for the 7 days till 4pm, 4 May 2023, 12,323 new Covid cases were recorded, with 53 deaths, 1290 hospitalisations and 29 people in intensive care. I am aware of numerous cases of COVID here in Bourke, Dubbo and Mudgee.

I noted from the news that a couple of schools in Sydney had reverted to wearing masks as a safeguard due to a spike in cases. I also understand that some of the schools in Bourke have adopted the same measure on a temporary basis.

NSW Health has issued a series of resources regarding COVID at <https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19> Health are encouraging people to stay up to date with their recommended vaccinations advising that it is “safe and convenient to get your COVID-19 and flu vaccines at the same time.” In Bourke these are available at the Bourke Aboriginal Corporation Health Service at 61 Oxley St in Bourke. You should contact the Bourke Aboriginal Corporation Health service to make an appointment. Immunisations are available on a Wednesday and Friday.

Source a rapid antigen test and if you feel unwell, test yourself. If positive and to reduce the risk to others, NSW Health recommends that you stay at home until your acute symptoms have gone.

In addition, don’t visit people who are at high risk of severe illness, anyone in hospital or an aged or disability care facility, for at least 7 days; wear a mask when indoors and on public transport, if you must leave your home; avoid large gatherings and indoor crowded places, especially where you will be in contact with groups of people you don’t live with; talk to your employer about when you should return to the workplace; tell people that you live with, or spend a lot of time with, that you have COVID-19; and register your positive rapid antigen test result with Service NSW on 13 77 88.

Registering your result helps you access medical support from NSW Health, including antiviral medicines if you are eligible, and also assists NSW Health respond to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This keeps you, your loved ones and the community safe. If you tested positive on a PCR test, you do not need to register your result as it will be done on your behalf.

Given the onset of winter and the flu and cold season it is good practice to maintain good hygiene practices such as washing your hands, using sanitiser and coughing into your elbow. All of these will hopefully assist in reducing the spread of the various virus and the resultant impact on the community.

Federal Funding

In May 2020, the Federal Government announced the Local Roads and Community Infrastructure (LRCI) Program which was introduced to support councils across Australia deliver priority local road and community infrastructure projects, supporting jobs and the resilience of local economies following the impacts of COVID-19. Under Phases 1-3 of the program, Bourke Shire Council fared very well with a total of near \$4.5 million in funding received. The latest projects under this Program in Bourke are the redevelopment of the Bourke Program (Learners) Pool and the redevelopment Bourke Swimming Pool Entry and Kiosk, which is currently underway.

Council recently received correspondence co-signed by the Hon Catherine King MP, who is the Federal Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, and the Hon Kristy McBain MP, Minister for Regional Development, Local Government and Territories, to advise that the Federal Government had committed, across the Nation, a further \$750 million of funding under Phase 4 of the LRCI Program. Phase 4 includes two (2) components of funding with Bourke Council to receive near \$1.2 million to spend on priority local road and community infrastructure projects, and then a further \$692,000 to spend on road projects. In total, Phase 4 of the Program will see \$1.892 million in funding delivered to the Bourke Shire. With Program Guidelines and Grant Agreements to be finalised by the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts over coming months, it will be a case of Council determining its project and road priorities, once the Guidelines become available. Bourke Shire Council is in a solid position in respect of determining funding projects having strategically developed, and regularly updated, an extensive list of potential projects, which I must say, are gradually being “ticked off” as projects are undertaken.

Council, and certainly the Bourke community, are most appreciative of the continuation of this funding by the current Anthony Albanese led Federal Government and the Scott Morrison led former Government who initiated the Program back in 2020. Council has undertaken numerous excellent projects to improve the amenity and liveability of Bourke, with the improvements at the Bourke War Memorial Olympic Pool being a great example. Without this funding, the Pool would be nowhere near as impressive a facility that it now is and will further be further enhanced once the kiosk and entry area works are completed.

Emergency Services Levy

Another piece of correspondence Council recently received, which wasn't as positive as the advice relating to the Federal Governments Local Roads and Community Infrastructure Program, was Councils invoice from Revenue NSW relating to payments due in respect of the Emergency Services Levy. This levy has been implemented to fund the operation of the NSW Rural Fire Service, NSW Fire and Rescue and the State Emergency Service, with funding being sourced from three (3) avenues, with insurance companies collecting 73.7 per cent of the amount from property insurance, the state government contributing 14.6 per cent and local councils funding 11.7 per cent of the costs. In 2019/2020 the NSW

Government introduced an increase in the emergency services levy to fund reforms to workers' compensation for firefighters suffering from work-related cancers. Whilst firefighters should be protected, the compensation added significantly to the levy across the State and following a willing campaign by local government in NSW, the NSW Government picked up the additional costs on Councils by refunding payments made up until 2022/2023. In 2023-2024 year, councils across the State will have to pay the full contribution which will rise from \$143 million last financial year to \$219 million next financial year.

For the 2023/2024 period, Councils invoice for the levy amounts to \$253,115 which is an increase of \$73,470 on the previous year's invoice. Council is obviously most concerned about these rising and additional costs. With Council permitted to increase its rates in 2023/2024 by 3.7%, noting that inflation is running at 7.0%, Council will raise some \$64,000 as a result of this "rate cap" funding. The issue is that 115% of these additional funds will be soaked up by the increased emergency services levy. It obviously is not just Bourke Shire that is affected by the increases. As examples, Hay Shire Council will immediately lose 88.6 per cent of its approved rate rise to the levy, Yass Valley Council will lose 96%, Tenterfield will lose 119% whilst larger urban councils like Hornsby and Shellharbour will lose around 75% of their approved rate rises. It's a tough pill to swallow and Council is working with its peak industry body, Local Government NSW, as it pursues the State Government on the ever-increasing funding impost.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for Councils across the state to be able to fund the current levels of services and facilities provided to their communities.

During their visit to Bourke last week the President of Local Government New South Wales Darriea Turley and Chief Executive Scott Phillips indicated that they will be meeting with the NSW Treasurer in an effort to see the subsidy restored for 2023 and the development of a fairer, more transparent and financially sustainable method of funding the critically important emergency services that benefit the whole community.

May Council Meeting

The May Council Meeting will be held on Monday 22 May 2023 commencing at 9.15am in the Council Chambers, Mitchell St, Bourke. Whilst the meetings are livestreamed via a link on Councils website (www.bourke.nsw.gov.au), members of the public are more than welcome to attend.

Quote: "The government had encouraged the public service to come to the government with frank and fearless advice." Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese responding in Parliament to a question from Independent MP for Goldstein, Zoe Daniel, who warned that her view was that consulting firms were tailoring advice.