



DOUGLAS SHIRE RATEPAYERS ASSOCIATION

Q&A RESPONSES

NATALIE JOHNSON

1. What will you do in your first 6 months as a Councillor?

My primary objective would be to meet key staff, familiarise myself with Council assets, policies, procedures and pending matters requiring immediate attention – chiefly the budget and current Water Resilience Strategy.

First-year objectives include the forward planning and delivery of Council basic services - roads, public health, waste collection, streetscape beautification and maintenance plus the streamlining of administrative processes. Also the forward planning of park and playing field maintenance with the installation and upgrade of equipment suited to our diverse family demographic including a children's water play facility, basketball half courts, pump tracks, walking and biking tracks, fitness equipment, water stations, shaded seating and barbecues together with the continuation of community services and grant funded activities.

Working with stakeholders to plan toward diversify our economy through the exploration of opportunities together with stakeholders in Indigenous, wellness, agricultural, educational and eco-tourism, parallel to our flagship reef and rainforest experiences will establish Douglas as the most diverse and unique destination in Australia.

2. What do you see as your role as a Councillor?

The role of each councillor is to represent the current and future interests of the residents of Douglas Shire whilst ensuring they follow the purpose and principles of local government, statutory responsibilities of councillors and any other obligations under the Local Government Act.

The role is also to ensure the local government achieves its corporate plan, complies with all applicable laws, discharges its responsibilities under the act, provides leadership and accountability to the community, participates in meetings, policy development and decision making for the benefit of the whole Shire both now and into the future.

3. What makes you stand out from other candidates?

I bring to the table a diverse skill set. I excel in the field of communication, have forged excellent relationships with local, state and national tourism and government bodies, I am a small business owner, the only candidate with an extensive tourism background and understanding, and who is still raising a family which positions me to be more empathetic and understanding of our Shire's families and tourism industry. I bring a younger perspective, a positive, creative, and financially conservative view, recognise the benefits of cultural diversity and have sat on strategic boards and committees locally contributing to my big picture thinking and advocacy of strong collaboration.

4. What should Council do to improve water security in the Shire?

Continue working on the water resilience strategy. Look to the creation of a circular water economy by investigating the upgrade of the PDWWTP to the next level from tertiary to allow increased use of recycled water on all public parks, playing fields, garden beds and council managed nature strips. Lobby the State for access to the home Water Tank rebate scheme, continuation of a solid maintenance program, increased education (if its yellow let it mellow, if its brown flush it down), interesting and creative school based education – get them from a young age, and the potential creation of a leisure-based water storage facility are all opportunities to be considered.

5. How would you ensure that the views of all ratepayers and residents are heard when consulting with the community?

Some want more consultation, others want less. For those seeking more consultation, the introduction of new engagement strategies including mobile and/or rotating meeting times and targeted email notifications of consultation opportunities on a platform that can be measured such silver stripe – these programs advise open rates, bounces, unsubscribes and blocks and provide hard data on engagement. The development of a quarterly community newsletter combined with continued social media and weekly updates in the Gazette and the possibility of introducing Councillor portfolios like the State and Federal System are all on the table. Ultimately, face to face is the best way to communicate, so being visual in the Shire and participating in as many diverse community activities as possible contribute to a councillor being accessible, approachable and available to listen.

Text message options cannot be measured as you cannot find out how many are read and at 40 cents per text, they become expensive.

6. How can the Douglas Shire Waste Management system be improved?

Currently I feel waste management is good, but there is always room for improvement.

Recycled materials in the yellow bin are separated in Cairns. Containers for cash is proving popular for local kids as a source of income as are charities.

We have free green waste dumping opportunities twice yearly – perhaps we can consider a voucher system with the rates notice to enable ratepayers to dump green waste when it is convenient to them.

Currently Killaloe breaks up waste into sections for recycling and offers the Scrap Shack.

Sludge from the WWTP is dried out and sent up to the Tablelands for use as fertiliser.

Other ideas include greater education (squash cans, break down boxes) introduce an education program for composting and worm farms to decrease landfill and reduce waste in the home.

Over the river – we need to review the results of the curb side trial and see if residents prefer to pay for waste collection or take it down to the transfer station.

7. What do you think the process should be for determining discretionary spending?

In terms of councillor discretionary spending, it is not something Douglas has as an undivided Council. All CAPEX and OPEX is budgeted for currently.

Rates collected are not as valuable in the bank (especially now) and more valuable spent on infrastructure provided we have enough for a rainy day and meet the liquidity ratio determined by the state.

Note on the block: the block was a capital purchase from money sitting in the bank. It was not an operational expense, so nothing was sacrificed from the operational budget to purchase the block which is now a community asset with a range of possibilities to benefit tourism, employment, education and conservation.

As a community, we now own the land and can use our creativity to create a revenue stream through tourism, partner with educational institutions, traditional owners and the community over the river to enhance what we offer in Douglas.

8. What gaps (if any) do you believe there are regarding Community Engagement?

Some want engagement, others want less. Refer to question five as these same strategies for engagement are pertinent to this question.

9. What % of closed Council meetings per year do you see as acceptable?

Policies and procedures regarding closed council meetings are set by the State under the local government act. If council are discussing contractual matters, tenders or a staffing issue, you must go into a closed council.

Council also must vote to go into closed session. However, if they don't go into closed session, they can't discuss certain issues as per the state legislation.

So, the percentage of closed council meetings is dependant on the agenda of the day.

Regarding workshops. Opening opportunities for residents to present in workshops and be a part of the discussion process can be considered, provided the options for closed sessions are still available as per the legislation.

10. Do you believe the current Rate Category System is fair and equitable (explain your response)?

My understanding is in 2014 it was suggested that a review of the rating categories for fairness and equity be reviewed and this was done in 2016 and passed unanimously by the sitting council at the time

Is this review still valid? Perhaps, but we need to ensure all the different rate categories pay their share of the rates burden.

There is perhaps an opportunity to review the types and number of categories but always in line with concepts of fairness and equity.

11. If elected what 3 steps would you take to improve the economic status of the Douglas Shire?

Continued, extensive capital works program – building on the record capital works last year.

Create a positive and welcoming environment for private enterprise and circumstance that economic development can occur.

Have an agriculture conversation regarding crop diversification (aquaculture has proven successful) and opportunities for the Mill bio precinct.

Promote Tourism diversification (Indigenous, education, eco-tourism, agritourism, wellness) alongside our reef and rainforest flagship experiences.

That's four I know, but the more the better!

12. What do you see as the key infrastructure barriers to sustainable development?

Water, capacity of the Cook highway, preservation of agricultural land and ongoing mill security.

Over the river have additional challenges of power and ferry operations.

13. How should the Community be involved regarding major development approvals?

The community is involved in the development and review of the planning scheme through various consultation processes.

In terms of other developments. Much depends on whether they are code assessable – which don't require consultation and comply with the planning scheme.

Impact assessable DA's don't apply with the codes in the planning scheme, so they come to the council for approval. Part of that process is community consultation.

Could all be changed but it would back up the process!

14. Do you see opportunities for Council to generate revenue from sources other than rates and government grants, and if so, give examples?

Council could consider private business, but you would have to ensure it is not competing with private enterprise, so niche business opportunities could be considered. Mossman pool how to swim generates revenue to offset the operational expenses of running the pool for the greater good of the community.

I believe we should be trying to extrapolate as much money as possible from the State and Federal governments from grants as it frees up our Shire revenue for other projects.

15. Do you believe the level of economic growth in the Shire is at an acceptable level?

The figures presented at the Douglas Business Expo by Robert were extremely encouraging – particularly his comments on a national trend toward increased infrastructure development – something Council delivered as part of a record CAPEX last year and should continue into the next year of course underpinned by consideration of the environment, economy and social wellbeing.

Currently, with what is going on globally, it is fortunate the Shire has no debt, as it will provide a buffer, which is something other Shires cannot do without borrowing. For example, Cairns Regional Council is carrying a \$121 million dollar debt which one of these days they are going to have to pay back.

Tourism has always experienced peaks and troughs – much of this is out of our control, plus as a small community we must fight for position to be heard over the millions of dollars being spent by other regions. As I have mentioned, I have worked through external disasters including the GFC and SARS, and positively supporting and collaborating will help us ride out the tourism downturn. Already I am hearing reports of increased domestic bookings over the Easter and school holiday periods from out of our major domestic source markets Melbourne and Sydney which is encouraging.

We do still need to support international travel however and show the world we are not afraid to travel and support them too. It goes both ways.