

Unit is under fire

< Paul Shaw

Richmond Valley Council (RVC) economic development and promotions unit is under fire on multiple fronts.

Several councillors have questioned the unit's efficiency and effectiveness and the unit is at odds with Casino Beef Week organisers.

Beef Week's major sponsor, the Northern Cooperative Meat Company, while saying it would continue to support the Richmond Valley's signature tourism event, wrote to RVC in support of the Beef Week board.

Organisers of several other community events are critical of the unit. Reports of excessive paperwork being required for assistance applications are common.

Others complain that the unit's staff members operate their own agendas when dealing with organisations they should be helping.

Beef Week chief is optimistic

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Casino Beef Week board chairman Cr Stuart George is optimistic about resolving the differences between the board and the council economic development and promotions unit.

"The recommendations and resolution of council mean that Beef Week can move forward to work with council to develop an improved relationship and, importantly, better outcomes for Beef Week in the future," Cr George said.

"As indicated in the report to council, the period from 2005 to 2008 was a hectic time for Beef Week and the boards. There were decisions that needed to be made about the 2007 Beef Week and also the ongoing changes to the event.

"There were three different boards over this period and the board elected in 2007 was a brand new board that was basically starting from scratch.

"The council had its own perspective in requiring specific actions for Beef Week as its signature event. With the Beef Week board being volunteers, the changes mentioned and the need to establish a clear direction for the renewal of Beef Week, it was very difficult for Beef Week to fully address what council was seeking.

"This perspective appears not to have been recognised and understood by council. In that respect it is very clear that better communications need to be established between council and Beef Week. The General Manager and I have already had discussions to that effect and will be progressing that issue and the matters raised via the council resolution."

Cr George said that, given the circumstances outlined above, it was difficult to implement the actions/strategies proposed in the Lorick Plan of Management for 2008.

"The board only received the plan in February 2008 and by this time we had the Beef Week events all organised," he said.

"We as a board and the committee adopted the plan at a meeting in February 2008 with the idea of revisiting the plan after Beef Week. The board has already used some of the suggestions in the plan and will continue to use this plan when needed.

"The basis of the plan is for implementation to occur in conjunction with Beef Week 2009. Beef Week recognises that as part of the signature-event status council is seeking a more strategic focus for the event. That fits in with the direction the board hopes to take. So, over all, we aren't miles apart. It is more about recognising each other's perspective and working on improving the communication between Beef Week and the council."

Cr George said the board was very happy

Reports that unit staff are hard to contact or do not return calls are frequent.

Community media organisations complain that the unit often issues press releases too late for them to be of any use.

Two long items in the business papers for the RVC meeting, on November 18, dealt with the tourism unit.

The first report gives a history of the unit, lists some of the milestones in its development, summarises the results of a recent staff workshop and looks at future directions for the unit.

It aims to answer councillors' queries about the unit's functions and status.

The second report details the progressive deterioration of relations between the unit and the Beef Week board and questions whether Beef Week deserves to be the 'signature' tourism event for the Richmond Valley, a tag which carries with it \$26,000 of funding over the next three years.

Cr Stuart George is the chairman of the Beef Week board and took up the post earlier this year. The immediate past chairman is mayor Col Sullivan.

One frequent criticism of council and the unit is that they lack a tourism policy or a tourism plan.

RVC general manager Brian Wilkinson said the focus and objectives of council's Economic Development/Promotion Program were clearly outlined in council's Annual Management Plan.

"The progress of that program is reviewed by the elected councillors on a quarterly basis and can be redetermined by the council as part of its annual management plan processes," Mr Wilkinson said.

with the outcome of Beef Week this year.

"The fact Country Energy has signed on as our platinum sponsor until 2011 shows that our sponsors too are happy with the way Beef Week went this year.

"We are currently negotiating with other sponsors for three-year deals. This is a suggestion we have adopted out of the management plan.

"We conducted a survey this year and the results we have obtained will help us and future boards in the planning of Beef Week. The results show visitors spent nearly a \$1 million over the week, averaging a daily spend of \$240 a person. Locals spent \$167 daily and the most favoured events were the Opening Night, Fashion Parade, Street Parade and the Led Steer Comp and Auction.

"The survey showed us that there was a lack of events for youth. We have taken this on and are in the process of organising events that will target youth, both during the week and on the main Saturday in the street."

On the question of whether Beef Week might lose its council funding, Cr George said that his perspective and that of the board was that the councillors made the decisions for allocation of sponsorship funding that was made by council.

"We, as a board, are very appreciative of the continued support we have received from the council. Council made certain resolutions at its November meeting that we both believe that will only help us overcome our communication problems.

"We look forward to our opportunity to respond to what council has asked us."

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Fishing Classic 'gave up on them'

< Maria Walsh

"We gave up on them, we just stopped trying to get help or sponsorship altogether," John Ritchie said, referring to council's relationship with the Evans Head Fishing Classic.

Mr Ritchie is the public officer and one of the founding members of the classic, which has been running for 13 years.

The fishing competition arguably is one of the most successful events in the Richmond Valley (winning council's Event of the Year in 2005). It started with unanimous support from the then Richmond River Shire Council which provided a small start-up grant (Richmond River Shire amalgamated with Casino Shire in 2000).

The frustration of the fishing classic committee centres on lack of support from council.

"All we wanted was for the Silver Sands Caravan Park to support us with a sponsorship, just like the other businesses in town," Mr Ritchie said.

"The irony is that the caravan park is the business that most benefits from the thousands of people attracted by the event. But the park is a council-run operation and this is not permitted."

Mr Ritchie said the rub was that they were presented with a 'book-length' application form, which required a great depth of information including the conducting of a survey, for an unspecified amount of support.

Ray Collins, president of the fishing classic, further explained the difficulty of applying for council's 'grant'.

"There are conditions placed on being given those funds, and a process dictated by application dates, which makes it virtually impossible to obtain them," he said. "For instance, certain components of the grant need to be put towards marketing and advertising. By the time the grant is provided to us we have gone way past

the promotions stage and already sent out our brochures and done our marketing. We can't hold things up to wait for their decision; otherwise the classic is at risk."

And the work required to get all the paperwork done is, according to Mr Ritchie, unreasonable.

"They want all this information which is very time consuming," Mr Ritchie said. "We are all volunteers on committee; most of us have businesses or full-time work and our focus has been running this major event. We're flat chat. Council wants us to jump through hoops and we just haven't got the time to do that."

Mr Ritchie said the increased profits of the caravan park went straight to council coffers, and none went back into the classic.

Cr Ray Jeffery agreed. He is a founding member and supporter of the classic and he has sat on the Silver Sands Caravan Park management committee for many years. Council's view, he said, was that it already provided 'in kind' support through mentioning the fishing classic in its tourism brochures and web site.

(Note: There is only one mention of the fishing classic on council's new web site – in the detail of the Calendar of Events. The classic prints and distributes 5000 brochures of its own as advertising.)

In Cr Jeffery's view this is not enough and he is aware that the classic does not value this contribution greatly.

"I know for a fact that some of the profits from the caravan park go back directly into the tourism department of council and help pay for the salaries of tourism officers," Cr Jeffery said.

According to this year's financial report, income from Silver Sands Caravan Park for 2008 was \$1,872,000, up from \$1,749,000 last year.

Cr Jeffery said he was used to people approaching him angrily about Council's lack of support and contribution for community events.

Major sponsor speaks out

< Paul Shaw

The Northern Cooperative Meat Company (NCMC), the Casino Beef Week major sponsor, said Richmond Valley Council (RVC) needed to ensure council staff supported and assisted the Beef Week board.

NCMC chief executive officer Gary Burridge said reports the company was considering withdrawing its Beef Week sponsorship because it was dissatisfied with the economic development and promotions unit's operations, were incorrect.

"NCMC is considering its position because council has again had an internal report presented from the 'Unit' questioning Beef Week's signature event status," Mr Burridge said.

"If council removes the signature event status then there will be a shortfall in sponsorship and a lack of commitment and assistance."

Mr Burridge said that from the NCMC perspective, it appeared there was an element within some employees of council which had an agenda of its own with regards to Beef Week and it appeared they did not wish to work through the Beef Week board and its committee.

However, he said the company had received a 'promising' letter from council suggesting there would be a resolution to the issues it had raised.

"NCMC has always been a major sponsor of Beef Week and its committee," Mr Burridge said.

"We inject a significant cash contribution and in-kind involvement to an extraordinary level including the supply of meat, preparation and assisting with cooking it for Breakfast on Walker.

"We also organise the beef industry expo for producers. We have also aligned an industry public holiday for our employees to coincide with Breakfast on Walker and the Race Day."

Mr Burridge said the NCMC felt that council needed to ensure its paid employees supported and assisted the Beef Week board and its committees and that they had commonly aligned objectives without the conjecture which had been seen in council.

"Council and its employees need to recognise that the Beef Week board has been duly elected by the community to stage Beef Week," he said.

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