

Planning Yass Valley Inc.

A non-profit Association seeking a better planning outcome for residents and ratepayers in Yass Valley.
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Notes from the Yass Valley Council's Forum on 5 August 2021

Topic: Community Strategic Plan

Executive Summary

The Forum held on 5th August 2021 as part of the Towards 2042 programme will contribute very little useful data for future planning of Yass Valley.

The two biggest deficiencies in the forum were the lack of time to discuss options and that very few ratepayers and residents were notified about the forum.

Introduction

The Forum on Thursday 5 August was conducted by a PR company called Projectura under contract from the Canberra Region Joint Organization (CRJO).

22 people attended the Forum of which 2 were from Projectura and one from Council. Out of about 17,000 residents and ratepayers of Yass Valley only 19 bothered to take the time to have their say on the future of Yass Valley.

However, the forum was only one part of the process. About 300 people completed the survey and about another 100 made some input to the process.

A random phone contact process has yet to begin.

This document is a brief summary of the Forum and a review of how effective the Forum was in determining what planning needs to be done for Yass Valley.

Canberra Region Joint Organization

The CRJO that contracted Projectura was set up as a forum for "...councils, state agencies and other stakeholders to identify shared priorities".

CRJO has 10 member councils as shown in Figure 1. The ACT Government is an Associate member so presumably can't vote for any decisions by the CRJO.

According to the minutes of the last CRJO meeting on 11 June 2021, the CRJO has a budget of over \$2.5m. About half of which comes from grants and the other half from "other revenue", presumably the "other revenue" is money from Council budgets (i.e. your rates).

It is probably reasonable to assume that Projectura is not unduly influenced by vested interests in Yass Valley given

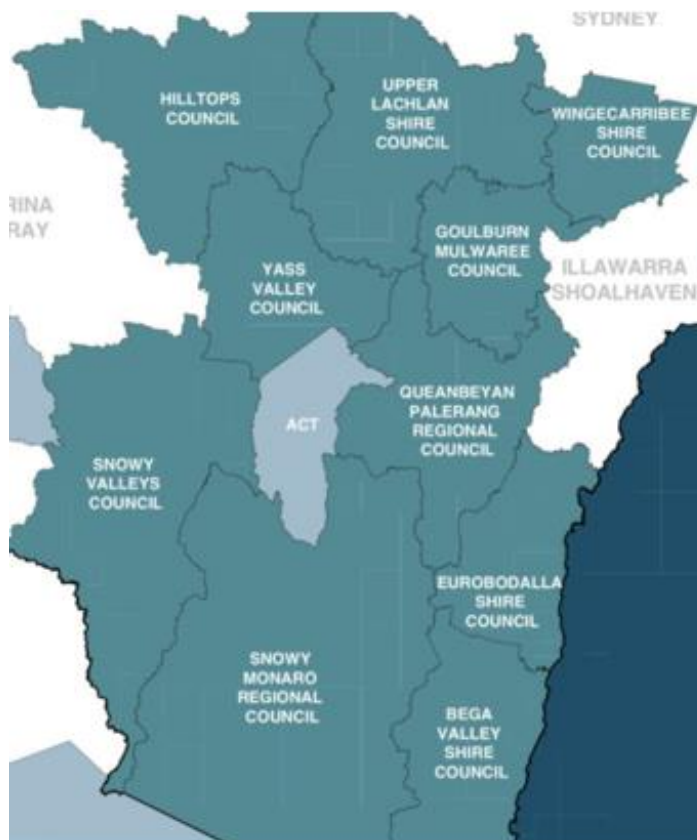


Figure 1: Canberra Region Joint Organization (CRJO)

that Projectura is paid by the CRJO and not Yass Valley Council.

The 5 August 2021 Forum

The Forum facilitator explained the community consultation process and stated that the intention was to produce a new document for Yass Valley called the Yass Valley Community Strategic Plan.

The Yass Valley Community Strategic Plan is to be separate from the Yass Valley Settlement Strategy 2036.

The forum was structured around a set of PowerPoint slides that had roughly the same questions as used in the online survey. Attendees were asked to select from multiple choice questions and fill in boxes with information such as what is good about living in Yass Valley.

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Most of the time was spent filling in the survey.

Unfortunately, only about half the people at the Forum contributed written input. Given the age group of those attending, many may not have been able to type. Some were on mobile phones (why is everyone so dependent on mobile phones?) and others were watching through their smart TV.

Multiple-choice questions are not an ideal way to get accurate information as the choices may be deliberately limited to skew the answer to whatever answer was desired by the people writing the question.

Open ended questions elicit the best information, but as stated above, not everyone could type written input. The Projectura team did offer to take telephone calls, but that would have slowed the process down and the schedule was tight anyway. There was no evidence that anyone called in with their response to the open-ended questions.

The forum broke up into two teams who were asked to discuss:

- The priorities of: strategic priority, environment, economy, community, infrastructure and leadership.

Attendees were given 5 minutes to provide a verbal input and were also asked to provide written input.

The overwhelming response was better governance was needed. Those attending clearly felt that Yass Valley Councillors had done a very poor job at consultation and responding to ratepayer's needs.

- The vision for Yass Valley

Although the Forum was Towards 2042, the facilitator said that the discussion on the vision was for what ratepayers would want to see in 10 years' time. Why is the whole programme called Towards 2042 if no one can really envisage what it will be like in 21 years' time?

Did the Forum achieve meaningful results?

The short answer is no. It wasn't a complete waste of time and money, but it wasn't an effective way of collecting accurate data to use as a basis for a 21-year strategic plan.

Key deficiencies in the process of collecting data at the Forum were:

1. The limitations of the video meeting as it involved attendees typing responses and not all attendees were able to provide typed input either due to lack of equipment or time.

Also, some people would need more time than allocated to create a sentence or two and enter it using one or two finger typing. The pressure to type quickly was most likely a significant inhibitor to receiving information from all the participants to open ended questions.

2. The deficiencies of the video conference and skills of the facilitator became evident during the team discussions on the priorities and vision statement.

The facilitator tried to keep up with typing points from verbal input from team participants, but in doing so could not also encourage discussion of points raised.

How could the data collection process be improved?

The biggest deficiencies in the Forum and other data collection processes that are part of the Towards 2042 project are:

1. The purpose of a forum was to facilitate discussion but there was very little discussion.

Apart from the team member's 5-minute speech opportunity on the two stated topics (priorities and vision statement) there was no overall opportunity to discuss and debate.

Video forums are difficult, but there should have been more opportunity to debate issues and ideas.

2. No diagrams were drawn during the Forum

People in a group work best with diagrams. Presenting lots of random and hastily typed comments does not help people focus on what is required and how the topic fits into other topics.

There are many tools available to draw diagrams on screens as would be done on white boards or flip charts.

3. There was no opportunity to identify issues for different parts of Yass Valley.

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Yass Valley has about 5 distinct zones each with totally different needs. Only one participant mentioned a way to solve this. That was that each zone should have some level of self-management.

The zones need to be identified and their needs explored. A suggested set of for zones is:

- 3.1. Yass – Murrumbateman urban areas
- 3.2. Jeir - Weejasper – Wallaroo
- 3.3. Sutton Mulligans Flat
- 3.4. Gunning – Gundaroo
- 3.5. 5km zone along the NSW ACT border

The Forum would have been more effective if the zones had been identified and a representative from each region invited to the Forum.

The former Ward electoral boundaries provided this sort of zone representation. Perhaps a reintroduction of wards needs to be discussed as well.

4. While the “What do you want” was asked at the forum and in the surveys, there was no opportunity to discuss the “How” or “When?” anything could be provided.

Asking attendees to produce a “wish list” without asking how it will be paid for is meaningless.

Also, the timing is important. Every activity takes time to organize and implement and the priority needs to be discussed by the community as part of the community consultation process.

One of the problems ratepayers have is the way Council decides on the how and when. Ratepayers need more input to that process and that input should be through community forums.

5. There was no opportunity to make a decision at the forum.

The ratepayers should have the opportunity at the forum to decide on an outcome, not the facilitator or the Council after the meeting.

The Yass Valley Councillors received a lot of criticism at the Forum so Council staff or councillors should not have any input to the “conclusions” of the forum.

6. There was no opportunity to discuss the performance of Yass Valley Council against the key performance indicators (KPI) given in the Tablelands Regional Community Strategic Plan.

The basis of the Forum’s discussion on a vision for Yass Valley was the vision stated in the Tablelands Regional Community Strategic Plan. The assessment of the KPIs in that document should have been presented to the Forum so that the attendees could see how well that strategic plan was performing.

Also, no mention was made of the future of the Tablelands Regional Community Strategic Plan or how the new Yass Valley Community Strategic Plan will fit in with existing State and Council documents such as the Yass Valley Settlement Strategy 2036.

7. There is a lack of effective community wide consultation on the Towards 2042 programme. The lack of consultation will result in inaccurate data that will allow the Yass Valley Councillors to legitimately create any policy that they want and it may not be in the best interests of the community.

The question of why Council didn’t provide a copy of the Towards 2042 documentation to every ratepayer came up on several occasions.

The reason given was that it would be prohibitively expensive for Council to send out a notice to every ratepayer.

It is ironic that every ratepayer received their rates notice by mail on the day or day after the forum.

8. The scheduled time for the forum 3-6pm would preclude many people participating who cannot get the time off work.

That time might be convenient for Council and Projectura staff, but it certainly isn’t convenient for most of the community who should have had the opportunity to join the forum after hours.