

10 November 2023

To General Manager, Mr Glenn Wilcox

BY EMAIL:


Dear Mr Wilcox,

The Ratepayers' Association of Tenterfield Shire Inc. request the General Manager, by way of Council Resolution, to propose the immediate withdrawal from sale of the property at **157 Rouse Street, Tenterfield (Lot 11/DP 1241545) (aka Visitor Information Centre)** allowing it to remain in Council ownership.

Background:

- At the 26th July 2023 Ordinary Council Meeting, Councillors passed a motion (part of Item ECO14/23, 119/23) to
 2. Cease all Council-run Visitor Information Services and transition all such services to the Tenterfield Chamber of Tourism, Industry and Business (TCTIB) no later than the 1st September 2023 ensuring no interruption of Visitor Services.
 5. Authorise the Chief Executive Officer to list the above property for sale at an asking price of \$700,000.
- Visitor Information Services did not cease on the specified date because the TCTIB had not put any plans in place so the CEO authorised the continuation of the existing arrangement for one month facilitated by the goodwill of the existing volunteers.
- The decision to close and sell the VIC was made the month before Council received a report from Councillors Tim Bonner and Kim Rhodes who attended the 2023 Manly/Northern Beaches – Destination and Visitors Economy Conference. This report contained some important takeaways relevant to this issue, among them being:
 - Most visitors to rural communities still wanted the personal touch preferring to speak with centre staff or volunteers and local business operators.
 - There are 152 Visitors Centres in NSW, 61% of these operated by Local Councils.
 - Welcoming experience; Knowledgeable, professional staff, skilled in customer service; Unbiased, authoritative and tailored information; Local stories and insights. Delivering on these needs is the core objective of all accredited VICs across Australia.
 - The availability of EV charging facilities is becoming more important, with users of these facilities having social networks sharing where they are available.

Also very important are:

- ❖ Appropriate parking for long/large vehicles such as caravans/motor-homes is essential.
- ❖ The Tourism Group, the appointed consultancy company contracted as the Program Manager for Destination NSW's Accredited Visitor Information Centres network has very specific requirements that must be met before the  symbol may be used.

The current VIC operational model and location meets ALL these criteria.

- The existing volunteers have all indicated that they are unwilling to work with the TCTIB in its present format.
- There is strong objection within the community and from RATEs members to the sale of assets, especially those that facilitate a community service, with most citing the old adage “you can only sell it once”; indeed this exact same opinion was expressed by the GM at a meeting I recently attended with him. The VIC, together with other assets that were being considered for sale have strong community ties, either through direct involvement in their establishment, (labour, funding, lobbying) or by ongoing support by dedicated volunteers. Any monies realised, assuming a \$700,000 sale less commissions, will not have a significant impact on the Council’s financial position, and probably represents only a small proportion of the replacement value of such a building. (This doesn’t take into consideration the location of this building and its undoubted suitability to a Visitor Information service.)
- There is a strong possibility that some information given to Councillors regarding the costs of maintaining and operating the VIC was incorrect or inflated and therefore could have improperly influenced their decision to close and list the centre for sale.
- During the recent Referendum some two hundred Declaration Votes were cast at pre-polling in Tenterfield. This represented just some of people from outside the New England Region, (other regions in NSW, QLD, VIC, TAS, & SA) who travelled through Tenterfield in the 5 day period.
- In the period the VIC has been closed, a number of past VIC volunteers and residents have noticed travellers stopped at and peering into the building wondering why such a facility should be closed. These past volunteers have given their time and knowledge to unofficially help these visitors with information; it is a real shame that we don’t have numbers to demonstrate how many travellers have stopped only to find the facility closed. (One traveller simply stated, “Oh well, we might as well just keep going”, NOT a great result for the Tenterfield community and its businesses.)
- At a public meeting, members of the TCTIB openly stated they did not have the time or desire to casually interact with tourists to promote the shire as “they have their own businesses to run”.
- It is not at all assured the TCTIB will be successful with their proposed model utilising brochure stands and on-line services; it is certainly not supported by the report from the Destination and Visitors Economy Conference or by comments from visitors finding the VIC closed.

Recommendation:

- Immediately withdraw the VIC property from sale and retain in council ownership pending more information being available regarding the future of Visitor Information Services in Tenterfield.
- Encourage the TCTIB (or other appropriate group) to engage in meaningful dialogue with the past VIC volunteers with a view to re-establishing a face-to-face Visitor Information presence.

Yours sincerely,

