*Grandstanding or Good Governance?*



**Companion Animals**

At last night’s Council meeting we debated a motion put up by Clr Wheeler regarding companion animals.

I was not happy with parts of the motion so I put up an amendment that I thought would provide the community with a better understanding of the current situation and more importantly provide a better outcome for the animals in question.

Clr Wheeler’s motion contained 5 points. I will explain my reasoning on each point in **blue** and include the information given by staff:

Point 1

*Notes that the $29 adoption programs for cats and dogs have been very effective at rehoming stray and surrendered animals from the HCA Shelter but these programs run at a significant cost to Council.*

Comment from Staff

* The Hawkesbury Companion Animal Shelter has been operating at capacity in terms of dogs throughout 2023. The capacity issues have also affected the Shelter for cats/kittens since early December 2023, with several days at maximum capacity for both dogs and cats, which as a result meant that new stray animals could not be accepted by the Shelter. This was also compounded with kitten season being in full force.
* The $29 rehoming fee for kittens was introduced as an emergency effort to accelerate rehoming and make room for the next batch of arrivals. As the kitten influx has levelled out, the $99 adoption fee has returned. Dog adoption fees have been kept at $99 and only reduced to $49 if the animal has been a resident at the Shelter for longer than five months.

**My comment**

**Clr Wheeler wanted us to note that the $29 adoption program for cats and dogs has been very effective…. Without any supporting evidence I was not inclined to note this. In fact, this point was incorrect, the $29 program was for cats. Dogs were $49… but that aside, it is important that we get a proper briefing on the matter. Taking our information from other Councillors is inappropriate.**

**The current situation is that the Shelter already has the capacity to reduce the adoptions fees when needed in a crisis. The note from management stated that the influx of kittens had levelled out - so not in crisis as Clr Wheeler claimed in the meeting.**

**I do appreciate that the animal shelter by its inherent nature is in crisis a lot of the time, but we still need to follow sound decision making.**

Point 2

*Reviews the operating policies at the Shelter to ensure that there is a limit on the number of reduced-fee cats and dogs able to be rehoused to the same address and /or person, to prevent hoarding, cruelty and on-selling.*

Comment from Staff

* Recently, Council has begun implementation of new Shelter management software. This software allows for Shelter staff to track all animals adopted from the facility to ensure people/households are not ‘over-adopting’. Further, shelter staff have developed a process where if Shelter staff are suspicious regarding the motivations of a customer, the circumstances are to be escalated to management and adoption can be refused if deemed appropriate.

**My comment**

**There was no need to include Point 2 as it was already policy and already being implemented. Including Point 2 in the motion gave the community the impression that this was not being done when it clearly was.**

Point 3

*By March 2024, provide Councillors with a briefing detailing the costs and feasibility of running at least two free annual microchipping and registration days in the LGA.*

Comment from Staff

* Planning for annual free microchipping days is currently underway. These days could be held at the Shelter, and potentially upcoming Council events and promoted in due course.

**My comment**

**Since this was also underway, this point wasn’t really necessary either. However, I did include this in my amendment (given below).**

Point 4

*Allocates $5,000 to a subsidised desexing program in the Hawkesbury, operated either by the Council or the Animal Welfare league (AWL), to be funded by a quarterly review variation, and include an amount of $10,000 in the 2024/2025 budget.*

Comment from Staff

* Planning for Council-run subsidised desexing initiatives is currently underway. An analysis of the Animal Welfare League program could be undertaken in order to evaluate the costs versus animals desexed in comparison to a Council-run program. However, there are greater opportunities to promote animal adoption and Council’s animal services more broadly if the Companion Animal Shelter runs its own program.
* It is also worth noting that Council has recently managed a procurement exercise with local veterinary clinic to standardise fees paid for desexing, as well as other veterinary services. This action was undertaken in order that Shelter staff could accurately calculate Shelter expenditure regarding these services, to ensure veterinary clinics were being paid a fair fee for their services and to enable budgetary planning to enable the introduction of programs such as subsidised desexing.

**My comment**

**Again, work on the delivery mechanism and funding of a subsidised desexing program is already being done. Clr Wheeler’s figures seemed to be plucked out of the air and were not based on any data. At times in the debate in the chamber it seemed like what was being asked for was for a donation to the Animal Welfare League. The governance around this arrangement was not clear and as such I was not prepared to support it. This is not to say that I don’t support the work of the AWL – I do and I will do my utmost to assist them in every way possible.**

**Also, it was recommended by staff that there would be better outcomes if the Shelter ran its own program (highlighted in yellow).**

**Why Clr Wheeler plucked a figure of $10,000 out of the air regarding the budget for subsidising the desexing program for 2024-2025 is mystifying. It may end up, after the budgeting process that we need to provide more.**

Point 5

Acknowledges the work of the Animal Welfare League Hawkesbury and other rescue organisations in the Hawkesbury and promotes the subsidised desexing and microchipping programs across our social media platforms to help increase uptake.

**My comment**

**No problem with this point other than it seems the AWL was singled out by Clr Wheeler as being the organisation that would be best placed to partner with. As a responsible Councillor I need to know why this is the case. It may very well be the case, but there was simply no case presented.**

**Now to my amendment**

**That Council:**

1. **Continues to receive new information and updates on the improvements taking place at our animal shelter, including an update by March 2024, on the planned free microchipping and registration days.**
2. **Receives a briefing on the funding required to run a fair and effective subsidized desexing program (delivered by Council or by another animal welfare organisation or by some partnership arrangement) early in the budgetary process for 2024-2025.**
3. **Acknowledges the tremendous work done by animal welfare organisations in the Hawkesbury and thank them for their efforts in rehoming animals and reducing their pain and suffering.**

**Concluding remarks**

**I was more than willing to include additional points to the amendment and expected that there would be some negotiation. That didn’t happen. Clr Wheeler, even though claiming we were in a crisis chose to not work together and to wait until the next Council meeting to put another motion up.**

**I’ll leave it to you to determine:**

**Grandstanding or Good Governance?**