

COMMUNITY SPACES AND SERVICES

ATTACHMENT A

FOOTPATH ACTIVITIES IN TOWN CENTRES

STRATEGIC MEETING

14 FEBRUARY 2018

12 VIBRANT SPACES TRIAL

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SUMMARY OF REPORT

Interest has been expressed by both the business community and the Local Representative Committee (LRC) in extending the provisions of the Vibrant Spaces initiative detailed in the "Footpaths in Town Centres Policy" (see Attachment A), adopted in 2015 by the former Greater Taree City Council.

This report discusses a proposed trial extension of the Vibrant Spaces initiative undertaken across the Manning Valley and identifies an intent to extend the approach to discreet areas within MidCoast Council – specifically the town centres of Bulahdelah, Gloucester, Tea Gardens, Hawks Nest, Pacific Palms & Stroud.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATION

1. That the Vibrant Spaces initiative undertaken across the Manning Valley be extended to the town centres of Bulahdelah, Gloucester, Tea Gardens, Hawks Nest, Pacific Palms & Stroud on a 6 month trial basis.
 2. That the existing policies and procedures which apply to footpath use in the former Gloucester and Great Lakes Local Government Areas be suspended over the trial areas until the findings of the trial are reported back to Council.
 3. That the "Footpaths in Town Centres Policy" adopted by the former Greater Taree City Council which covers the town centres of Taree, Wingham, Old Bar and Harrington, be extended to cover Bulahdelah, Gloucester, Tea Gardens, Hawks Nest, Pacific Palms & Stroud until the findings of the trial are reported back to Council.
 4. That the payment of existing permits/leases over footpaths and permits/leases sort up until the end of the trial be suspended until the findings of the trial are reported back to Council.
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FINANCIAL/RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Extension of the Vibrant Spaces initiative to the town centres of Bulahdelah, Gloucester, Tea Gardens, Hawks Nest, Pacific Palms & Stroud will have a minor budgetary impact in the order of \$1000 - \$2000. This impact is considered acceptable given the potential economic benefits the trial has to offer the local business communities within these localities.

There will also need to be significant staff resource allocated to the promotion and facilitation of the Vibrant Spaces initiative in the new areas. How this resource will be allocated is yet to be determined.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Nil

BACKGROUND

A Vibrant Spaces trial was conducted in Taree in 2014. The trial concluded that the most appropriate way to manage footpath space in town centres is not through existing regulation but by way of policy. Consequently the “Footpath Activities in Town Centres” Policy was adopted by the former GTCC in 2015.

Based on the experience in the Manning Valley the vibrant space concept is a good low risk approach that has the potential to stimulate economic growth and activity if it is fully supported by the local business community.

Outcomes from the Taree Trial

- the majority of participating businesses (74%) reported an increase in their sales and number of people entering their store
- 85% of those surveyed felt there was a positive change in the vibrancy of the streets
- the number of cafes with outdoor dining doubled
- confidence in the rental market improved
- the partnership between Council and businesses improved
- future improvements were implemented by local businesses at their cost to further improve the look of the street
- both the community and businesses reported wanting more - more chairs, more colour, more activity, more shops involved and the concept allowed in all our town centres.
- improved perceptions about the Taree town centre being more “colourful and friendly”.

This success was attributed to the:

- use of simple rules
- easy sign-up process
- removal of fees
- cooperation between businesses, the community and Council
- willingness of Council to trial and explore new ideas.

DISCUSSION

The successful trial in Taree and subsequent policy adoption has delivered significant benefit to businesses operating in areas where economic stimulation is required.

Typically, the policy delivers benefit where businesses are operating but would not otherwise choose to go through the process of obtaining development approval, then entering a subsequent licence arrangement with Council due to cost and regulatory impediments.

Additionally, these areas typically present a “low risk” environment for removal of the traditional regulatory approach to the management of footpaths and business operators in smaller town centres.

It is proposed that MidCoast Council adopt a trial period where the former Greater Taree City Council Policy “Footpaths in Town Centres Policy” is extended to limited town centres in the MidCoast region which would result in:

1. a minimalist approach to regulating the use of footpaths
2. imposition of just three key requirements
3. suspension of fees payable to use the footpath.

Key Themes

Simplicity:

Simplicity was crucial to the success of the trial in Taree. Providing a simple brochure outlining the three simple rules allowed for a clear understanding of the trial (see **Attachment B**). The sign-up process was very easy and provided an element of trust. Businesses need only to ‘tick a box’ confirming that they have undertaken the relevant steps.

Facilitate vs Regulate:

There is great potential for MidCoast staff to change and as was in the case in Taree, shift from being enforcers of rules and regulations to being advisors. This relationship grew into a partnership with Council and business sharing goals to benefit community. With a better understanding of the barriers Council imposes on businesses, we were able to work together to remove the red tape that impedes business growth and success.

Access:

The Australian Human Rights Commission outlines that for as far as possible, a footpath should allow for a continuous accessible path of travel. They have a range of footpath requirements including “a minimum clear width of 1.8 metres at the narrowest point and a minimum clear height of 2 metres”. This width is based on two people using wheelchairs having enough room to pass each other or turn around if required.

The Commission:

... encourages local government authorities with responsibility for footpaths to develop policies that reflect this good practice, however, individual authorities must make their own decisions on how to proceed based on the needs of local communities, local conditions, historical practice and any unique heritage or environmental issues.

In summary, the application of these guidelines is at the discretion of each Council and we need to consider ways to engage community members who can provide advice to business and Council on access issues but recognise that this is critical to the success of the trial.

Business Partnerships:

The successful application of the trial is also dependent on ongoing monitoring and coaching of business to test, trial and respond quickly when things don’t work. It is therefore imperative that we work with local chambers of commerce and anticipate that members of the chamber can be trained to encourage and support the trial.

Benefits

- Limited compliance staff (rangers) are able dedicate time to more community significant activity (such as pollution and illegal dumping).
- Improved relationship with Council
- Stimulates collective thinking between business in town centres to improve streetscape.

COMMUNITY IMPACTS

Nil.

RECOMMENDATION

1. That the Vibrant Spaces initiative undertaken across the Manning Valley be extended to the town centres of Bulahdelah, Gloucester, Tea Gardens, Hawks Nest, Pacific Palms & Stroud on a 6 month trial basis.
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3. That the "Footpaths in Town Centres Policy" adopted by the former Greater Taree City Council which currently covers the town centres of Taree, Wingham, Old Bar and Harrington, be extended to cover Bulahdelah, Gloucester, Tea Gardens, Hawks Nest, Pacific Palms & Stroud until the findings of the trial are reported back to Council.
4. That the payment of existing permits/leases over footpaths and permits/leases sort up until the end of the trial be suspended until the findings of the trial are reported back to Council.

ATTACHMENTS

- A. "Footpaths in Town Centres Policy" adopted by the former Greater Taree City Council.
- B. Vibrant Spaces Brochure

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189/16 RESOLVED (Turner) (as per recommendation)

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