

## Mayor Kerr's Budget Address



I am proud to table this Council's first budget since being elected, with the people of Douglas Shire voting to steer the region in a new direction.

What I believe is a responsible direction of increased transparency, sensible investment and a need to strengthen the shire's economy. All things we can look forward to seeing this term.

COVID-19 lockdown restrictions may have depleted our local economy, but I am determined to build resilience in the face of adversity.

For the past six years, this council has followed a plan of financial sustainability by driving towards a budget surplus - a dubious goal that unfortunately fell well short.

Douglas Shire is as vulnerable as it is beautiful. Whether it is any of the recent natural disasters, or a global pandemic, our entire region buckles when our tourism sector falters. Businesses shut their doors, unemployment escalates and people leave the region.

Economists predict that up to 1,547 jobs and \$150 million could be lost from our local economy by the time they crunch the numbers for the June quarter in coming days. Now is the time for sensible policy and investment to build our resistance to outside influences.

I believe we can do this by growing our rate base, diversifying industries and exploring revenue raising opportunities. This Budget is the start of that process. Over the next 12 months, Council will deliver its largest ever budgeted capital works program with a focus on renewing and upgrading critical infrastructure as we build our way out of Covid-19 and expect this to grow as further grant funding becomes available.

A total of just over \$21 million worth of investment will see \$12.5m spent on civil works projects such as roads, footpaths, bridges and drains, and a further \$5m pumped into improving the Shire's water and wastewater infrastructure.

It is clear that this council has an important role to play in keeping our local economy moving and this program lets us focus on providing essential services to our community. Council will also dedicate \$1.4m on public spaces and sporting infrastructure.

While we have prioritized investment in essential infrastructure, we have made sure there is a collection of projects that our community can also be proud of.

You can also expect to see more workers on the ground with extra funds allocated for the outdoor crews to get the important tasks done.

Offering the required level of service, along with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Council's financial position is now expected to be pushed back to a \$3.7 million operating deficit.

But now is not a time for this Council to be chasing a quick surplus with unreasonable rate rises.

Now is a time for creating jobs, repairing infrastructure and ensuring our economy becomes stronger through progress.

Council will do this while finding alternative revenue streams, to ensure ratepayers do not continue to wear this burden over the next many years. We are facing uncharted territory but we are committed to getting the shire back on track through growth and diversity, rather than cutbacks and reductions.

This responsible budget keeps Council financially viable without imposing any unreasonable increases and most importantly whilst stimulating the economy. As promised in this budget, the general rates and utilities have been capped at the CPI level of 2.2% and as a Covid assistance offer; we will introduce a 1.2% general rates discount for those that pay their rates before the due date. This added discount will keep an estimated \$140,000 in the pockets of rate payers.

Over the next 12 months, we will continue to explore revenue-raising opportunities and fully investigate how rates are calculated across the shire to ensure that in the future years we bring back fairness and balance to all ratepayers.