

The Northern Beaches Council's proposal to increase rates by up to 46% is deeply concerning. It is particularly alarming to see Councillors attending community consultation sessions seemingly supporting these significant rate rises *before* the consultation process has concluded. This undermines the very purpose of genuine community engagement and gives the appearance that decisions have already been made.

The Northern Beaches 'Shadow' Council is an initiative of former Liberal Councillors, though it is open to all members of the community who share our commitment to ensuring accountability and advocating for sensible, community-first governance. We provide residents with a platform to voice their concerns and challenge decisions that place unnecessary strain on households and businesses.

We are especially concerned that the 'Your Say' consultation questions on the proposed rate increases appear to be structured to steer public feedback towards a predetermined outcome. By prioritising options such as "Improve Services" and "Increase Services" while linking service levels solely to rate hikes, the Council limits genuine community choice and stifles alternative solutions.

Key Issues with the Consultation Process

- **Order Influences Perception:** By placing "Improve Services" at the top of the list and "Increase Services" at the bottom, the Council subtly frames the former as the most reasonable option while portraying the latter as extreme. This biased framing leads participants toward the Council's preferred middle-ground option, which still involves significant rate increases.
- **False Dichotomy of Choices:** The consultation restricts feedback to service levels tied directly to rate hikes, excluding alternative approaches such as cost-cutting measures or internal efficiencies. This framework prevents residents from voicing innovative solutions or expressing opposition to rate increases altogether.
- **Feedback Mechanism Bias:** By requiring participants to rank all options, the Council effectively coerces respondents into legitimising rate increases. This data can then be manipulated to present an artificial consensus in support of higher rates.
- **Selective Framing of Impact:** The descriptions of the options likely emphasise negative consequences for "Reduce Services" while highlighting benefits for "Maintain Services" or "Improve Services." This approach plays on community fears and pressures residents to accept rate hikes as inevitable.

The ranking system and the overall structure of the consultation process raise serious concerns about the integrity of the feedback mechanism. Rather than genuinely capturing community sentiment, the consultation appears more focused on justifying predetermined outcomes that align with the Council's interests.

A Call for Fair and Transparent Consultation

We call on the Northern Beaches Council to adopt a more transparent and inclusive approach to consultation. A fair process should:

- Include options that explore cost-cutting measures and innovative funding solutions within the existing budget.
- Present choices in a neutral and unbiased manner.

- Allow participants to reject rate increases outright without coercion.
- Clearly outline how feedback will be interpreted and used to inform decisions.

The community deserves leadership that prioritises cutting waste, addressing inefficiencies, and exploring alternative funding options rather than passing financial burdens onto residents. The Northern Beaches 'Shadow' Council is committed to standing up for the community, advocating for smarter governance, and ensuring that public voices are genuinely heard in all decision-making processes.

Regards, Michael

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