

SPECIAL COUNCIL MEETING 23 March 2020

Response to COVID 19 Pandemic

In light of the global pandemic, the Town of Bassendean has adapted its range of services and support to the community as we face the challenge of the Coronavirus (COVID-19). This comes at an important time, when people look to government for leadership, support and compassion.

The approach is based on minimising the health risks and financial burden, while maximising support for the most vulnerable members of our community. A number of statutory services such as waste collection will continue as per normal.

Strategy

In line with the Business Continuity Plan, the Chief Executive Officer has established a COVID-19 Advisory Group which meets daily to monitor the situation, assess risk and respond accordingly. The group comprises the Executive team plus the Manager Human Resources, Senior Health Environmental Officer, Manager Strategy and Governance and the Corporate Communications Coordinator, drawing in other specialist staff as required. The Bassendean Local Emergency Management Committee (BLEMC) is due to meet on 1 April and the Town's Business Continuity Plan will be discussed.

Health Measures

To minimise the health risks to staff and the community, the following measures have been implemented:

- In accordance with government advice, all events and programs have been cancelled
- All bookings for Town venues and halls have been cancelled
- Town workplaces have increased hygiene and cleaning, and administrative staff will be working from home the majority of the time from this week
- The Customer Service Centre and Bassendean Memorial Library have been closed to the public, while remaining accessible by phone, email and online
- The drop-in centre run by Youth Services and the RYDE driver education program are now closed
- Social activities at Seniors services at Ashfield have been scaled back.

Services from the Town's Library continue to be provided through online e-services and over the phone means, until at least the end of May (subject to further review).

At the two Wind in the Willows childcare centres in Ashfield and Bassendean, the centres are governed by strict national hygiene standards for Early Childhood Education and Care as per <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/attachments/ch55-staying-healthy.pdf>

Government subsidy for staff wages are dependent on the Town keeping the childcare centres open until the Government advises otherwise. In the event the Town voluntarily closes the childcare centres, no government funding will be available for staff wages. A decline in the demand for childcare services with a number of families now staying at home, has seen the centres operating at a reduced capacity of 60%. There has not been any modelling on potential financial impacts on this service area at this point in time.

At Senior Services, the primary concern is the provision of care to the most vulnerable and at risk group in the community without compromising the health and safety of staff or perpetuating the spread of COVID-19. The service will remain open and continue to provide care to seniors as long as it is safe to do so, workforce availability permitting in line with Government direction – as our funder. Some clients have cancelled services in favour of self-isolation, however there has been a recent increase in new client referrals and at this stage cancelled services are being replaced twice over with new ones. Staff workload has not diminished – conversely, adherence to increased hygiene and social distancing measures has meant a significant increase in efforts. This is further compounded by the age of volunteers who are an older cohort and no longer able to support the service due to risk factors to themselves and clients, with the exception of one. It's anticipated that this trend will continue due to changes announced from CHSP to make it easier for seniors to access services during this time.

Of the new measures in place, the most significant is that “urgent or immediate CHSP services can be put in place for up to six weeks, for clients affected by COVID-19 or in self-isolation, without requiring an assessment”.

Commissioner's Order

Under the authority of the State Emergency Coordinator, the Commissioner of Police has now prepared a Commissioner's order under the Emergency Management Act.

This relates to the closures of State institutions as well as:

- Cultural institutions (libraries)
- Pubs, registered and licensed clubs (excluding bottle shops attached to these venues), hotels (excluding accommodation)
- Gyms and indoor sporting venues
- Cinemas, entertainment venues, casinos, and night clubs
- Restaurants and cafes will be restricted to takeaway and/or home delivery; and
- Religious gatherings, places of worship or funerals (in enclosed spaces and other than very small groups and where the 1 person per 4 square metre rule applies).

The Town is ensuring Town owned facilities, in addition to all businesses, are adhering to the above through correspondence to be distributed this week.

Community Outreach

From late March 2020, the Town will establish “Neighbour Assist” designed to provide support to the most vulnerable members in the community. It involves a telephone hotline 9377 8099, with staff and volunteers rostered to deal with calls and respond to matters arising.

This dedicated line will differ from current business-as-usual activity. Responses may include the provision of information, access to counselling and offers of help. Information requests will be monitored over time to ensure the Town is being responsive to community need.

This realignment of community facing services will also incorporate actively approaching people who may be vulnerable, using existing databases and networks, to offer practical and emotional support. The hotline seeks to provide connection and empathy to those disadvantaged, isolated or experiencing practical barriers.

Whilst the focus is on personal support and empathy, some people will require referral to existing services or practical interventions from staff and volunteers such as essential items. The hotline is the first of several initiatives.

The Town will contact Ashfield CAN, Success Hill Action Group, Eden Hill CAN, the Old Perth Road Collective and SES for example to discuss opportunities to work together in caring for our community during this crisis.

Funding for the Town's current sponsorship and grants program and commemorative services is able to be repurposed to have a specific focus on emergency funding over the next 3 months including the potential for grants to community groups seeking to support housebound local residents to reduce people's sense of social isolation.

Businesses

The Town will contact businesses via email newsletter to ask what they are experiencing, what support they are seeking and then referring them to information or resources, for example, through the Small Business Development Corporation.

The Town will also not actively pursue any compliance action associated with activities necessary to support businesses, including delivery curfews.

A focus on health and hygiene measures is particularly important during this period and greater attention will be paid to ensuring businesses are aware of their obligations. The Town will also seek out local businesses providing online or takeaway services and promote these in an online community directory. The Town will promote on its website, support tools, for those that may be facing unemployment including how to submit an intent to apply for support via Centrelink.

Activities

The Town will continue to explore opportunities to engage the community at a time when they are more housebound. To mark milestones such as ANZAC Day, NAIDOC Week, and Danjoo Koorlini, the Town can develop ways to acknowledge these occasions through themed corporate branding, signage and historical/cultural content on the Town's online platforms.

Community members will be encouraged to undertake their own solo activities, such as lining the streets at safe distances for ANZAC Day, which the Town can promote through its online channels. Programs such as RELax will revert to online workshops. The Town may choose to foster gardening as an opportunity for relaxation and therapeutic benefits, particularly given the latest verge transformation guidelines to help residents create more useable space on their verge. The Town could provide free mulch to residents.

Support for Town Employees

All Town employees have been informed of precautionary measures issued by the World Health Organisation together with Federal and State authorities. Administrative staff will be supported to work remotely. Under the Occupational Safety and Health Act (1984), employers must – as far as reasonably possible – ensure the health and safety of workers, contractors and other persons at the workplace are not put at risk in the workplace.

Arrangements are in place for outside workers to have staggered start and finish times, allowing only one person per vehicle, and reducing the number of staff working from the Depot.

It is proposed, the Town grants up to 20 days of COVID-19 leave to employees who have contracted COVID-19, need to care for another person who has COVID-19 or is required to self-isolate, cannot access school or other care arrangements because of COVID-19 or are otherwise prevented from working because of COVID-19.

COVID-19 leave is only intended to be made available after an employee's existing paid personal leave or carers leave have been exhausted.

These are similar provisions recently offered by the State Government.

Communication

The Town will continue to update its communication as the situation evolves and it reassesses its response, including via social media, web and its newsletter Thrive (due out in late April 2020).

The Town has increased its social media presence to ensure the community is kept abreast of the situation but also recognise that more people are likely to be using social media during this time. Thrive will be used as a mechanism to reach every household and business. Included in Thrive will be an update on the Town's response to the pandemic and measures for community outreach including promotion of the Town's hotline for vulnerable people.

Community groups will also be invited to distribute to every household and business a flyer produced by the Town to help to identify people in need; promote the Town's Community Outreach service; and encourage neighbours to help each other.

Council Meetings

Currently there is no provision under the Local Government Regulations for Council meetings and Committees of Council meetings, to be undertaken in an online environment. It is anticipated the State Government will enact Regulations in the coming days to cater for this. Whilst the Town is constrained by the state of its technology and heavy reliance on manual processes, efforts are underway to ensure future meetings are conducted in an online environment.

Impact on Budget

The Town has an allocation of \$36,000 as part of the mid-year budget review to be considered at the Council meeting later in March 2020 to respond to COVID-19 for personal protective equipment for staff and other emergency requirements.

It may be necessary to allocate further funds prior to 30 June 2020, which can be done as part of the regular monthly financial reports to Council. To reduce the financial burden on ratepayers, minimising any rate increase for 2020-21 and deferring any costs associated with a proposed underground power project until 2021-22 may also be measures considered by Council at the appropriate time.

These measures are consistent with the Premier's recent request to the Mayor of the Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) for a unilateral freeze on rates, fees and charges across member Councils. Further forecasting is required to assess the impact of such measures.

Current remaining sponsorship and events funding (\$16K) and commemorative services funding (\$16K) for 2019-20 is proposed to be repurposed for community initiatives using more streamlined delegations in the current environment where timeliness is of the essence.

More broadly further forecasting of the financial impacts of the pandemic on the Town's budget for the 2020-21 Budget is required.

The stimulus packages announced so far by the State and Federal Governments have addressed individuals and businesses. It may be possible to access federal funding for community projects and services in the short to medium term by advocating to bodies such as the East Metropolitan Regional Council (EMRC), WALGA etc.

The Town's response to COVID-19 will continue to evolve as the situation changes. The Town will remain adaptive and agile and will put the health and wellbeing of the community and its workforce as a priority.

OFFICER RECOMMENDATION – ITEM 4.3

That Council in recognition of the impact of the Coronavirus (COVID19):

1. Requests the Chief Executive Officer to prepare a budget scenario for 2020-21 based on:
 - a) 0% rate revenue increases in accordance with section 6.2 of the Local Government Act and no increase in fees and charges.
 - b) Any proposal for the undergrounding of power by Western Power in parts of Eden Hill and the Bassendean area, not to financially impact home owners in the 2020-21 financial year.
2. Delegates to the Chief Executive Officer the authority to use the remaining sponsorship and events funding and commemorative services funding for the remainder of this financial year in order to facilitate community outreach services including the potential for community grants;
3. Approves 20 days COVID-19 paid leave for employees who have contracted COVID-19, need to care for another person who has COVID-19 or is required to self-isolate, cannot access school or other care arrangements because of COVID-19 or are otherwise prevented from working because of COVID-19.