

Nepean News 4/8/15 ②

New democracy in Penrith



By Garion Thain

PENRITH City Council is about to undertake a new move in deliberative democracy with the formation of a Community Panel, comprising of 35 everyday people from the Penrith LGA.

Residents who accept the invitation to take part in the panel will be provided with detailed information to analyse and make recommendations to council on their assets and services.

The operation is spearheaded by the newDemocracy Foundation, a not-for-profit organisation who specialise in citizen engagement, and have formulated similar panels in other councils and states.

The new campaign will begin in September, when the panel members (who have yet to be formally selected) will meet for the first time in their first meeting of several that will take place until the end of the year, the meetings being an all-day affair, from 9:30 until 4:30.

newDemocracy Executive director Iain Walker and Penrith Mayor Ross Fowler met with the media at Penrith Council last Tuesday to give a formal preview of what the Community Panel will entail.

"We're giving [council] a 'problem,' – an open discussion," said Mr Walker.

"There's the trade-off mindset, the community panel has to be complimentary to the decision elected representatives have to make," he elaborated.

Mr Walker cited a similar exercise in Canada Bay as an example of the surprise effectiveness



▲ A preview for The Penrith Community Panel has revealed the panel of everyday residents will begin meeting on September 5th.

a community oriented panel can have for elected councillors and the broader community alike.

At Canada Bay, the community panel observed council's deficit in depth over their meetings and deliberated on suggestions on how to save money. One money-saving idea that the panel approved suggested council could mow public lawns every three weeks rather than two – a proposition none of the councillors in Canada Bay could say they had considered themselves.

"It's about balancing," explained Mr Walker.

"If you're right, make your case to 34 other people. If 34 people say 'I don't want to spend money on that,' that's a message in itself."

Mr Walker said one of the most common observations to come from these panels is that "this is harder than it looks."

"We give people a blank sheet," he said.

"If you had 5 minutes with the mayor and council,

what would you say?"

Expert speakers are present at most meetings to inform the panel about various assorted topics relevant to the discussions they may be having.

Cr Fowler described the exercise as a way of improving council's relationship with the community, first and foremost.

"We thought we'd like to take community consultation to another level," Cr Fowler said.

"Whatever information [the panel] wants will be provided."

Cr Fowler said his measure of success at the end of this exercise would be a standard, robust direction resulting from the panel's recommendations.

The Penrith Community Panel will begin meeting on September 5th and begin their discussions and later recommendations therein. More information is available at <http://yoursaypenrith.com.au/community-panel>.