

29 October, 2020

Dear Editor,

I am writing as a follow-up to my letter published in the August edition and to again correct recent reporting in the Meander Valley Gazette.

In your October edition, I was disappointed to note further apparent breaches of Australian Press Council [APC] standards of practice in your reporting about Council and its staff. For the record, the community is always welcome to question or criticise Council decision-making. That said, such scrutiny should be levelled where the responsibility lies: with Councillors, and with Council's executive arm, including myself.

In her piece titled 'Sydney'sider's abattoir plan for Mole Creek approved', Ms Sharon Webb writes, "...while they did not voice support for the abattoir, Cllrs Cameron, Johnston, Sherriff, King, Bower and Kelly voted for [the motion] because [a named Council officer] advised it complied with the Meander Valley Planning Scheme". In doing so, Ms Webb has improperly misrepresented Council's process. Councillors vote after considering all relevant written and verbal materials, including representations by the public. They do not act solely on a Council officer's advice. In suggesting this is the case, the Gazette, whether intentionally or recklessly, invites personal scrutiny of Council officers with no factual, legal or structural basis for doing so. Scrutiny for voting outcomes rests, as a matter of democratic principle, with the elected representatives whose votes decide the motion, not the officers working to inform the motion.

Further, there will rarely be any public interest in reporting on individual officers' personal circumstances, particularly when based on incorrect and unsubstantiated information. The Gazette, in reporting the appointment of Council's new Governance Coordinator, has again got it wrong by harvesting personal information from the officer's online professional networking profile and whatever other uncited sources. Our Governance Coordinator does not purport to hold a Masters of Teaching as reported and was not directly engaged by the Safe at Home program in her previous role. Her event management background was also incorrectly paraphrased. The Australian Press Council's standards enshrine "a person's reasonable expectations of privacy"; they also compel factual reporting. It is disappointing that these standards appear to have been set aside yet again.

Council takes its statutory responsibility to protect the wellbeing of staff seriously. It is my responsibility, on behalf of Council employees, Councillors and – by extension – the Meander Valley community, to highlight the impact of inaccurate and editorial opinion expressed as reporting on Council staff and indeed the perceptions of the community.

Factual reporting, without embedded opinion or undeclared language of editorial commentary or bias, of relevant matters is essential to inform constructive community debate. As stated in my last letter, Council supports promoting community awareness through accurate reporting. I can only hope that the Gazette commits to this and upholding the APC standards to which your publication professes to abide by.

Yours sincerely,

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GENERAL MANAGER