

20 December 2024

Hon. Lily D'Ambrosio
Minister for Energy and Resources
Email: [REDACTED]

CC/ Sonya Kilkenny, Minister for Planning [REDACTED]

CC/ Nick Staikos, Minister for Local Government [REDACTED]

CC/ Jaclyn Symes, Minister for Regional Development [REDACTED]

CC/ Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria [REDACTED]

CC/ Martha Haylett, Member for Ripon [REDACTED]

CC/ Emma Kealy, Member for Lowan [REDACTED]

CC/ Anne Webster, Member for Mallee [REDACTED]

Dear Ms D'Ambrosio

Transition to Renewables – Resourcing Concerns

Thank you for meeting Northern Grampians Shire Council on 19 November 2024. Council appreciates the opportunity to raise our concerns with you.

Council acknowledges the need to transition to renewable energy. However as discussed in the meeting this is placing significant pressure on Council, with Northern Grampians Shire Council along with other rural Councils struggling to resource and respond to the transition to renewables. This is further compounded by the rapid pace at which the transition is occurring.

Local Government is the closest level of government to the community. It is the level of government that is most familiar with the community, the issues it is facing. It is essential that Councils are resourced to be able to respond to this transition, to support the community, and to represent the communities' views.

There are currently 12 renewable energy projects with the Shire. Of these five are approved and seven are proposed. Of the seven proposed, three are running concurrent EES process, these being the Western Renewables Link, VNI West, and the Navarre Green Power Hib Wind Farm and Battery. There is a significant amount of work for Council in responding to proposed projects including submissions, meetings, reviewing of technical reports, and attending technical reference group meetings.

Due to the speed at which the transition is occurring, these projects are progressing concurrently with the State Government preparing plans to support the transition. As a result, Council's resources are being stretched not only to responding to proposed renewable energy projects, but also in responding to new policy direction such as the Draft Renewable Energy Zone Community Benefits Plan, and the Draft Victorian Transmission Plan.

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There is no question that these projects having a significant resourcing impost on Council, one which is not able to be absorbed within existing staff resources. Unlike metropolitan and many regional city Councils, who have a team of strategic planners, rural Councils have limited staff resources, in particular planning staff. There is no scenario in which Council can continue to progress its existing workload whilst simultaneously responding to 7 proposed renewables energy projects, along with State Government led plans and policy proposals.

This puts Council in a difficult position where it is forced to deprioritise existing work and commitments, or limit attendance/technical report review. This particularly frustrating when Council has a strong interest in being involved and representing its community. It is noted that there has been limited Council attendance or participation in the VNI West TRG meetings/technical report review. Consultation and engagement with Councils is important, but ultimately is meaningless if Councils are not resourced to be able participate in the consultation and TRG processes.

Further Council wishes to raise concerns with the timelines for the EES processes. The timeframes mean that TRG members, are receiving incomplete reports for review, with information missing or yet to be determined. An example of this is the TRG reports for VNI West (of which there have been 13 distributed to date) which are missing technical assessment of the proposed accommodation camps, laydown areas, and the proposed second terminal station at Bulgana. Often other important information such as appendices and maps are missing. Whilst it is acknowledged that the reports will be updated when this information is available, the distribution of the reports without this information is further compounding resourcing and workload constraints and necessitating further additional reviews of these reports once this information is available.

The timelines for report review have also been challenges, with as little as two weeks being allocated for review on some report. This in itself is difficult in itself due to resourcing and workload constraints, but it is made more difficult when Council is seeking external consultant support to assist in the technical report review.

An example of the workload associated with these projects is highlighted by the following snapshot taken on Friday 29 November highlighting the workload associated with these projects.

- Draft VNI West EES Scoping Requirements out for consultation (15 day timeframe for submissions)
- 15 hours (or 3 days) of TRG meetings across the three projects requiring EES's (over a three week period)
- Full day TRG for Naverre Green Power Hub on 4 December
- Review and comment on the draft consultation plan for one TRG
- 13 technical report reviews across two TRGs, with all report reviews due either prior to Christmas or in January 2025.

Funding for Staff Augmentation

The scale and urgency of these projects are significant. Given the increasing workload associated with the projects, as highlighted by the snapshot from Friday 29 November, the Council is facing significant resource pressures. To ensure the ability to participate in this transition, and to represent Council and the community, we are requesting **funding for staff augmentation** to hire a **shared Council role across the Wimmera Southern Mallee**.

Specifically, we are seeking:

1. Funding for a Dedicated Council Wimmera Southern Mallee Staff Resource

- Annual cost: **\$150,000** (inclusive of salary, on-costs, and overheads).
- Duration: **At least 5 years** to ensure sustained support for ongoing project commitments.

This funding will enable Councils across the region to hire a dedicated resource to manage critical renewable energy transition-related tasks such as:

- Council responses to new policy direction
- Responding to proposed projects
 - Technical report reviews
 - Attending Technical Reference Group meetings, including preparations
- Community Consultation

If you would any further information or to discuss this letter further, please contact [REDACTED]

via [REDACTED]



Yours faithfully



BRENT McALISTER
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

