



## “FROM THE GM’S DESK” 25<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST 2011



Congratulations to all people involved with the Health Services which have resulted in the most modern surgical equipment being available in Bourke for specialist cataract eye surgery. On Tuesday this week I was privileged to be involved with several Councillors and many members of the Bourke and regional community for a launch of the newly upgraded medical equipment now located at the Bourke Hospital. We had an opportunity to meet with the specialist medical staff involved with the use of this new equipment, most notably including representatives from the Prince of Wales Eye Team who provide the regular services at Bourke, with the support of local Doctors and hospital personnel.

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Funding for the project involving the Indigenous and Remote Eye Health Service (IRIS) has been provided to the Australian Society of Ophthalmologists by the Australian Government, allowing for the specialist equipment to be placed in only a handful of remote communities across Australia. Bourke is the only such location in NSW, and there are none in Queensland. Other locations to receive similar equipment include Alice Springs, and Karratha, Kununurra and Derby in Western Australia. Cataract surgery in these communities can now be performed to the same standard of professionalism as is available in the best hospitals in any capital city, being simple, safer and with faster recovery than previously available techniques.

Bourke Shire Council was one of many organizations which lobbied strongly a couple of years ago when the Commonwealth Government decided to reduce the Medicare rebate for cataract surgery. The provision of this new equipment is a direct consequence of the intensive lobbying undertaken across Australia at the time, particularly in remote areas.

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At the Council meeting this week a preliminary report was tabled indicating that for the financial year ending 30<sup>th</sup> June 2011 a “surplus” of approximately \$500,000 was achieved across the \$20 million plus operational budget, prior to any provisions for depreciation. This “surplus” represents only 13% of the unfunded depreciation of Council assets, and as such must be saved to allow for future replacement of critical assets.

During the year Council has also increased our “credit rating” with the State Government by having made significant improvements in reducing the debt levels of Council to the best position in over a decade. Both these results are a credit to the effective financial management which has occurred across Council, with the “surplus” significantly assisted by a number of unpredicted income opportunities through grants obtained during the year.

The importance of the fire risks across western NSW during the approaching summer was brought to Council's attention at the Council meeting through a special presentation by Chris Favelle, Acting Manager, Barwon Darling Rural Fire Service (RFS). Chris highlighted that this season poses to be one of the greatest risks for many years as a consequence of the outstanding seasonal conditions experienced last summer. Council and the RFS have been working cooperatively for months in carrying out strategic fire hazard reductions, particularly on the western sides of Bourke, Alice Edwards Village and Enngonia and along highways. All members of the community should take their own initiatives now to undertake the simple steps in reducing their own property fire risks. In rural areas, elderly people with perceived fire risk problems are encouraged to consult with the RFS to establish if any assistance is available for specific needs.

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The importance of long term planning was reinforced last week when all Mayors and senior Council Managers converged on a two day workshop in Dubbo convened by the Minister for Local Government towards development of a 25 year plan for local government across the state. Mayor Andrew Lewis and Phil Johnston represented Bourke, and a simple message was that similar challenges are facing all Councils, whether city or rural based. Bourke Council, like all Councils, is continuing to develop a community based 10 year Strategic Plan.

Anne and I have recently returned from a rushed car trip to visit our son and daughter in law in Darwin. Observations along the way include:

- Tourism across inland Australia is widely estimated to be 30% below last year's rates.
- There remain numerous caravans travelling remote Australia, with the travellers aiming to learn more about Australia as well as enjoy their experiences. The majority of the caravan travellers appear to originate from Victoria.
- Bourke is widely known by all travellers, as well as by locals no matter where they live. Most of the travellers we spoke to indicated they have passed through Bourke at some stage.
- Virtually every town we travelled through has professional facilities and displays targeting the tourist market. Most of these are run by the respective Council, aimed at promoting their district history whilst holding travellers in their community as long as possible, even if at cost to the Council.
- The effects of outstanding seasonal conditions last summer are evident continuously all the way through western Queensland and the northern half of Northern Territory, and all have high fire risks this summer.

The importance of Bourke as a highway corridor has again been highlighted by two different groups staying overnight in town. A visit has been made by a large group of the "RV" Club of caravan owners, and a group of protesters to the Carbon Tax chose to camp in Bourke overnight last weekend en route to Canberra.

Whilst mentioning travellers, please take care if you are driving between Bourke and Hungerford at present, as a new causeway is currently being constructed across Back Creek, a short distance northwest of Yantabulla. This creek crossing was damaged by the continuous flows experienced down the Cuttaburra system last summer, and has only recently become dry enough for the upgrade of the crossing to be undertaken.

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This week in history, what were three climatic events which occurred at Bourke on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2009, 25<sup>th</sup> August 1950 and 27<sup>th</sup> August 1998?

The English novelist G. K. Chesterton quoted: *“A traveller sees what he sees, the tourist sees what he has come to see.”*

Cheers for now,  
Geoff