

COUNCIL WATCH FLEURIEU INC

Newsletter No. 70 - Date 11th July 2026

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Victor Harbor CEO Faces Strong Public Criticism Over Budget Confidentiality

One issue clearly emerged above almost every other topic: the administration's continued reliance on confidentiality during the budget development process became the focus of sustained public criticism. While the meeting was advertised as a consultation on the Draft 2026–27 Annual Business Plan and Budget, several speakers argued that meaningful consultation had been undermined because the detailed budget information remained unavailable to the public until the process was largely complete. For the audience, that is likely the strongest lead because it raises broader governance issues rather than simply debating a 6.4% rate increase. The City of Victor Harbor's public consultation meeting on its Draft 2026–27 Annual Business Plan and Budget became a wider debate about transparency, with Chief Executive Officer Victoria MacKirdy facing sustained criticism over the administration's continued use of confidentiality during the budget preparation process.

Rather than concentrating solely on the proposed 6.4% average rate increase, several speakers questioned whether genuine public consultation can occur when detailed budget information remains unavailable until the draft has effectively been finalised. Former elected member **Andrew Robertson** delivered one of the strongest criticisms of the evening, describing the consultation process as "**the worst**" he had experienced. He argued that the public had been denied access to the detailed working documents that councillors receive throughout the budget process and

therefore had little meaningful opportunity to influence council's financial decisions before they reached the consultation stage.

He contrasted Victor Harbor's approach with neighbouring Alexandrina Council, noting that Alexandrina had conducted multiple public consultation sessions across its district, whereas Victor Harbor had held only a single public meeting.

Mr Robertson also challenged the lack of detailed financial reporting available to ratepayers, questioning why major expenditure areas, including approximately \$2 million allocated to the CEO's operational area, were not broken down into more meaningful categories for public scrutiny.

CEO Victoria MacKirdy rejected the criticism, stating that the consultation period had been open for twenty-one days and that elected members receive more detailed financial information because "**that's why you elect them.**" She said councillors are responsible for questioning and scrutinising the detailed budget on behalf of the community.

That response appeared to highlight the central issue raised by several attendees. The criticism was not simply that councillors receive more information than the public, that is expected, but whether the public is being provided with sufficient information to make informed submissions before key financial decisions have effectively been settled.

The meeting also reinforced concerns previously raised by Council Watch regarding the increasing use of confidential briefings and restricted documentation within the City of Victor Harbor. Speakers questioned how meaningful community participation can occur when significant financial assumptions, project development and budget deliberations largely take place outside the public arena.

The issue extends beyond this year's budget. Public confidence depends upon residents having timely access to information before decisions are effectively made, not merely the opportunity to comment after the preferred budget has already been developed.

Budget consultation should be more than compliance with statutory requirements. It should provide genuine transparency, allowing ratepayers to understand not only the final figures but also the assumptions, alternatives considered and reasons for the choices ultimately presented to Council.

Words matter in public administration. The language chosen by senior officials sets the tone for public meetings and can influence how residents perceive the consultation process. At a time when international news coverage is dominated by reports of armed conflict and repeated references to "rules of engagement", some attendees may naturally associate the phrase with confrontation rather than consultation. While the expression has become common in some business settings,

Council Watch considers it an unfortunate choice of words for a public meeting intended to encourage open community participation. In Council Watch's view, public consultation should begin with language that welcomes residents into the democratic process, not terminology that some attendees may reasonably perceive as establishing the boundaries of engagement.

The evening demonstrated that, for many residents, the debate is no longer simply about rates; it is increasingly about trust, openness, and whether public participation in Victor Harbor is becoming consultation in form rather than consultation in substance.

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