

8.1. Mayoral Minute - 13/01/2020 - Bush Fire Emergency Report

Report by	Mayor - Councillor Ray Thompson
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Commentary

Lithgow Council has been a support agency to the Rural Fire Service (RFS) since the current fire emergency commenced. Council has been operating in the context of two state of emergency declarations and Council and community need to continue to ensure that the lead agencies in the current emergency (RFS) and recovery (OEM) continue to receive Council's unqualified support and respond to the directions and communications given. A state of emergency was called for a week beginning on 19 December, with the premier's office citing "the most devastating bushfire season in living memory". On 2 January, the premier called yet another state of emergency – the third for this fire season which began on Friday 3rd January.

In NSW, a state of emergency is declared under the State Emergency and Rescue Management Act of 1989 and can be done so when the premier believes there is "a significant and widespread danger to life or property in New South Wales".

A state of emergency declaration allows the Rural Fire Service commissioner to exercise powers usually unavailable to them. In December 2019, the premier's office said these powers would enable RFS commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons to:

- direct any government agency to conduct or refrain from conducting its functions;
- control and coordinate the allocation of government resources;
- evacuate people from property within the declared area;
- close roads and thoroughfares to traffic;
- pull down or shore up infrastructure at risk of collapse;
- order the shutdown of essential utilities in the declared area including electricity, gas, oil, water;
- enter or take possession of property in the course of the emergency response.

It is an offence to obstruct emergency personnel.

Emergency Management Committee.

On behalf of Council, I wish to extend our greatest appreciation to the Emergency Management Committee (EMC) and RFS Management and Volunteers for the tremendous efforts of all in protecting the Lithgow and surrounding community during the recent and ongoing fire emergency in our LGA.

The EMC led by the Local Emergency Operations Controller (LEOCON) Chris Sammut who in my view, with the assistance of committee members, conducted the most professional and efficient organisation of relevant resources during the fire emergency successfully preventing loss of life and mitigating the extent of property damage.

My thanks to Chris and his EMC members comprising-

- Libby Stansell – Family and Community Services
- Leslie Kent – Zig Zag Railway
- Kelly Hamilton – Endeavour Energy
- Peter Evans and Liam Orrick – Local Land Services
- Stuart Cope and Patricio Pina – RMS
- Chris Sammut and Steve Giffney – NSW Police
- Angela Lonergan – National Parks
- Craig Bowra – Regional Emergency Management Officer

- Sydney Trains (Transport for NSW) –
- NSW Ambulance – various alternating representatives.
- Bronwyn Boyling and various alternating representatives - NSW Health
- Lithgow Fire and Rescue
- Mick Holland – Rural Fire Service (briefings)
- Ray Thompson, Steve Ring, Wayne McAndrew, Jonathon Edgecombe and Lewis Bezzina – Lithgow City Council

On behalf of Council, I wish also to recognise and thank the following for their support and assistance to our Lithgow community during this continuing emergency-

- The Lithgow Workies Club and its senior executive Mr Geoff Wheeler. The Workies Club was instrumental in providing a secure evacuation premises and support for those of our community members who needed support during the ongoing emergency.
- Our local Federal and State Members the Hon Andrew Gee and The Hon Minister for regional Roads and Transport Paul Toole, both of whom attended the Bushfire emergency centre to offer assistance and ongoing support.
- Our State Emergency Services personnel.
- The Hartley Bushfire Brigade Canteen and all volunteer personnel organised by Doreen Peters.
- Lithgow and Lithgow West Fire and Rescue NSW.
- Local Land Services that assisted in the evacuation and housing of animals.
- Bathurst City Council in assisting with locations for animal evacuation.
- The Rapid Response team in Lithgow
- The Hon Jodi McKay and the Hon Trish Doyle who visited Lithgow to support our community during this time.
- Kirkconnell Correctional Centre which has offered personnel to assist in the recovery process.
- Rural Adversity Mental Health Program (RAMHP)
- Public Works Advisory
- St Vincent de Paul
- Lithgow Lions Club
- The Office of Emergency Management (OEM)
- Australian Red Cross, Salvation Army, Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy Network and Anglicare (organised by OEM)
- The following Local Government Authorities who have made contact and offered assistance-
 - Our fellow WSROC partner Blacktown City Council who are in discussions with our administration re the provision of qualified staff throughout the recovery process.
 - Mayor Greenhill from Blue Mountains City Council and his Administration who are also working with Lithgow Council Administration on the recovery process in both Councils.
 - Woollahra City Council who have offered assistance.
 - Inner West City Council who have offered personnel and support through the recovery process and
 - Bathurst City Council who continue to help and support whenever they are requested and without hesitation.

Last but not least, on behalf of my fellow Councillors and our community, let me thank our senior executive staff and all council employees for the extraordinary effort that I personally witnessed, and which is also recognised by our local agencies, most particularly by the RFS which has been conveyed to me.

Particular recognition must go to our Director of Infrastructure Services, Mr Jonathon Edgecombe, who, as Local Emergency Management Officer (LEMO) is the councils delegated representative

that interfaces with the Bushfire Emergency Management Committee, providing Council equipment and personnel where directed by the LEOCON and RFS as they need it. Mr Edgecombe was on call throughout this emergency and provided assistance whenever required.

Council also recognises the significant effort of our executive team led by Ross Gurney (Acting General Manager) which includes-

- Director of Water and Waste Water Mr Daniel Buckens
- Director of People and Services Mr Michael McGrath and
- Director of Economic Development and Environment Mr Andrew Muir.

I must say, that as Mayor, I am very pleased with the calibre of our Council team and the depth we have created in our organisation, giving Council confidence that business can continue without change in the face of the challenges presenting at any one time.

In the context of the above, several matters can be raised for consultation with the RFS and the Bushfire Management committee after the current emergency is over and when RFS personnel have recovered from the exhaustive requirements they are acting under currently.

1. Communication.

Council must ensure the media releases from the lead agency in control at the time are the only communication forwarded to the community to ensure accuracy and consistency of advice. Council has done this throughout this current fire emergency and will continue to post approved media releases and bulletins as requested by the relevant lead agency to avoid confusing members of the community. During the convening of the Emergency Operations Centre, Councillors themselves received situation reports until the centre closed on the 24th December 2019.

2. Dangerous Trees.

The RMS and Council are currently removing dangerous trees from road reserves after assessment from qualified arborists. There may be additional support that can be provided to Council in this area from the State Government and we would be grateful for RFS support in this area.

3. Chitters

The matter of coal chitters smouldering within areas in the LGA have been raised with the RFS who have undertaken inspections with a view to action. Future risk mitigation including the potential acquisition of appropriate machinery (LCC has none) to undertake remedial action is to be further discussed with the RFS once the fire emergency is over.

4. Erosion and Slope Stabilisation.

Council is mindful of past bushfire emergencies in our LGA and the resultant destabilisation of slopes following degradation of trees and undergrowth. Council is currently seeking to engage qualified contractors to survey the immediate vicinity of fire affected areas with a view to reducing any risk identified.

5. Mapping of Underground Mines and exposed coal seams.

Council is to approach the Mines Subsidence Board and local contractors with a view to obtaining accurate mapping of mines in the Lithgow City and adjacent areas to reduce risk and assist RFS and other agencies responding to future fire emergencies.

6. Safety Zones around Houses.

Council will seek approval from relevant regulatory agencies to permit local landholders to increase their zone of safety around their homes and assets to protect life and property

7. Mental Health Assistance.

Council is already in discussion with the Office of Emergency Management and Charitable Organisations to facilitate the availability of mental Health Services for those affected by the recent emergency.

8. Ongoing contact with communities.

I propose that the Deputy Mayor and myself (and any other Councillor wishing to attend), together with members of Council's senior executive continue as we have done and meet over the next few weeks with different communities within the LGA that have been affected by the recent emergency to gain and relay feedback to all agencies involved in the threat response and recover effort.

9. Evacuation Routes

In consultation with the EMC, RFS and other relevant agencies, identify designated evacuation routes for our Lithgow and village communities.

Policy Implications

NIL

Financial Implications

- Budget approved - NA
- Cost centre -NA
- Expended to date –To be Determined
- Future potential impact –To Be Determined

Legal Implications

NIL

Attachments

Nil

Recommendation

THAT Council

1. Via formal letter under the signature of the Mayor, extend Council's sincere appreciation to those persons, state agencies and Local Government Authorities as outlined in this mayoral minute, for their assistance and support during the recent and continuing bush fire emergency affecting our Lithgow Community.
2. At a time and date suitable to the relevant emergency services and local Emergency Management Committee, Council engage in discussion, and where appropriate initiate actions outlined above concerning-
 - a. Communication.
 - b. Dangerous tree removal.
 - c. Response to smouldering coal chitters.
 - d. Erosion and slope stabilisation.
 - e. Mapping of underground mines.
 - f. Safety zones around houses.
 - g. Mental health assistance and
 - h. Ongoing contact with communities.
3. Acknowledge the efforts of the senior executive team and all council staff during the ongoing bushfire emergency affecting our local community.