

Submission to Council re. 2011/12 – 2015/16 Draft Budget and the Community Technology Centre

OBERON COUNCIL

17 JUN 2011

RECEIVED

I write to voice some concerns about Council's handling of the CTC as well as some of the figures concerning the CTC finances (see page 29 of the Draft Budget).

My interest is twofold: (1) as an Oberon resident anxious to see that good facilities and educational opportunities are maintained for the community, and (2) as a volunteer teacher at the CTC who has given time, freely and enthusiastically, for a minimum of two and a half hours per week, for some 40 weeks per year, since early 2007 (in the form of Tuesday afternoon beginners' classes, as well as occasional one on one lessons).

My first concern is to do with the actual running of the CTC and the role of the person who is contracted to provide "professional services". Julie Stott has performed this role since the CTC's inception and, as a volunteer, I have viewed her as my "boss". So, it was a shock to receive a copy of her resignation email to John Chapman a few weeks ago and more of a shock to realize that this resignation was the result of sheer frustration at being left out of the loop when discussions and decisions about matters relating to the operation of the CTC were taking place. Not only was she left out of communication, she also received no replies to queries posed to Council about things like figures in the draft budget. Surely Julie's contribution to setting up the centre and co-ordinating its activities for so long deserves the courtesy of inclusion in discussions and replies to questions, even if Council doesn't intend to take any notice of her opinions!

I was also angered to learn that no one, no staff member, no Councilor, even bothered to ask Julie to reconsider her resignation. Can the town afford to let people with her expertise walk away in frustration without some attempt, however feeble, to get her to reconsider? I will certainly miss her presence, her organization, and her help and advice in the field of technology – her knowledge is broad and deep. My enthusiasm to continue volunteering at the CTC will be affected by whether or not Council can establish and maintain a more consultative working relationship with the next "contractor / co-ordinator" and the volunteer staff.

This leads to my second concern. The figures relating to the 2010/11 **operating costs** of the CTC seem grossly inflated, while the predicted **revenue** for 2011/12 and beyond seems to be hugely deflated. The figures on page 29 make the CTC look like a very expensive drain on Council, costing the community over \$50,000 in the revised 2010/11 budget figures!! How can this be? I presume item 0360 Professional Services (\$6000) was Julie's wage. If this is so then

- where does item **0300 Employee costs (\$23,185)** come from? Surely Council is not arguing that Visitor Information Centre staff devote this amount of time to helping out with the CTC? They do take the occasional phone call about classes, and collect money from class participants, as well as opening and closing the conference room for the occasional course run by outside groups, but this would take very little time in the scheme of things – they certainly wouldn't be devoting almost 4 times the amount of time Julie does to the running of the Centre. Similarly they don't work extra hours to keep the CTC open since its hours match those of the VIC.
- item 0980 Administration Overheads Distributed (\$25,300) – what does this mean? It is a significant amount of money – over 4 times Julie's wage. Is it paying the wage of somebody else, somewhere else? Surely it's not implying that there are administration costs of this amount connected to the CTC! If not, then why is it in the CTC budget? Does this happen all over the place? If there are staffing or overhead costs related to Council administration shouldn't they just be put in a category that says exactly that, not slipped into other budget areas?

The above two items alone represent a large proportion of the CTC costs in the last budget (\$48,485) and yet, to me, they appear very “rubbery” indeed. They make a facility which I think is largely self supporting into one that looks like a very costly operation.

In terms of **Revenue**, Julie Stott’s estimate is that CTC revenue has been about \$8000 per annum for a few years now. The revised 2010/11 budget puts it at \$9,430. Why then is there such a huge drop in income predicted for 2011/12 and subsequent years? Are current services (training, hire of room / equipment etc) going to be curtailed? Are organizations like the Central West Community Centre (currently using the computer room each Friday and drawing in an estimated annual income of about \$6,000) going to cease using the Centre? I’m sure this is one of the unanswered questions Julie put to Council some time ago....

In summary, the draft budget for the CTC seems to include figures that are not a true reflection of what the CTC is actually costing ratepayers. The major expense would be for the professional services of the contractor. The bulk of the rest of the services are provided by volunteers – Lyn Agland, Allan McLennan and me. There have been no major hardware or software expenses over the past few years: the equipment, furniture and software have not been updated in that time and it looks like very little funding has been set aside for that in the future. This we can live with for the short term – after all, Council has lost a lot of money and we need to expect some cuts. However these cuts should not be based on manufactured or inflated figures that do not mirror the real situation.

Since its inception many Oberon residents have benefited from the services provided by the CTC. Ron Lardner gave huge amounts of time and advice as well as running workshops and fixing people’s computers. Julie has devoted time well beyond her required role – much of it only visible to people on the receiving end of her advice, guidance and emails which invariably contained invaluable information on matters relating to technology. I estimate that over 50 residents (many of them pensioners) have participated in my classes alone over the past four and a half years. If you add to all this those Oberon residents who have benefited from Lyn Agland’s and Allan McLennan’s volunteering then you are looking at a significant number of people, and new ones keep coming. It is a wonderful resource for a small town and one which should not be taken for granted.

My request to Council is to

- ensure that the CTC continues to be co-ordinated by a dedicated contractor – not someone from the VIC, or Library, or Council who gets it tacked on to their existing job. This person needs to be committed to the CTC and possess appropriate expertise in technology and organizational skills.
- ensure that this person at least be included in discussions and planning concerning the operation of the CTC.
- ensure that the CTC budget be transparent, and based on revenue and expenditure figures that truly reflect the cost of running this valuable community resource.

Maree Arrow

Maree Arrow
926 Lowes Mount Road
Oberon
16/06/2011

