

### 14.1.1 Response to COVID-19

**SUMMARY: Manager Governance, Phil McQue**

**COVID-19 is an unprecedented crisis, presenting Council with a complex and unpredictable challenge. The impact of COVID-19 on the Knox community will be significant from a health, wellbeing and economic perspective. Knox has a diverse range of industry sectors, with many businesses immediately vulnerable to the impact of COVID-19. Knox's community clubs and organisations also face an uncertain future as they typically do not have the cash reserves to sustain them in a period of declining or in some instances nil revenue.**

**Council has a key role to play in managing and responding to COVID-19, including supporting community health and wellbeing, delivering emergency responses, implementing stimulus projects and driving community recovery.**

**Council has been planning for and progressively implementing a range of measures to protect the health, wellbeing and safety of our community, Councillors and staff. Council has prioritised the ongoing delivery of critical services to support our vulnerable and elderly residents. Council has deployed its Crisis Management Plan, Pandemic Sub-Plan and various Business Continuity Plans, ensuring that essential services continue to be delivered to the community.**

**This report recommends that Council provide an initial round of community relief measures, targeted to support programs not presently offered by the Federal and Victorian State Government. The relief measures specifically targets the Knox community at a grass roots level, in the knowledge that further initiatives and support will be required by Council as this crisis unfolds.**

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

**That Council:**

- 1. Undertake an immediate review of the *Knox Payment Assistance Policy* with a view to addressing emerging consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the livelihoods of the Knox community;**
- 2. Resolve to not charge interest on rates from 31 March 2020 to 30 June 2020 for late payments and charges; noting that the extension of this will form part of the 2020-21 budget deliberations;**
- 3. Waive trading fees, including outdoor dining and business A-frame signage fees for the period 30 March 2020 until 30 June 2020 as a pro-rata refund for renewal permit fees and refunding the full application fee amount for new applications received in that period; noting that the extension of this will form part of the 2020-21 budget deliberations;**
- 4. Waive all Not-For Profit community organisation hire agreement, license and lease fees for the remainder of the 2019-20 Financial Year, with any advance pro-rata payments to be refunded;**

- 5. Waive Knox Basketball Incorporated's Annual Asset Renewal Fee for the remainder of the 2019-20 Financial Year;**
- 6. Amend the 2019-20 Budget by providing COVID-19 Emergency Funding of \$100,000, such amount to be expended by the Chief Executive Officer wholly in connection with Council's response to COVID-19 as is considered appropriate;**
- 7. Indefinitely defer the following proposed events due to government imposed restrictions on gatherings:**
  - a. Fire Fighter Recognition Function**
  - b. Annual Joint Advisory Committee Meeting; and**
- 8. Continue to formulate its Community Relief Plan, complimenting the Federal and Victorian State Governments COVID-19 response, with priority of addressing any identified gaps that particularly impact Knox community, with further reports to be presented to Council for consideration and implementation as soon as practicable.**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared Coronavirus (COVID-19) as a pandemic and the State of Victoria subsequently declared a State of Emergency on 16 March 2020.

This report responds to a number of operational matters affecting Council operations and decision-making in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In all responses to date, Council has considered occupational health and safety, public health concerns, community impact assessment, economic impact assessment and investigated options for alternative service delivery options.

## **2. DISCUSSION**

Council Staff have initiated appropriate actions under Council's Crisis Management Plan and Pandemic Sub Plan and the Executive Management Team has now convened and operationalised the Knox Crisis Management Team, which is meeting daily to guide the organisation's response to the evolving pandemic. Daily meetings are held with the Chief Executive Officer, Mayor and Deputy Mayor.

Following risk based assessments, a range of measures have been implemented. These measures have not been taken lightly, particularly in relation to changes to service levels. Given the dynamic nature of this pandemic, there may be further measures required in the future. Where services to the community are impacted, there are associated communication plans in place to inform the community.

At the time of preparing this report, Council had closed the following services and facilities:

- Knox Civic Centre Customer Service Counter
- Knox Regional Netball Centre
- Knox Community Arts Centre
- Ferntree Gully Community Arts Centre
- Carrington Park Leisure Centre

- Rowville Community Centre, except for immunisations sessions which will continue
- Knox Libraries (as part of the Eastern Region Library Corporation approach)
- Various other sites such as Knox Athletics Track, Knox BMX Track, Waterford Valley Golf Course and the Youth Information Centre.

The recommendations in this report will contribute towards ensuring that Council is agile enough over the short to medium term, to continue to respond to unforeseen circumstances in a timely manner.

The following additional support measures are recommended for consideration by Council:

#### Funding to address COVID-19

This report recommends that Council authorise the expenditure of unbudgeted funds to a maximum of \$100,000, to ensure the organisation is in a position to respond to unforeseen circumstances which may arise requiring funding.

#### Deferral of Council Events

Council has postponed or cancelled more than 50 events from March through to May 2020. Two specific Council functions require a resolution to defer, being the Fire Fighter Recognition Function (*required to be held in April / May*) and the Annual Joint Advisory Committee Meeting (*required to be held by May 2020*).

This report notes that whilst Victoria is subject to a declared State of Emergency, the Chief Executive Officer, in discussion with the Mayor, will continue to make urgent decisions and defer and cancel meetings, events and identified matters as is considered necessary and appropriate to mitigate risks associated with COVID-19.

#### Assistance to Knox Council Ratepayers

Many Knox Council ratepayers will be facing immediate hardship from COVID-19. At the time of preparing this report, the four major banks have already received approximately 100,000 applications for deferral of housing loan payments.

Council is committed to protecting the livelihood and wellbeing of its residents and will be considering a range of initiatives in coming months, including a review of Council's *Knox Payment Assistance Policy*. In the interim, it is recommended that Council resolve to not charge interest from 31 March 2020 to 30 June 2020 for late rate payments.

#### Community Relief Package

Not-For-Profit community groups are an essential fabric of the Knox community, playing a significant role in building and maintaining social infrastructure, capital and resilience. Council has long recognised the important role that community facilities provide to the community in encouraging social and civic participation and supporting the wellbeing of residents.

Council recognises the significant impact that COVID-19 will have on community organisations with the restrictions presently in place. Currently, there are 166 Not-For-Profit community groups operating out of a Council facility, which includes pavilions and grounds, with a lease or license (including seasonal tenancy) agreement. This does not include those Not-For-Profit organisations who currently utilise a Council facility under a hire agreement.

To ensure the ongoing sustainability of these community groups, the following initiatives are recommended:

- Waive all Not-For-Profit hire, license and lease fees for the remainder of 2019-20 Financial Year (*valued at approximately \$1,346,612 per annum*) and refund any fees paid in advance pro-rata for this period; and
- Waive Knox Basketball Associations' Annual Asset Renewal Fee for the remainder of the 2019-20 Financial Year (*\$105,916 annual fee*)

Council are recognises the importance of small business within the Knox community and it is recommended to waive trading fees, including outdoor dining and business trading signage, as of 30 March 2020 until 30 June 2020, noting that payments made to date will receive full refunds;

### **3. CONSULTATION**

This report has been prepared in consultation with Councillors at a Special Confidential Issues Briefing on 26 March 2020.

### **4. ENVIRONMENTAL/AMENITY ISSUES**

The closure of Council facilities and services has a direct impact on the amenity of the Knox community.

### **5. FINANCIAL & ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS**

The economic impact of COVID-19 is largely unknown and will be very difficult to quantify this financial year, particularly in relation to the loss of revenue, which will be to the value of millions for Knox City Council. This uncertainly makes it difficult to formulate reliable estimates that are required for prudent responsible budgeting. The potential financial and economic implications associated with the COVID-19 pandemic will be the subject of separate reports and discussions with Councillors.

Council has written to the Minister for Local Government requesting that the State Government defer the statutory requirement for councils to adopt the 2020-21 budget until October 2020, in line with the action taken by the Federal Government and Victorian State Government in the adoption of their respective 2020-21 budgets.

This will provide the required time for the economic and fiscal impacts of COVID19 to be known and understood, and the potential scale of recovery efforts, ensuring councils can adopt a responsive and responsible budget that assists Victoria in surviving this crisis and the path to economic recovery.

### **6. SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Council has a role to play in responding to COVID-19, particularly in supporting the limiting of the spread of the virus.

Council will also have a critical role to play in recovery activities once COVID-19 is minimised within the community.

Council acknowledges the critical role that local Not-For-Profit organisations and community groups play in supporting community access to key activities and services across all life stages,

particularly access by disadvantaged and socially isolated groups. These groups significantly encourage social and civic participation and engagement, supporting the health and wellbeing of the Knox community.

## **7. RELEVANCE TO KNOX COMMUNITY AND COUNCIL PLAN 2017-2021**

### **Goal 4 - We are safe and secure**

Strategy 4.4 - Protect and promote public health, safety and amenity

Strategy 4.5 - Support the provision of emergency services

### **Goal 8 - We have confidence in decision making**

Strategy 8.1 - Build, strengthen and promote good governance practices across government and community organisations

## **8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

Under section 80c of the Local Government Act 1989 officers providing advice to Council must disclose any interests, including the type of interest.

Author – Manager Governance, Phil McQue- In providing this advice as the Author, I have no disclosable interests in this report.

Officer Responsible Director, City Development, Matt Kelleher - In providing this advice as the Officer Responsible, I have no disclosable interests in this report.

## **9. CONCLUSION**

Council has a key role to play in managing COVID-19, including supporting community wellbeing, delivering emergency responses, implementing stimulus projects and driving community recovery. This report recommends a number of immediate initiatives to assist in appropriately responding to COVID-19.

## **10. CONFIDENTIALITY**

Nil.

**Report Prepared By:** Manager Governance, Phil McQue

**Report Authorised By:** Director City Development, Matt Kelleher

## **Attachments**

Nil