

Stratford Extension Project

Personal Submission from Gloucester resident Julie Lyford

“The rise of community activism within democratic societies.”

This personal submission has been written with the hindsight and experience of living in a rural community for the past 26 years. As a Local Government Councillor from 1995 to 2012, Mayor from 2007-2009, Deputy Mayor for one year and Chair of Hunter councils during 2009, I feel compelled to contribute my observations and story about what has and continues to be happening to our iconic Gloucester valley and the wider Hunter region. My past career as a Registered Nurse and my marriage to a rural General Practitioner, with three adult children who grew up and were schooled in Gloucester, adds to the deep community and social connections we enjoy, support and are sustained by.

It must be patently obvious to all those who work in the relevant government departments, ministerial offices and related organisations that the people of Gloucester, and indeed the Hunter, have sadly lost any faith and trust in the democratic processes that govern departmental advice, decision making and indeed the ability to listen to and protect the fundamental health, environmental and social needs of the communities you are employed to serve.

The rise of activism from ordinary law abiding citizens is indicative of how deeply communities feel regarding government and industry attitudes and the lack of respect for the lives of rural people.

I was a joint founder of the Gloucester Environment Group (GEG) in 1989 on the basis of climate change concerns and the ability to educate the Gloucester community re environmental initiatives and positive actions for our area.

When Stratford Coal/Gloucester Coal first mooted their desire to mine, GEG instigated community forums with the coal company so there was understanding and a community response to what many at the time saw as an economic positive, although with some major permanent environmental side effects.

For many years the ‘boutique’ mine carried out its business with a quiet acceptance from the community, although there were many instances of condition breaches and issues of noise, dust, and blasting and water tank pollution which have been well documented.

With the many representations from Council and the community over the ensuing years advocating against these serious lifestyle impediments to the lives of 150 Stratford residents and those in the surrounds (including Stratford Primary School) nothing constructive or supportive has been forthcoming from industry or government.

Effects of long term mining activities on urban and rural residents have been profound, with their mental and physical health impacted by noise, impaired air and water quality and the right to live in a peaceful and healthy environment severely compromised.

Virtually ignored by government and often maligned and intimidated by industry, this is immoral and unacceptable in the 21st Century within a democratic and mature Australia.

Would you like to live with an uncertain future for over 10 years and now the prospect of 10-20 more? Where do they move to, leaving their home, unable to afford anywhere due to the lowering of property prices? Losing the farm, the dairy?

Don't dismiss this submission and toss it in the 'too hard/emotional' basket....someone somewhere in the Dept Planning, Dept Premier and Cabinet or the myriad layers of government must have a conscience. Some of you must have environmental awareness and a deep understanding of how traumatized many of the communities in Gloucester and the Hunter are under this exponential expansion of extractive industry mania that we are all living through? I strongly believe many of you do. Act on your moral instincts.

Over the period of the Stratford mine I have been involved in site inspections where there has been deep concern regarding acid sulphate mine rejects from the Duralie mine, where they continue to be stored in the Gloucester Shire in the Avon catchment area. The permanent need to monitor that site (post mining) so we do not have a leachate disaster is the dilemma facing future generations.

Intergenerational equity is in serious doubt with this legacy amongst others that will have to be dealt with across the valley and Hunter region. The voids are a massive problem.

Sure, Stratford Coal has been a contributor to an Education Fund (of which I was a committee member for over 10 years) for Gloucester High School students, apprentices and business. It has been a small bonus to those who received the grant.

However, many local businesses spend years training apprentices only to constantly lose them to the mine due to the inability to pay the exorbitant wages affordable by mining companies.

The continuing economic and social deficit of mining in rural communities re job losses from local firms, loss of rural food producing lands, dairy farms and the actual people who move away is of great concern and NEVER figures in any determination by government departments, industry or is acknowledged by political leaders.

This is a huge social, economic and environmental problem that faces many communities and is exacerbated by the divide and conquer strategies that industry and complicit government are so adept at.

Are you comfortable with this destructive attitude and behaviour that leads to the fracturing of communities that have previously enjoyed such a cohesive and strong quality of life ethos? Are you concerned by the issues of food and water security?

When Stratford Coal progressed to further stages of mining and Duralie came on line, the community knew that the previously balanced situation with the 'boutique' promises of not mining any closer to communities was gone.

The attitude of the Dept Planning and Ministers also significantly changed.

The corruption scenario that is now being played out in the ICAC court of public interest should now start to give you the picture as to why strong networks of ordinary law-abiding citizens, that you are employed or elected to represent, are now well-orchestrated and informed and are taking peaceful co-coordinated action.

Indeed, due to the ICAC revelations and personal experiences, it appears there is a deep conviction within many communities that vested interests continue to work deep in the government structures to facilitate the progression of extractive industries.

Many who used to work in these areas are now a very constructive part of calling to account the transparency, truth and integrity of the governance and government/s that have been orchestrating the devolution of the democratic processes that NSW previously relied upon.

Justice, equity and protection of the people that you serve should be the government's highest priority. Are you comfortable with the current situation?

Since when is it ethical for a Minister to make outrageous public comments against ordinary citizens who dare to stand up to the inevitable, heavy handed, undemocratic decision making that consistently favours big business over our future life support systems regarding water and food security?

To call those who attended community conferences 'left wing socialists wanting to destroy the economy' was profoundly ignorant of the processes at work, especially when the rise of community activism is comprised of mainly National/Liberal heartland voters, Councils, Mayors, farmers and conservatives!

Does this portray the NSW government as a mature, fair, consultative and transparent entity?

Now let's add to this scenario for the Gloucester community.

Over the last 15 years there have been many pressures for the community to bear the impacts of the mining sector as outlined above and detailed in Gloucester Council's submission and the BGSPA submission. The community members contributing to these submissions have a very high degree of experience, many have worked within government at some level and their integrity is without question. This is a more structured approach that is being developed with whole community inclusion and this will continue to create a stronger and more articulate voice for the people of this region. Support for the overwhelming plight of the Gloucester valley from surrounding catchments and the wider NSW regions have been excellent.

As the reader of this submission, I would ask that you take on board the importance of the need for the human values of the situation we find ourselves in to be taken very seriously.

If the NSW government, or any government, thinks that it can treat its citizens with such disregard, lack of respect and utter lack of social conscience then we are on the downhill path of decent and trustworthy democratic existence.

The withdrawal of affordable legal advice through de-funding the Environmental Defenders Office (EDO) is also seen by many citizens across the state as a government punishing and marginalizing those who need to obtain just and unbiased advice. This

especially applies to rural Australians who, in the majority, live in low socio economic communities. Trust has been trashed in the ability of government to act in the best interests of the people it is paid to serve.

You would be fully aware that companies produce their own expert advice which is more than often unchallenged by any overseeing government bodies.

When this is questioned by communities such as Gloucester in the AGL CSG aquifer scenario, which lead to a blockade (unheard of in this conservative community) and forced the company to the table to make changes to their 'independent scientific advice' process – concerned citizens have to do the job that government should be doing!

The precautionary principle has been thrown out the window and 'adaptive management' is the new term for 'fix it when it goes wrong'!

Since when did government have the mandate to allow this potentially destructive industry behaviour to become the norm in our living, breathing and working spaces?

You must also be fully aware that thinking citizens have no trust in the truthfulness of company reports or governments ability to adequately monitor the strict conditions/requirements. We know from past experiences that this is an ad hoc situation.

Indeed, further skepticism is warranted when the strict guidelines are issued and then, like night follows day, in come the variances and adaptations that always get the nod of approval. Even when a low socio-economic community takes the brave plunge to right the issue thought the courts, only to be then overruled by a government who changes the rules through legislation so the company can proceed regardless!

You know this is the reality. Are you comfortable with working with such a poor democratic and patently biased process?

Are you OK with the NSW Minerals Council lobbying and pressuring the government and the people you need to protect and represent?

Is this a period of your life that you will look back on and be proud to have been a part of? Have you been to Gloucester or other areas in the Hunter and actually taken the time to meet with these ordinary decent people and hear their stories?

I have sat with the families of farmers, retirees, tourism operators and many more affected by the relentless onslaught of mining and coal seam gas expansion.

To watch them break down over the uncertainty of their future, the worry of air quality (not just for their family but for the health of their animals for human consumption) and the future for sustainable rural productivity – it is very disturbing and in 2013 not how the vast majority sees a just Australia.

These are real people who voluntarily fight fires, are part of the social fabric comprised of over 190 volunteer organisations, who have faced droughts and life tragedies and had the strength and their families support to continue their productive and meaningful lives to the benefit of the communities they live and produce in.

Add to this the feelings of 'Solastalgia' (you know what that means), the stigma of 'selling out' and the sense of disempowerment.....are you still saying this has no place in an EIS submission or in the conscience of any in this governmental/big business process?

I guess it is easy when Ministers, Premiers, Heads of Departments and those ticking the boxes never have the courage to come face to face with the people they are supposed to be looking after. Even NSW Health lacks a strong conscience voice...just the tired old bureaucratic jargon that is so indicative of government out of touch with its people. If it were not so Orwellian you would think it a joke. It is not admirable when you have people protecting their positions and lacking the fortitude and moral fibre to speak out.

Over the years this community has held large and small rallies, a blockade, made numerous submissions, held many meetings with ministers, held conferences with communities, been vocal with all media and written editorials and letters to editors.

Federal representation and scientific recognition of the Bioregional Status of the valley, Council committees, community information evenings and Community Consultative committees have involved many in this dynamic rural place we call Gloucester Shire. The community concern and advocacy on behalf of our citizens will only intensify. A growing movement and network of ordinary people are determined to stand up and be counted. The networks across the region and the state are gaining in cohesion.

Where do you suggest communities can relocate to when the air quality exceeds the WHO guidelines as they have on over a hundred separate occasions such as is currently happening with the Upper Hunter Air Quality network?

I would hope that the health of children and the elderly is of great consequence in your decision making process?

When Gloucester Resources, aka 'Rocky Hill' (a new mining name for a Gloucester icon known as the Mograni foothills), gets the big tick 3000 people will be directly affected (just like the poor Stratford and Craven citizens over the last 15 years) by an open cut coal mine less than 2 km to residences and 5km to the hospital and high school. Do you find this acceptable in 2013 knowing the well published health risks?

You know the issues with the toxicity of coal dust. It is internationally documented for those with integrity and intellect to acknowledge the scientific data.

You also know about the air flow patterns over the Gloucester valley and how the inversion layers work. Please do not dismiss this very important health impact as the previous governments did with asbestos and its related fatal outcomes.

This data is in the public arena and you need to treat it with the utmost seriousness.

Lung function testing is well on its way in the Gloucester valley and people are waking up to this serious threat to air quality in their droves. Ordinary people are asking how this threat to our lives through air and water pollution is acceptable.

Many people use tank water and work outside in their rural professions.

Maybe it will not be you who wears the responsibility, moral outrage and eventual financial compensation for all that these industries bring to bear on the human populations you are accountable to.

Your responsibility is to serve the best interests of the people and make sure that your actions are of the highest integrity, with full transparency towards a sustainable and productive future for life in this valley and on this planet.

Government must bear the responsibility of ethical decision-making regarding the future of the extractive industries in the Gloucester valley.

It is deceptive in the extreme to only look at the income from this arena and not address the financial and human costs of the detrimental aspects of the cumulative impacts from expansion of mining and CSG activities.

The growing social and democratic movements will hold past and present governments responsible for poor and unethical decisions regarding mining and CSG activities.

One of the key areas identified for investigation is the alteration of many NSW Local Government LEP's (Local Environment Plans) from the LEP 2000 (561 NSW Legislation) through the 2 year Community Plan process in 2005 and onwards to the drawn-out state template process that saw most LEP's not gazetted until 2010.

What became very telling were the direct orders from government departments to planners re the removal of special zoned areas of environmental significance and scenic importance that were previously in the 2000 LEP's.

Further investigation will entail an overview of all NSW LEP's to compare 2000 to 2010 and see where zones have been significantly changed or omitted. An overlay of mining exploration licenses and past, current and future mine proposals should not show any correlation if a transparent and ethical process has been used.

There would need to be a very compelling reason to be instructed to remove a significant, long standing zone over an area that could possibly become a mining lease/mine.

So I have no apologies for the lack of technical response in my submission to the EIS process. You have all of that in spades from those more adept in those areas than I. My submission is to highlight how far removed government is from the reality of living in a mining area with all the physical and psychological harms that it causes.

Minister George Souris stood on the platform with me at the rally regarding land use and water policy outside Parliament House when I held the role of Mayor, and he talked publically about how terrible it would be to expand mining closer to our communities in the Gloucester Valley. The people of Stratford listened and thought George and then opposition leader Barry O'Farrell cared about their health and wellbeing, as did the small pupils of Stratford school less than a kilometre from the mine action. Sadly the trust has gone. The furthering of political careers and the opportunism of politics has been exposed.

The past dismissive treatment of the Gloucester community by the hands of government departments, the former NSW Labor Minister Ian McDonald and other political figures was thought to be an anomaly. People voted for true consultation and change.

How wrong we all were to believe that integrity, truth and transparency would be the new order. Sadly, 150 people who are living in and around Stratford face a 24 hour mining expansion which will totally ruin what is left of their rural existence. Gloucester Township also faces the real prospect of a new open cut coal mine on the doorstep of the homes, workplaces, hospital and schools of 3000 residents.

Add the 110 gas wells legislated in the last dying days of the NSW Labor Government by former Minister Tony Kelly and prepare for a future of 300 gas wells, fracking of our aquifers and unknown damage to ecosystems throughout the State Heritage nominated (since 1956) beautiful and iconic Gloucester Valley.

Money is not everything. People are the priority and they need their environment “to be liveable” - your own government terminology in The NSW State Plan.

I wish you well in your deliberations.
Please make your decisions with a clear conscience
It is Ok to stand up for what is just and right.

The health and wellbeing of current and future Gloucester Shire citizens is at stake - along with the credibility of business, government and mining practice in NSW.

Hold your head high, keep your integrity intact and do what is right and sustainable.

Stand firm against big business dogma and political bullying and do your best for the future of Gloucester, the communities who live and breathe here and for the wider cause of a true and just society that cares for its people.

Yours sincerely

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