

2016 Local Government Election — Priorities for Miles



The 19 March 2016 Local Government election will determine not only the next Mayor and Councillors for the Western Downs region, but also the course of the region's economy at a critical juncture in Queensland's economic future.

The Chamber of Commerce and Industry Queensland (CCIQ) and the Miles & Districts Chamber of Commerce have conducted this survey to determine priority issues for small business on key election issues such as community infrastructure, economic development, roads infrastructure, local facilities and services, planning and development, local content policy, and the quality of representation in the Miles region.

CCIQ and Miles & Districts Chamber of Commerce are determined that the issues of concern and importance for small businesses in Miles stay at the forefront of the Local Government election debate.

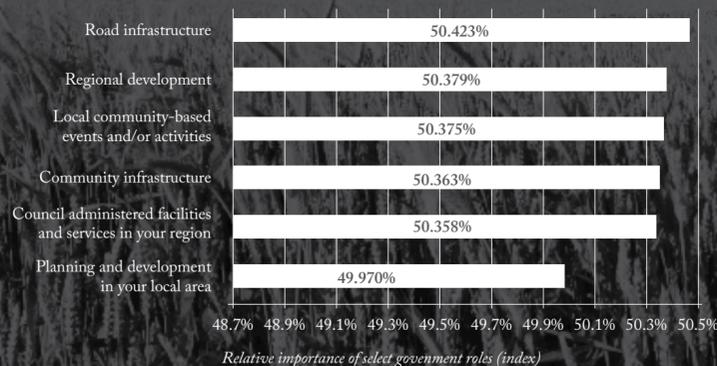
The Miles & Districts Chamber of Commerce recognises the vital role that the Western Downs Regional Council plays in building and sustaining the Western Downs economy. Local businesses and community members in Miles believe the activities of the Western Downs Regional Council are of crucial importance in their day to day activities and to this end, the Miles & Districts Chamber of Commerce maintains a significant interest in the outcome of the Local Government elections to be held 19 March 2016.

Miles & Districts Chamber of Commerce is committed to working constructively with all Councillors across the Western Downs region over the coming four years to address those issues and challenges confronting the community. The next Western Downs Regional Council must also work closely with Miles' small businesses to shape Miles' economic and social environments in a way that promotes business growth and community prosperity.

The Miles & Districts Chamber of Commerce Election Survey revealed 3 key priorities that all candidates must act upon to improve the business operating environment in Miles. These are:



In the context of your business and/or community, how important are the following in your local government area: Miles



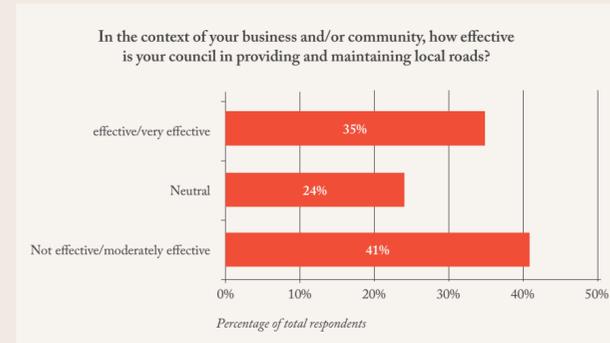
For general enquiries or more information contact Kylie Bourne at the Miles & Districts Chamber of Commerce on 0467 171 225

Roads infrastructure

Roads infrastructure plays a crucial role in driving business investment, growth and productivity. It is essential that local governments work alongside their state and federal counterparts to invest in roads infrastructure and address current and future bottlenecks so that businesses can thrive in the domestic and global marketplace. An investment in infrastructure represents an investment in the future prosperity of Miles, the Western Downs region and its businesses.

The Miles & Districts Chamber of Commerce Election Survey shows that a significant majority (87 per cent) of businesses and community members believe roads infrastructure is very important or critical to the region. When asked about how effective the Western Downs Regional Council is at providing and maintaining local roads, 41 per cent of respondents believed Council were not effective or moderately effective, with 35 per cent stating the Council was effective or very effective.

As Miles is experiencing high growth as an important transportation hub, respondents have indicated that major freight roads such as the Warrego and Leichhardt Highways, as well as the Western Rail Link, are key infrastructure projects that will deliver business and industry growth. It is critical that the next Western Downs Regional Council put in place a strategic road upgrade strategy and work co-operatively with the Queensland State Government in delivering much needed rail infrastructure for the region to secure a strong future.



The Miles District Chamber is calling on the next Western Downs Regional Council to:

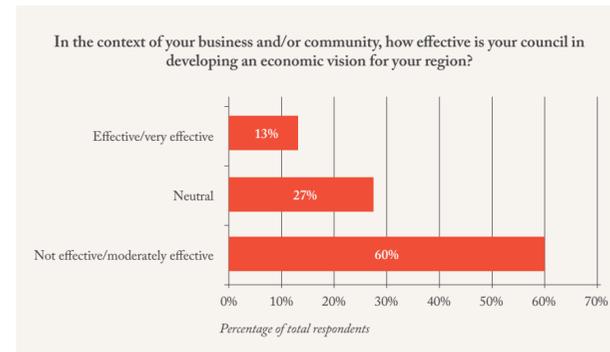
- Prioritise upgrades to the Warrego and Leichhardt Highways, working closely with the State Government to ensure major freight roads are equipped to accommodate continued growth in the region
- Ensure local roads are regularly maintained, and Council resources are used as efficiently as possible when carrying out this task

Economic development

An economic development strategy for the Western Downs that identifies and capitalises on the uniqueness of Miles is a key determinant of business confidence and investment in the township. Businesses in the Miles district will be looking to the next Western Downs Regional Council to drive economic development and better enable economic growth to ensure the community is supported by a dynamic and globally competitive regional economy.

When asked about economic development initiatives in Miles, a significant majority of businesses and community members (82 per cent) stated regional economic development was very important or critical to the economic future of the Miles district. Notably, the Miles & Districts Chamber of Commerce Local Government Election Survey revealed that 60 per cent of businesses and community members in the Miles region believed the Western Downs Regional Council was either not effective or moderately effective at developing an economic vision for Miles and/or the Western Downs region more broadly.

This result has been driven by a lack of an existing development plan that sets out a strategic vision for the Western Downs region. The most recent plan expired in 2015, and businesses are deeply concerned about the impact of no short, medium, or long-term economic development planning at present. The lack of a clear strategic vision for developing Miles, attracting tourism, and capitalising on future economic opportunities in the region is fundamentally undermining business certainty, confidence, and investment.



The Miles & Districts Chamber of Commerce is calling on the next Western Downs Regional Council to:

- Develop and deliver a Western Downs Regional Economic Plan that is endorsed by the business community in Miles as a matter of urgency
- Create a positive investment and operating environment to ensure the Western Downs becomes an attractive place to do business
- Establish an economic diversification strategy for the Miles region to accommodate for the gradual downturn of the energy sector
- Work with the Miles & Districts local chamber to implement regular 'buy local' campaigns to encourage greater spend in local businesses

'The Western Downs Regional Council has no clear Economic Development Strategy. There is no adequate vision or forward thinking that will help our region benefit from increased and improved economic development. There is also one major event that receives ridiculous funding to the other major events in the region. There is also only minimal Council staff support in most cases toward these major community/economy driving events.'

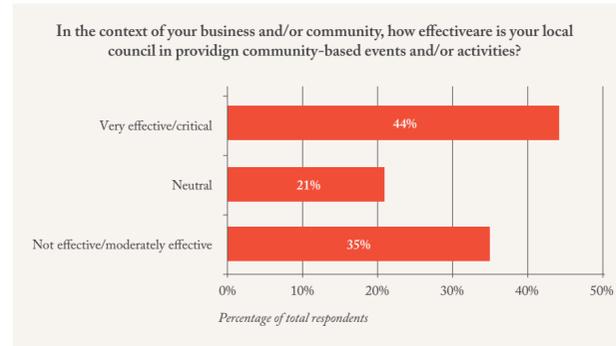
—Survey Respondent, Miles

Community-based events and activities

Council's role in facilitating and/or supporting community events and programmes is critical to building and maintaining social capital throughout Miles and districts. Communities that share knowledge and cooperate to deliver mutually beneficial outcomes are in essence more profitable, with networked communities more likely to be innovative, creative, and take risks thereby reducing business transaction costs.

Marked by reciprocity through the collective benefit of networks in local communities, local governments play a central role in generating social capital. The Miles & Districts Chamber believes the facilitation and execution of community-based events and activities is critical to achieving this goal. This was also reflected in the survey results.

The Miles & Districts Chamber Local Government Election Survey revealed that 83 per cent of business and community members in the Miles region believed local community-based events and/or activities were very important or critical. When asked how effective Council was at planning and facilitating community-based events, 35 per cent of respondents stated Council was either not effective or moderately effective. Respondents stated that the red tape encountered to host an event was largely prohibitive. Feedback also revealed that the time and expense associated with hosting an event was exacerbated by a general attitude of disengagement from Council in the Miles District.



The Miles & Districts Chamber is calling on the next Western Downs Regional Council to:

- Develop a Community Events and Celebrations Strategy to bring engagement activities in line with community expectations
- Reduce the red tape associated with hosting an event in Miles and Districts
- Better utilise existing Council resources to assist applicants to conform with Council requirements

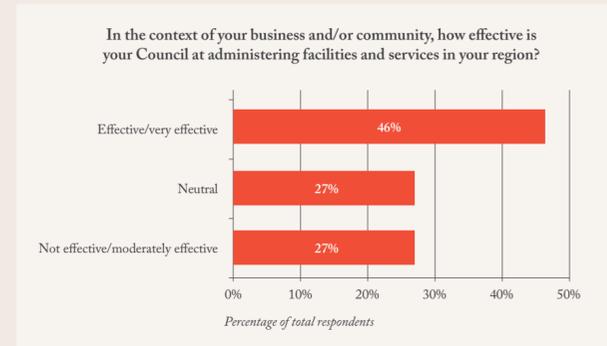
‘The core business of Council is community –governance, delivery of services and support and promotion of the social and economic fabric of the towns in which they represent and this is clearly not happening in Miles.’

—Survey Respondent, Miles

Council-administered facilities and services

Community members in the Miles district recognise that services and facilities are a central component of a thriving community. It is equally critical that the district has the right services and facilities for Miles to continue to be an attractive place to do business.

The Miles District Chamber election survey shows that the majority of businesses and community members (73 per cent) consider Council-administered facilities and services such as the upkeep of footpaths, water and sewerage, waste disposal, and public amenities to be very important or critical for Miles. When asked about how effective the Western Downs Regional Council is at administering facilities and services in Miles, 46 per cent of respondents said the Council was either effective or very effective at maintaining facilities and providing services



The Miles District Chamber is calling on the next Western Downs Regional Council to:

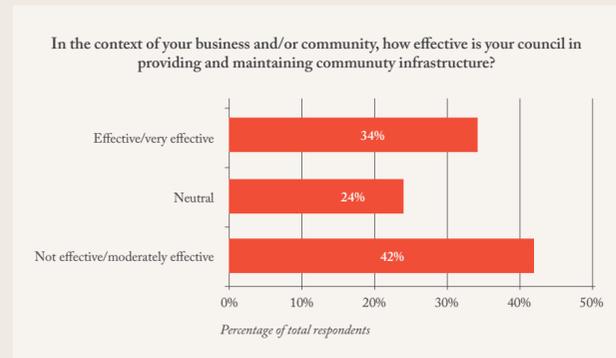
- Prioritise greater communication with Miles residents and business owners regarding Council's maintenance schedule
- Improve footpath networks throughout the Miles district, particularly near schools
- Fast track sewerage and water upgrades and maintenance plans to accommodate for future growth

Community infrastructure

Investment in community infrastructure is critical to community health, well-being, and economic prosperity. It must benefit the local population, cater for intergenerational needs, and increase the liveability of each region and city across Queensland. When asked about community infrastructure in Miles, a significant majority of businesses and community members (80 per cent) stated facilities for recreation such as sports centres, art galleries, museums and civic centres were very important or critical to the Miles district.

Importantly, the Miles & Districts Chamber Local Government Election Survey revealed that 42 per cent of businesses and community members in the Miles region believed the Western Downs Regional Council was either not effective or moderately effective at delivering and/or maintaining community facilities. Overwhelmingly, the feedback received focused on the Council's lack of investment in recreational facilities in the Miles region, and believed ratepayers were not seeing resources effectively and efficiently channelled into Miles.

The challenge for the next Western Downs Regional Council is to improve the delivery of more targeted infrastructure for the Miles district, and ensure existing facilities are effectively maintained for the use and enjoyment of the residents and businesses of Miles. Candidates must also address the ways in which improved community infrastructure can better facilitate youth engagement.



The Miles & Districts Chamber is calling on the next Western Downs Regional Council to:

- Progress a more targeted community infrastructure plan that better informs the current and future requirements of the Miles district
- Engage more fully with the Miles district business community prior to finalising the Amended Draft Western Downs Planning Scheme to ensure future planning for facilities better responds to community needs
- Deliver community infrastructure-based programs that more successfully engage the youth of Miles
- Develop local employment strategies to ensure youths and/or long-term unemployed are properly integrated into the performance of Council tasks in the region

‘Most clubs in Miles are operated by volunteers. With the current decline in economic growth, most clubs will not have the manpower of volunteers to maintain grounds, buildings, fundraising etc, as the volunteers have all gone back to their businesses to run them.’

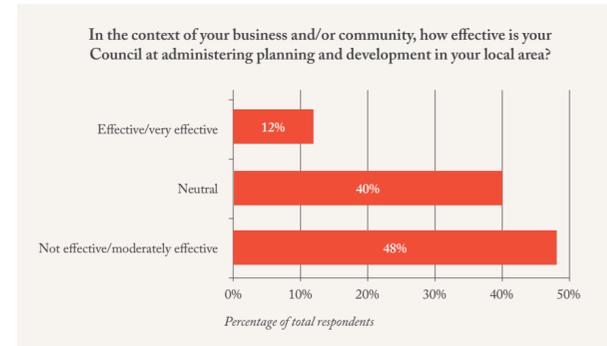
—Survey Respondent, Miles

Planning and building

Local planning departments across Queensland play an important role in achieving economic, social, cultural and environmental goals in their respective regions. Small businesses in particular rely on planning departments to be flexible when assessing applications, to employ a common sense approach towards planning and zoning, and to divulge simple and accessible information on by-laws, licensing and registration requirements to ensure the barriers to starting, expanding or planning a business is not burdened by red tape.

A significant majority of community members and business owners in Miles believe planning and development are very important or critical to the Miles region (81 per cent). When asked how effective Council is at administering planning and development in the Miles district, a significant proportion (48 per cent) stated Council was not effective or moderately effective.

Respondents considered the lack of effective planning has impacted housing vacancy rates across Miles, and also indicated that approvals for material-use changes were costly and time-consuming, thereby prohibiting business activity in the region.



The Miles District Chamber is calling on the next Western Downs Regional Council to:

- Consult small and medium sized businesses widely prior to the implementation of the Draft Western Downs Regional Planning Scheme
- Accelerate red tape reduction efforts across Council with a focus on reforms that will be most beneficial to small and medium business
- Fast-track approval services to ensure the costs of starting or expanding a business are not prohibitive
- Work with mining companies in the region to deliver mutually agreed legacy infrastructure projects for Miles

‘Council has failed us badly in not providing a town plan, despite being 5 years late. Just when we needed good planning they used 2006 statistics which ignored the exponential growth.’

— Survey Respondent, Miles

Effective representation for Miles

Better representation for Miles is a key issue for community members and business owners in the district. The lack of Council engagement in the region is being felt strongly by all residents and business owners. This was also reflected in the survey results. Overall, respondents believed the interests of larger townships such as Dalby were being over-represented to the detriment of the Miles region, and that priorities for small business owners in Miles were regularly over-looked in favour of those closer in proximity to Council.

Business owners told the Miles District Chamber that at present, elected Councillors were not living up to local expectations with respect to adequate presence in the district, and felt largely neglected in comparison to other townships in the Western Downs Local Government Area.

The Miles District Chamber is calling on the next Western Downs Regional Council to:

- Review Council's Community Engagement Policy to ensure that Council decision-making regarding operation and service delivery is founded upon meaningful community engagement activities
- Introduce a timeline of review for the Council's *Community Engagement Policy*

‘Communities across the board want to feel like they are understood and valued. We are looking for pro-active, forward thinking leaders that can deliver Western Downs to the forefront of strategy, development, and investment in the coming terms.’

—Survey Respondent, Miles

Conclusion

Regardless of who forms the next Western Downs Regional Council, it is essential they implement a program that addresses the issues of concern for the region's small and medium business owners and community members.

The next Western Downs Regional Council must commit to greater engagement with the small business owners of Miles, prioritise regional economic development planning, and ensure simpler and more flexible approvals in planning and building applications.

Ultimately, when people vote on 19 March 2016 they should do so on the basis of who they think will best address the concerns raised by the business owners and community members of Miles.

Every citizen of Miles, be they business owner, employer, employee, or resident has an opportunity to determine the future prosperity of their region.

METHODOLOGY

In addition to the survey, the Miles & Districts Chamber of Commerce hosted (alongside CCIQ) a series of Business Resilience forums to document the insight and experiences of small business owners regarding Council's execution of its functions in Miles.

*Survey:
28 September – 21 December
Miles, Jandowae, Tara*