

Agenda Briefing Forum – Special Electors Meeting

Madam Mayor and Councillors,

I appear today because what occurred at the Special Electors Meeting should concern every resident, every ratepayer and every elected member of this Council, regardless of where they stand on the John Connell Reserve Oval Extension proposal.

Tonight I am not asking you to reconsider whether the oval should proceed.

Reasonable people can and do disagree about that.

The issue before us now is much more fundamental.

It is whether the City conducted a democratic process that gave electors a genuine opportunity to participate, to be heard, and to have confidence in the integrity of the outcome.

Because if residents lose confidence in the integrity of a Special Electors Meeting, they begin to lose confidence in local democracy itself.



More than 410 verified electors signed the petition requesting this Special Electors Meeting.

That represents one of the largest petitions presented to this Council in recent years.

Yet the City selected a venue capable of accommodating only around 150 people.

Those two numbers simply do not reconcile.

When more than four hundred electors formally petition for a statutory meeting, it is entirely foreseeable that attendance could exceed the capacity of a small community hall.

Instead, electors attempting to register repeatedly encountered a booking system displaying the meeting as “sold out.”

Whether or not that accurately reflected the number of people who ultimately attended, it undoubtedly conveyed the message that there was little point attempting to participate.

Participation in local democracy should never depend upon whether someone happened to register at exactly the right time.

As Lead Petitioner, I myself was placed on the waiting list.

If the person responsible for lodging the petition could not initially secure a place at the meeting, what confidence could other electors reasonably have that they would be able to participate?

Whether intentional or not, the practical effect was that many electors were discouraged from attending one of the most significant community meetings this Council has conducted.

That issue alone deserves an independent review.

3M

Equally concerning was the management of voting.

The Local Government Act provides that only electors are entitled to vote at a Special Electors Meeting.

Yet, to my knowledge, no formal process was undertaken to verify that those voting were in fact eligible electors.

If that understanding is correct, then the City has no reliable means of demonstrating that every vote cast complied with the Act.

Let me be very clear.

I am not alleging that ineligible people voted.

I am saying that the process itself was incapable of demonstrating that only eligible electors voted.

There is an important difference.

Democracy depends not only upon honest participants.

It depends upon processes that inspire public confidence.

Where those safeguards are absent, confidence inevitably suffers.

3M

Unfortunately, what occurred inside the meeting did little to restore that confidence.

Many residents have since described the atmosphere as intimidating.

Female speakers opposing the proposal were interrupted.

Residents were heckled.

Community volunteers who simply wished to address their Council were subjected to behaviour that should have no place in any civic forum.

Respectful disagreement is healthy.

Organised hostility is not.

A Special Electors Meeting should be a place where ideas compete.

Not where speakers do.



What I found particularly disappointing was that arguments supported by the City's own reports were too often met not with evidence, but with organised opposition.

Council's own report examined five separate options for the future of John Connell Reserve.

One of those—Option 3—required no clearing of native vegetation whatsoever.

It remained entirely within the existing reserve footprint.

It delivered a second cricket oval.

It delivered an additional soccer field.

It upgraded sports lighting.

And it did so for an estimated cost of approximately \$2.1 million, less than half the preferred option.

Most importantly, the report expressly states:

"All field concepts under each option meet the minimum requirements under Cricket Australia's Community Cricket Facility Guidelines." Minutes - 21 April 2026 - OMC.pdf

The report identifies the preferred minimum boundary for Open Age Community Club cricket as 50 metres. Minutes - 21 April 2026 - OMC.pdf

In response to a Question on Notice, officers were asked to confirm that understanding and to confirm that Henry Jeffrey Oval, used by a club competing in the same South Metropolitan Cricket Association competition as Leeming Spartans, has a boundary of approximately that size.

The City's response was simple.

"Your understanding is correct."

The City's own report also explains that the South Metropolitan Cricket Council allows grounds with boundaries below sixty metres, subject to Association approval. Minutes - 21 April 2026 - OMC.pdf

The report does not conclude that Option 3 was incapable of accommodating community cricket.

Instead, it states that the option was:

"not supported by user clubs due to the reduced field sizes, diminishing the quality of offering supplied by each club." Minutes - 21 April 2026 - OMC.pdf

That is an important distinction.

The issue was not whether cricket could be played.

It was whether the second oval should be 50 metres, meeting the City's own identified minimum standard, or whether it should be larger.

That is fundamentally a debate about preference.

About quality.

About aspiration.

Not necessarily about minimum operational need.

I raise this not to reopen the sporting debate tonight.

I raise it because I do not believe many electors were ever given the opportunity to properly understand that distinction before voting.

Democracy requires more than access to a ballot.

It requires access to the relevant facts.

Most extraordinary of all, a motion was introduced that was fundamentally inconsistent with the very purpose of the meeting.

Electors had petitioned this Council to review and reconsider its earlier decision.

Instead, a motion was moved seeking to reinforce that very decision.

That raises an important question of governance.

Section 5.28 of the *Local Government Act* requires that the request for a Special Electors Meeting specify the matters to be discussed. The petition that brought hundreds of electors together was not seeking to endorse the Council's existing decision. It sought a review and reconsideration of that decision.

I therefore question whether a motion whose practical effect was to affirm the very decision that electors had petitioned to review - was consistent with either the purpose or the spirit of a Special Electors Meeting.

At the very least, that question deserved careful consideration by the Presiding Member before such a motion was accepted.

If Special Electors Meetings can be redirected by motions fundamentally opposed to the purpose for which they were convened, then the statutory right of electors to call such meetings risks becoming largely symbolic.

Future petitioners could spend weeks gathering hundreds of signatures, only to find the meeting transformed into an endorsement of the very decision they sought to have reconsidered.

I do not believe Parliament intended Special Electors Meetings to operate in that way.

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I also wish to address campaign material distributed during the meeting.

A leaflet authorised by Mr Daniel Coombs, Secretary of the Leeming Spartan Cricket Club, contained statements which we consider misleading and which, in my view, conveyed false impressions about me and others involved in this campaign.

I have previously raised concerns regarding those statements.

Regardless of where people stand on the project, Council should carefully consider whether disputed campaign material ought to be distributed at an official civic event convened under the Local Government Act.

What makes this especially disappointing is that Mr Coombs has recently been recognised by the Leeming Spartans Cricket Club with its Best Club Person Award.

Every organisation is entitled to celebrate its volunteers.

But awards also communicate values.

When conduct that includes authorising inflammatory campaign material directed at fellow community volunteers is celebrated, it inevitably raises questions about the culture being rewarded.

Sport should bring communities together.

It should never divide them.

And it should never contribute to an environment where residents feel reluctant to participate in local democracy.



Throughout this process I have tried to focus on evidence, process and governance.

I have accepted that reasonable people can disagree about whether the oval should proceed.

What I cannot accept is a democratic process where participation appears restricted, voter eligibility cannot be demonstrated, respectful debate deteriorates into organised hostility, and important evidence contained within Council's own reports never becomes part of the broader public discussion.

Councillors, this is no longer simply about John Connell Reserve.

It is about confidence.

Confidence that petitions matter.

Confidence that Special Electors Meetings are genuinely accessible.

Confidence that only eligible electors vote.

Confidence that all reasonable alternatives receive fair consideration.

And confidence that every resident, regardless of their view, will be treated with respect when they engage with their Council.

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I therefore ask the City to commission an independent review into the planning and administration of this Special Electors Meeting, including venue selection, registration arrangements, elector verification, audience management and the distribution of campaign material.

Not because we can change what has already occurred.

But because we can ensure that no future Special Electors Meeting leaves residents asking whether the process itself was worthy of their confidence.

Because once confidence in local democracy is lost, it is extraordinarily difficult to regain.

Thank you.