

Media Release

Friday 21 July 2023

Council votes to proceed with divestment of Yallambee Lodge, defer closure of Snowy River Hostel

At the July Council Meeting held yesterday afternoon in Cooma, Council voted to proceed with the divestment of Yallambee Lodge, with not-for-profit provider Respect Aged Care to take over operations of the Cooma aged care facility.

A decision on the closure of Berridale's Snowy River Hostel was deferred until further consultation with the community on the future of the site, and the reasons for closure, is conducted.

The debate and discussion on these two important matters began with a passionate address from two community members against the staff recommendations in the public forum, and continued for hours in the meeting – with two interjections from the gallery voicing their concerns about this process.

Yallambee Lodge:

Councillor Beer moved the Yallambee Lodge motion, adding an amendment requiring further consultation with the community as this process continues.

The matter moved quickly into a committee discussion, with Mayor Narelle Davis providing the history of the process to divest Council from aged care services. She highlighted the untenable situation for Council operating small scale, low care facilities in light of major changes to regulations and funding.

These changes followed the conclusion of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, and following an extended process with the prospective new operator of both of Council's aged care facilities, it was simply not financially viable to provide the level of care and resources required through Yallambee Lodge and Snowy River Hostel into the future.

At the time they were built, these facilities were able to provide the level of care regulators and the community expected. But with the times and requirements for facilities changing, they are no longer fit for purpose.

After an extended period of collaboration with a potential new provider, which saw major improvements to efficiency and finances at both facilities, the prospective operator withdrew from the process. This operator concluded that it was not viable to keep these facilities running.

With the prospective arrangement to transfer our facilities to a new provider falling through, Council met with the Federal Government and Respect Aged Care – the new operator of Cooma's other aged care facility, Hudson House – to develop a sustainable plan for the future of aged care in our region. The conclusion of this process was the recognition that the only viable solution is a single high-quality, expanded and well-resourced facility at Hudson House – operated by Respect Aged Care.

Broadly, the councillors in support of the motion spoke of the difficulty of the decision and the impact on residents, families and staff. With these reservations noted, discussion highlighted that Council can simply not afford to provide the level of care, resourcing and investment required to provide aged care in this new regulatory environment.

The prospect of a consolidated and expanded Hudson House, however, will see aged care residents in the Snowy Monaro provided with the highest possible standard of care, in a state of the art facility, sustainably into the future. No less than they deserve.

Councillors Frolich, Hanna, Hopkins, Johnson and Williamson all voted against proceeding with the divestment of Yallambee Lodge.

There were questions raised about the nature of the arrangement Council is entering into, and whether it is the best deal for resident, families, staff and the community overall. Additionally, councillors opposed to the motion had concerns about whether appropriate due diligence had been exercised by Council, and whether this decision was being rushed. **Continues overleaf.**

Whether there had been sufficient consultation and information provided was also questioned, with Cr Johnson suggesting that additional consultation should be undertaken before a decision is made.

There were more minor concerns about the wording of the motion.

Importantly, although there was significant difference of opinion amongst Councillors, none that spoke at the meeting were of the opinion that Council should continue operating aged care services. The only disagreement, as significant as it was, was about the process.

Council will transfer operation of Yallambee Lodge and all of its assets to Respect Aged Care, providing Respect with a grant towards one year of operating costs for Yallambee while upgrades to Hudson House are completed.

The process of transferring Yallambee Lodge residents and staff out of the current facility to the upgraded Hudson House is expected to take years. Consultation with and the provision of information for the community will commence as soon as possible.

Snowy River Hostel:

With much of the content of the debate already voiced during discussions on Yallambee Lodge, debate about Snowy River Hostel was significantly shorter.

Cr Stewart immediately voiced his opposition to the motion, stating that more consultation needed to be done before closing a facility outright. This is the major difference between plans for Yallambee Lodge and those for Snowy River Hostel.

Cr Mitchell, Cr Beer and Cr Williamson agreed that more consultation with the community was needed, with Cr Beer stressing the point that as there is no deal with a third party hinging on Council's decision – unlike with Yallambee Lodge – there was no rush to proceed with the closure.

The original motion – to proceed with the orderly closure of Snowy River Hostel – was lost, with Councillors Davis, Hopkins, Mitchell and Summers voting for.

An alternate motion deferring a decision to close Snowy River Hostel until consultation is undertaken was then passed unanimously.

Council will announce details of the consultation very soon, with dates anticipated to be scheduled within the next two weeks. Anyone with questions, concerns, or who is simply interested in learning more is encouraged to attend.

Consultation with residents and families will additionally be held for Snowy River Hostel. Council will be in direct contact with families to arrange these in coming days.

It is important to reiterate that the aged care facility at Snowy River Hostel will close. This upcoming consultation is to explain the reasons why, provide ample opportunity for the community's questions to be answered, and to find out what the community wants to see happen with the site following the closure.

Council understands that this is sad and difficult news for many in our community, particularly those in Berridale and with loved ones in Snowy River Hostel. This was not what was promised, and despite the best efforts of everyone involved in this process since 2020, there was no solution that would see these facilities continue into the future.

Council is deeply grateful for the efforts of all our aged care staff, the trust and support of families and residents, and the invaluable and immeasurably generous contributions of our community over the many years Yallambee Lodge and Snowy River Hostel have been in operation.

While these decisions are difficult, we are confident that the future of aged care in the Snowy Monaro is stronger than ever, with better care, more resources, and a state-of-the-art facility at Hudson House.

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