

Byron council downgrades key environment role

Chris Dobney

Byron Shire Council has admitted that its former environment team leader has taken a redundancy rather than see his position downgraded, in a move that a former mayor has described as a 'shocking and sad and a betrayal of the community'.

Council GM Ken Gainger said the move was part of normal council processes, adding that council had restructured 'its entire workforce' over the past two years.

As part of the restructure the bush regeneration team has been moved to the parks and open space department and now reports to a new team leader, Mr Gainger told *Echonetdaily*.

'As a consequence, the former team leader natural environment position was reduced in grade because of the loss of staff management responsibilities,' he said.

'The incumbent was offered the new position but chose to apply for a redundancy which is an award entitlement in such circumstances.

'Council is strongly committed to continuing and growing its extensive environmental programs and will shortly advertise the vacant position,' Mr Gainger said.

But former Greens mayor Jan Barham, during whose term the council's biodiversity strategy was drawn up, has attacked the move.

Vital role

Ms Barham has urged the community to 'question elected representatives and the general manager about any move to downgrade or eliminate the role of professional staff who implement our commitment and responsibility to being leaders in biodiversity protection'.

'Please don't let this happen, don't let this be done without the outrage that it deserves and then wonder why we continue to see the shire destroyed – it's too important,' she implored.

'Perhaps [councillors] don't get that you need professional staff to undertake such a vital role, that the years of study and experience that is required to fulfil such a significant position to enable the implementation of a community priority is crucial,' Ms Barham told *Echonetdaily*.

In 2004, during her time in office, Byron Shire Council adopted an award winning biodiversity conservation strategy that 'identified the long-term plans for implementation of the commitment to be leaders in the biodiversity management,' Ms Barham said.

'To do this, it was recognised that professional staff were essential to guide this process and provide support to community to be partners in making it a reality.

'Staff also have the professional role of informing all other plans and developments within the shire.

'To downgrade and or eliminate the crucial role of environment team leader and the priority objective of biodiversity protection will undermine a defined community priority,' Ms Barham said.

Additional support

But Byron Shire Council's director of infrastructure services, Phil Holloway, said the move was 'part of Council commitment to strengthen service delivery', adding the bush regeneration team is now 'supported by the open spaces teams'.

'Our hard working bush regenerators and our open space teams, remain focused on weed management and land regeneration projects,' he said.



(<http://www.echo.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/big-scrub-landcare-800px.jpg>)

Byron Shire Council's environment team leader position has been downgraded, resulting in the redundancy of the former staff member and a vacant position.

'There has been no reduction in staff numbers, there has simply been a change in reporting lines and the bush regeneration crew now has access to additional support.

'Plus, we will continue to boost our crew with contract bush regenerators as grant funding becomes available,' Mr Holloway said.

No consultation

But Ms Barham said she was concerned there did not appear to have been any community consultation around the move.

'I cannot find any public reference to the councillors or the community being advised or consulted on this downgrading of our stated commitment,' she told *Echo*netdaily.

'This downgrading of a staff position would not be tolerated for other professional areas such as engineering or management – it shouldn't happen in this situation.

'If it does, we will see the failure of our long held commitment to be at the forefront of biodiversity management,' Ms Barham said.

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