



CEO sacking: Secret meetings and confidential documents

Description



Confidential documents relating to the former CEO were sent anonymously to Cr Cassidy. Image: Governmentnews.com

Carol Altmann – The Terrier

If everything that dumped Warrnambool City Council CEO Peter Schneider says in his affidavit is true, our council has gone bad.

Mr Schneider's allegations – which will be put to the Supreme Court on Thursday for a directions hearing – paints a picture of a toxic council, broken by old rivalries and unhealthy, cosy relationships that must end.

And they can only end by a metaphorical deep clean at the next election.

I am hopeful that the full affidavit can be published after Thursday, under the protection of the court, but many of the allegations are out there and they are ugly.

They include the decade-old hate fest between Crs Mike Neoh and Kylie Gaston and their nemesis Peter Hulin which just rolls on.

It includes concerns about the “close relationships” of some councillors to senior council staff, including the Director of Community Development Vikki King, now acting CEO, and former governance manager Anne-Maree Neal.

And it also raises claims that three councillors – Neoh, Gaston and Cr David Owen – allegedly rated Mr Schneider so poorly in a review in May that the consultant, Peter Berry, who was running the review said it could only have been motivated by “vindictiveness” and “spite”.

These are strong words.

And then there is my personal favourite: Cr Neoh allegedly laying the heavy on Mr Schneider for his handling of the credit card saga.

We all know, from the council's own statements, that it was former CEO Bruce Anson who allowed David McMahon to repay money, to keep his job as a senior manager, and who kept the whole thing under wraps.

Just a blip.

No wonder ratepayers are starting to wonder if Mr Schneider was dumped because he wasn't up to the job, or dumped because he wasn't Mr Anson, or dumped because he got along with Cr Hulin.

One thing is certain, the push to get rid of Mr Schneider became dirty, very early.

Here is something you don't know:

You may recall that Cr Gaston, in a string of questions to Mayor Tony Herbert at this month's council meeting, asked why he and Cr Sue Cassidy had met at Mr Schneider's private home for two hours' on a Sunday in February.

Cr Gaston told the council a number of "red flags" were raised at this gathering.

What I have since learned is that Cr Cassidy had, by that time, received highly confidential documents, anonymously, in the mail, about Mr Schneider's job application.

From what I understand, these documents related to personality and psychological testing that formed part of the job application.

This is highly personal stuff, and so very few people connected to the council had access to these documents.

Yet they were mailed – anonymously – to Cr Cassidy, and for a reason. Who was behind that move?

No wonder Cr Cassidy was keen to talk to Mr Schneider, face-to-face, in February.

Interestingly, Cr Cassidy was not among the councillors named in Mr Schneider's affidavit as having acted with "spite" or "vindictiveness" in his May review.

Perhaps, in May, Cr Cassidy still thought he was doing a good job.

Cr Cassidy has declined to comment on this leaked document and Cr Herbert would only say "there were some concerns about confidential information that was sent to Sue."

On top of all this, Mr Schneider's affidavit also refers to a particular email written by Cr Gaston.

This email, written in July, Gas allegedly confirms Cr Gaston was seeking legal advice back in February about Mr Schneider's contract.

In other words, several councillors were starting to seek legal advice on how to get rid of him and how much it would cost.

Who did these councillors expect to pay for this advice? Remind me again?

The Local Government Inspectorate is looking into all this and its findings can't come soon enough.

Neither, in my view, can the election when ratepayers and residents will decide whether this is the sort of council we want to serve us, or whether it is time for a generational change.

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