

## **Rutherglen Loops – Engagement Gaps Threaten Community Trust in Council**

A local avid Rutherglen cyclist's attempts to engage with the Indigo Shire Council have unfolded into a saga of silence and inaction, revealing a troubling gap between promised practices and real-world responses.

According to the Indigo Shire's Customer Service Charter, the expectation is clear: a four-day response time to email inquiries. This assurance is underpinned by a pledge of integrity and a commitment to timely and positive action. Yet, as one resident's experience suggests, these are not always met, challenging the council's image of responsiveness and transparency.

The resident, a keen cyclist and advocate for sustainable trail planning, has navigated both the proposed and existing sections of the Rutherglen Wine Walk Cycle Trail, now known as Rutherglen Loops. Concerned about the viability of constructing paths in flood zones—a concern validated by the destructive floods of 2022 which submerged trails and incurred over \$250,000 in damages—this individual sought to engage with the council, armed with a detailed analysis and photographs.

In response, the initial communication from the council was promising. An affirmative reply from the CEO seemed to open the door to fruitful discussions. However, the reality that unfolded was starkly different. Emails sent on multiple occasions were met with silence or generic automated responses. Even direct inquiries to councillors and a plea for engagement were largely ignored, with only minimal, non-substantive replies forthcoming.

This pattern of non-engagement culminated in an evasive response from the Mayor and a contradictory explanation from the CEO regarding the decision to alter the consultation process. According to the CEO, tight timelines necessitated a change, a decision purportedly supported unreservedly, yet the details of when and why this decision was taken remain murky.

Further complicating matters, the governance coordinator's investigation into the complaint suggested no definitive decision to alter the communication process had ever been made, contradicting earlier statements and indicating a lack of coordination and accountability within the council's ranks.

Frustrated by this cycle of non-responses and bureaucratic obfuscation, the resident turned to the Victorian Ombudsman. The response from the council to the Ombudsman's inquiries did little to clarify matters, offering what was considered as a hollow apology riddled with excuses rather than genuine accountability.

What emerges from this protracted exchange is a disconcerting disconnect between the council's stated values and its practices. For residents and ratepayers of Indigo Shire, such experiences erode trust and dampen enthusiasm for civic engagement. It is not merely the integrity of trails at stake, but the integrity of the council itself.

As Indigo Shire Council moves forward, it faces a crucial choice: to bridge the chasm between promise and practice or to continue a pattern of response that risks alienating those it serves. For the health of its democratic processes and the trust of its community, one hopes for a course correction that aligns more closely with the council's avowed principles of service and transparency.