

Media Statement 6 March 2025

Shire of Dundas President's Full Response to ABC Goldfields-Esperance Questions

The Shire of Dundas has responded to recent concerns about Norseman IGA operations, as reported in the ABC article dated March 6, 2025. Shire President Laurene Bonza provided a detailed response to journalist Hayden Smith's questions. See below for further details.

1. As president, are you concerned by some of the feedback relating to the IGA (bare shelves, inedible meat, poor quality fruit and veg etc)? Is the Shire managing the store to an acceptable standard?

We acknowledge the challenges but are not overly concerned. Sales at the IGA have increased significantly, driven by demand from Eyre Highway truck stops, pastoral stations, and fluctuations in tourist numbers. Additionally, businesses in town rely on our IGA for supplies, and when their orders don't arrive on time, they purchase stock from us, further impacting inventory levels.

We've acknowledged recent challenges with stock availability, particularly due to critical breakdowns in our main freezer and fridge. To mitigate this, we took the steps to organise additional runs and increase bread orders to meet heightened demand.

Logistics are a key factor—our truck only travels to Perth (743 km away) once a week for restocking, which limits supply frequency. December, in particular, is a volatile period for deliveries.

Like many stores, we've faced gaps on shelves, which is not unique to us and reflects strong customer activity. Our overall orders have increased since we took ownership, indicating regular stock replenishment. We stand by the quality of our produce, and while feedback varies, the majority of our customers appreciate shopping locally. Our onsite butcher ensures quality control in meat products.

We're committed to addressing concerns promptly and maintaining high standards across all areas of our store operations. It would be entirely counterproductive to do otherwise. We do strive for continual improvement as we should.

2. Is Norseman IGA profitable? Could you please direct me to any profit/loss statement specifically relating to the IGA?

Yes, the Norseman IGA and Post Office remain viable, and our financial reporting complies with Local Government financial requirements. These figures are included in our financial statements. The Shire uses external accountants ensuring expert oversight and transparency.

While we are not required to publish a detailed profit and loss statement every month, we welcome concerned community members to visit us. We are happy to explain how to read financial statements and provide insights into the store's financial position. Local Governments are audited by the Office of the Auditor General, we are currently in the final stages of our audit, which includes a detailed audit of the IGA operations.

3. A local was last week banned from entering the IGA for six months. For what reason was she banned? Did the Shire hear her version of events before enforcing the ban?

Unfortunately, this situation has been a long-standing issue. The individual in question has repeatedly exhibited verbally abusive behaviour towards our staff. The person has been approached about previous behaviours.

All staff have a right to feel safe in their workplace. The Shire is responsible for ensuring a safe and respectful workplace. We do not accept that customer service staff must accept being sworn at, called names, and their characters attacked on an ongoing basis. The IGA issues banning notices as a last resort, usually as a result of occurrences of ongoing theft, and significant or sustained abuse. This was not an isolated incident, and the decision was made based on ongoing concerns for staff safety and wellbeing.

4. Was it an acceptable punishment?

We believe so. There are appropriate ways to voice concerns, including engaging directly with us or through formal channels. Taking matters to the media, as has happened in this case, is also an option, and we respect that.

The decision to impose the ban was made to protect our staff from ongoing abuse and threats. Our IGA operates under challenging circumstances—demand has increased significantly, and our supply chain is limited to a single truck travelling from Perth (743 km away) once a week. We are actively exploring solutions, such as increasing deliveries to twice a week or investing in a larger truck, but these require additional staffing and budget planning.

Success

Despite the challenges, the Shire has made significant progress. Over the past six years, our workforce has grown by over 100%, and our budget has increased from \$4.8 million to \$15 million—clear indicators of our success. While some may choose to focus on criticism, we remain committed to serving those who recognise the value of our efforts. Anyone concerned is welcome to engage with the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries (DLGSC) or the media, as we stand by our decisions and our commitment to the community.

This is all done to have better community outcomes. Examples of community outcomes:

- Employment – the Norseman IGA employs 20 locals- 8 of those are juniors. We see it as a great opportunity to be part of a young person's first job.
- Education support: The IGA supports school events with food donations, and this year every student was provided with their start of year booklist.
- IGA and the Shire is a keen supporter of community events , and we regularly donate supplies to the Norseman DHS P&C and the Norseman Historical Society events/fundraisers and the free Seniors' Christmas dinner.
- Hardship grocery packages - Norseman IGA works with Norseman CRC to provide hardship packs for vulnerable people.

As a small, remote local government we face many funding challenges, for example, we currently can't get funding for asbestos removal; our town has issues in relation to asbestos.

All our culverts have been installed upside down; we need to fix that.

Our Main Street is falling with owners not willing to invest in keeping their premises in an acceptable condition. Council will be working towards adopting a plan in the future to buy these properties and rescue Norseman's appearance.

We have for the first time, with no external funding, a 3 year \$1 million footpath replacement programme.

We have replaced 95% of our outdated plant and equipment, because of positive growth and the way we do business.

We paid for a sawmill without State or Federal funding. It is also worth noting that we paid for the IGA , PO and associated plant and infrastructure from our own reserves, (we did not borrow any money for this purpose), which has been returned to those reserves in the first 9 months of operation.

The Shire of Dundas remains committed to improving services for our residents and visitors, ensuring these essential services continue.

Media Requests: For further information, please contact the Shire of Dundas CEO 0429 391 291