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FREE COMMUNITY PAPER

[ 17 - 30 May 2025 ]

# THE BUGGLE

Minnamurra  
Kiama Downs  
Jamberoo  
Bombo  
Kiama  
Kiama Heights  
Gerringong  
Gerroa



Councillor Erica Warren. Photo: Supplied

## One simple fix could have saved millions

Lynne Strong

As Kiama Council faces scrutiny over lost developer contributions and project delays, a new question with notice from Cr Erica Warren is pushing Council to address the root of the problem and adopt basic governance reforms that should already be in place.

At the centre of the issue is the quiet repeal of Kiama's three Section 7.11 Developer Contributions Plans in December 2023.

These plans allowed Council to collect targeted fees from developers to help pay for roads, stormwater, community facilities and parks in areas experiencing growth.

In Jamberoo, the Section 7.11 charge was \$20,050 per new lot or dwelling. This figure would have applied to a current 50-lot subdivision in the area if a valid plan had been in place.

That's over \$1 million in infrastructure funding now gone.

Once a Development Application is approved, there is no legal mechanism to retrospectively apply updated contribution rates. Under state rules, councils are

expected to review these plans every five years. The work to prepare a replacement for Jamberoo should have started in late 2022. It did not. Instead, the plans were allowed to lapse without replacement, and contributions were quietly shifted to the fallback Section 7.12 scheme.

Section 7.12 applies a fixed percentage levy based on construction cost. While simpler to administer, it is not linked to local infrastructure need, and it typically delivers lower returns in high-growth areas. In this case, the shift has left the community with far less funding for essential infrastructure and no say in how it should be prioritised.

Cr Warren has asked Council to urgently engage a specialist consultant to prepare a new Section 7.11 Plan and to include the cost of this work in the 2025-26 budget. She has also called for a register to track expiry dates and ensure renewal work begins well in advance.

Preparing a new plan typically takes 12 months and requires review by the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal. There is an 8 per cent administration allowance built into the contribution framework so Council can recover the cost of preparing the plan.

Cr Warren has also urged Council to work more closely with developers who understand the planning framework and can help

ensure that Council captures its full entitlements. "We aren't expected to know everything," she said.

"Leaning on those with experience is good practice and another way Council can collaborate within the community."

These actions are not about fixing a technical oversight. They are about rebuilding the systems that ensure our community receives its fair share of infrastructure investment when new homes are built.

The call for reform comes as residents voice frustration over a string of governance failures. The failure to renew contribution plans has already cost the community more than \$1 million and contributed to a legal dispute that drained significant Council resources. Two grants totalling \$50,000 for Jamberoo Rural Fire Service were lost due to missed Council signatures.

And now, \$2.4m in cycleway funding is expected to be returned due to missed deadlines and coordination failures.

Cr Warren's question points to a larger issue. Council is not losing opportunities because it lacks resources but because it lacks systems. The cost is not just financial. It is a loss of trust, momentum and potential. The solution is clear. Start early. Work together. And make sure no one forgets to renew what matters most.



Trump effect in Gilmore p4



John's volunteer spirit p7



Snail of approval p9



Sacked Dragon returns p24

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# THE BUGLE

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## Costly failures show the need for vigilance

Opinion - Lynne Strong

Kiama Council has recently lost millions in grants, developer contributions and legal costs.

But the real issue is not just the money. It is the absence of the basic checks and balances that would have prevented these failures in the first place. A council that forgets to renew its developer contributions plan is not unlucky. It is unaccountable.

A council that overcharges developers by \$1.5 million due to spreadsheet errors does not have a bad day. It has poor financial controls. And when Council staff fail to sign off on grants that volunteers worked hard to secure, that is not unfortunate. It is administrative neglect.

Jamberoo RFS volunteers secured a \$30,000 grant for solar panels and a \$20,000 grant for a mural and garden. The RFS met with the Mayor to secure his support, completed all the paperwork, and all Council had to do was sign it. They did not. Both grants were lost.

This week's recommendation to cancel the Jamberoo Cycleway project is just the latest example. It has money behind it. It has community support. It even has the design ready. But once again, the timeline cannot be met, the

stakeholders are not aligned, and the clock has run out.

A sewer main is being installed along the same stretch of road by a developer. That work will block any cycleway construction until mid-2026. This alone makes it impossible to meet the Transport for NSW deadline. But this crucial detail seems to have arrived too late. Why? Because the people who needed to talk to each other did not.

This is where a working group could have made the difference. A project of this complexity, involving Council, state funding agencies, utility providers, private developers and the community cannot be managed in isolation. It requires shared timelines, early warnings and open channels between those doing the digging, the planning and the funding.

This is not about one team making a mistake. It is about a lack of structure, a lack of communication and a lack of shared accountability. From expired developer plans to spreadsheet errors to missed infrastructure timelines, it all adds up. This is not a funding problem. It is a systems problem.

Best-practice councils operate with live tracking of grants and funding. They maintain up-to-date policies, escalation systems

for approvals, clear delegation rules and audit trails for all decisions. They do not rely on memory. They rely on systems.

They also welcome scrutiny. Quarterly internal audits, independent audit committees and public reporting of grant outcomes are standard practice in well-governed councils. If Kiama had these in place, many of the recent losses would likely have been avoided.

Cr Erica Warren has asked the right question: what steps has Council taken to fix this? She has also proposed practical solutions, including hiring a specialist to update the expired developer contributions plan, establishing an expiry register and working with experienced developers who understand the regulations set by the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal and can help Council get it right.

This is not about blame. It is about fixing the culture, the systems and the accountability gaps that have allowed these failures to occur.

Now the community needs to back those who are pushing for reform. We need to expect more than apologies and commit to watching what happens next.

Kiama can do better. And with the right leadership and public pressure, it will.

### Council clears loan ahead of schedule

Kiama Council has taken another giant leap towards getting back into a financially strong position after its \$60 million loan for Blue Haven Bonaira to the NSW Government has been cleared ahead of schedule. Following last month's settlement of Blue Haven Bonaira with new owners Hall & Prior taking over the aged-care facility, Council repaid the final instalment of \$14.6 million on Wednesday to the NSW Treasury Corporation, well ahead of the August 2025 deadline which had been extended in 2023 given Council's financial position at that time.

Kiama Mayor Cameron McDonald was pleased to see the matter resolved ahead of schedule. "This final payment improves our Debt Service Cover Ratio, returning it to positive territory, satisfying another requirement of the NSW Government's Performance Improvement Order," he said. "I want to thank the NSW Government for their support, through TCorp, allowing Council the extended time to clear the debt." Kiama Council's remaining loan obligations are \$5.6 million for a range of infrastructure projects at holiday parks and Gerringong Library as well as road and bridge improvements.

### Roadworks to cause disruptions

Motorists and residents in Kiama will experience disruptions brought about by maintenance work at three roads. Kiama Council will be completing resurfacing work from 19-26 May. Traffic controllers will also be on site to direct traffic while the work is undertaken at Colley St (Minnamurra St to Swan St) 19 May, 7am to 5pm, Gipps St (Princes Hwy to Hothersal St): 19 to 20 May, 7pm to 5am, Manning St (Bonaira St to Farmer St): 21 to 25 May, 7pm to 5am. There will be lane closures and road detours set-up during the work. Affected residents should approach the traffic controllers for help leaving or entering their property. To enable works to be completed and for the safety and convenience for the workers, Council is asking residents to park vehicles "off street". Kiama Council's contractor will make every effort to minimise disruption where possible although the works are expected to be noisy.

### Ducking for cover at Jamberoo Pool

If you are looking to take a dip in Jamberoo Pool over the winter, don't bother. And that goes for you ducks too. Kiama Council has installed off-season covers at Jamberoo Pool, to reduce the clean-up costs when the pool opens each summer. The 25-metre main pool and toddler pool are usually left uncovered over the off-season. However, leaf litter, other debris and a significant number of local ducks have added to the time, effort, equipment and chemicals required to get the pools spick and span each summer.

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