

# **Understanding the Draft Annual Business Plan 2026/27**

## **A Community Guide Prepared by Councillor Ian Schlein**

### **Disclaimer**

The views expressed in this document are my own personal opinions and interpretations as an elected member of the Berri Barmera Council. They do not represent the official position of Council, its administration or my fellow elected members.

My intention is not to tell residents what to think. Rather, it is to present information from the Draft Annual Business Plan in plain English so that members of our community can better understand the decisions being considered and form their own views.

### **Why I Prepared This Guide**

Most residents do not have the time to read lengthy budgets, financial reports and supporting documents. Yet the decisions contained within these plans affect every household through the services we receive, the infrastructure we rely upon and the rates we pay.

I have prepared this guide as both a resident and an elected member. I understand that cost-of-living pressures are real and that discussions about rates are deeply personal. Healthy democracy depends upon informed communities. My hope is that this guide assists residents to understand the facts and participate confidently in the conversation about our district's future.

### **A Little History**

The Berri Barmera district has been built over generations by residents, volunteers, staff and elected members who invested in roads, parks, sporting facilities, community buildings and wastewater infrastructure.

Those decisions were made using the information available at the time and often reflected the priorities of the communities they served.

Over recent years, improvements in asset management practices have given councils a clearer understanding of the true cost of maintaining and replacing these assets. This has highlighted future obligations that may not have been fully recognised in earlier decades. This is not about assigning blame to previous councils or administrations. Rather, it is about recognising that today's leaders inherit both the benefits and responsibilities created by those who came before us.

### **What the Draft Annual Business Plan Does**

The Annual Business Plan outlines:

- the services Council intends to provide;
- the projects Council intends to undertake;
- how those activities are proposed to be funded; and
- the rates and charges required to deliver those commitments.

It is, in effect, Council's business plan for the coming financial year.

## Financial Snapshot

The Draft Annual Business Plan proposes an average residential rate increase of approximately **8.7 percent**.

Major areas of expenditure include:

- Roads and kerbing
  - approximately **\$2.4 million**;
- Buildings and structures
  - approximately **\$2.1 million**;
- Road rehabilitation
  - approximately **\$1.26 million**;
- Community Wastewater Management Scheme works
  - approximately **\$1.1 million**;
- Plant replacement
  - approximately **\$1.0 million**;
- Wilson Street office works
  - approximately **\$820,000**;
- Building renewals
  - approximately **\$810,000**;
- Berri West wastewater works
  - approximately **\$433,000**;
- Irrigation upgrades
  - approximately **\$415,000**;
- Other wastewater upgrades
  - approximately **\$370,000**.

## Initiatives Intended to Improve Financial Sustainability

The Draft Annual Business Plan identifies a number of measures intended to improve Council's financial position over time, including:

- returning staff to Wilson Street;
- reviewing Council property holdings;
- continuing efficiency programs;
- undertaking service reviews;
- maintaining staffing levels;
- strengthening asset management practices;
- maximising grant opportunities;
- quarantining identified savings;
- applying user-pays principles where appropriate; and
- encouraging growth to broaden the rate base.

## What Appears Different

Compared with earlier plans, several themes appear more prominent:

- greater emphasis on financial sustainability;
- stronger reliance on asset management information;
- increased focus on maintaining existing assets;
- formal service reviews;

- improved governance practices; and
- recognition of broader cost-of-living pressures.

### **My Interpretation**

My interpretation is that this plan focuses primarily on maintaining the services and assets that communities rely upon while working toward a more sustainable financial position. It appears to prioritise renewal over expansion and places greater emphasis on ensuring that today's decisions remain affordable tomorrow.

### **Uncomfortable Truths**

- There is no secret pool of money.
- Every service has a cost.
- Deferred maintenance rarely becomes cheaper.
- Every decision involves trade-offs.
- Leadership sometimes requires making decisions that are necessary rather than popular.
- Doing nothing is also a decision, and often the most expensive one of all.

### **Final Thoughts**

You may agree with my interpretation or you may not.

My hope is simply that this guide helps residents better understand the Draft Annual Business Plan and encourages informed and respectful discussion about the future of our community.