



# Planners and Politics

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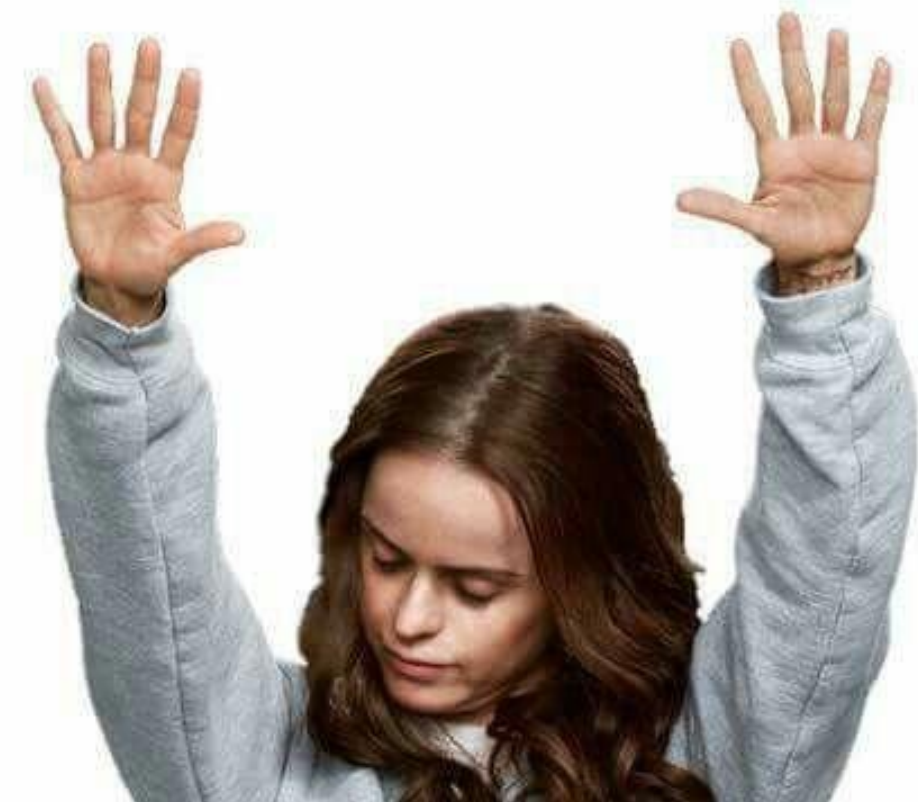
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# Acknowledgements and Disclaimers

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These views are that of my own and do not represent those of the City of Melville

Many of these lessons have been adopted from working with my mentors – most recently Peter Varelis and Gail Bowman who has assisted in this presentation preparation.



# The Issue

The role of a planner is ever evolving and we have to wear many hats – this makes many question what and why we do what we do

## Key Issues

- We are technical experts, facilitators, mediators, project managers and advocates
- We are employed by the CEO and the CEO is employed by the Council – we are answerable to both and the community and the State Government.
- These bodies may not always agree on certain issues and hence present conflicts for planners. <sup>1</sup>
- Planning for the community (both existing and future) in a system of procedural consensus weighed to the existing over the future.<sup>2</sup>
- Our profession is being undermined by allegations of misconduct, corruption, and incompetence. <sup>3</sup>
- Where does this leave us?

Me caught in the middle between people getting into a heated argument/fight and told to choose a side





## Political Nous

Political nous" refers to the skill and ability to understand and effectively navigate the political environment, including its unwritten rules, power players, and the best timing and approach for communication and decision-making. It involves building trust, managing relationships, aligning competing interests, and delivering sound advice to influence policy outcomes without getting bogged down in partisan politics. <sup>4</sup>

These are a series of lessons which I wish I learnt earlier in my career which will hopefully help the next generation of LG planners.



# Lesson 1 – Be first / early

You can be right but if you aren't first – sometimes it doesn't matter.

## Key lessons

- Some won't ask for both sides before making up their mind
- Make your leadership team and elected members look good by keeping them well informed on likely escalation issues early (keep ahead of issues where you can)
- Holding responses are gold on hot topics – keep stakeholders informed, updated and close the loops
- Be succinct with information, stick to the important aspects – if they want more they will ask
- Your level of engagement and forum is dependent on the issue – figure out who the power brokers are and navigate accordingly
- Consider any perceived and real conflicts and take measures to manage





## Lesson 2 – Get to know your context

Context is everything and this applies in many situations in planning – not just location but also in governance

### Key lessons

- Standing orders/meeting procedures matter – they maintain order when the politics is “hot” (clear the afternoon prior to prepare)
- The order and timing of council agenda items matters – pick your battles and the timing
- Listen to Council meetings and pay attention to elected member views and ‘alignment’
- Elected members care about community sentiment – provide options where issues aren’t clear or there’s significant opposition
- When to be pro-active vs reactive (with risk analysis)
- Data and level of interest matters to Elected Members (think about the likely response and impact)

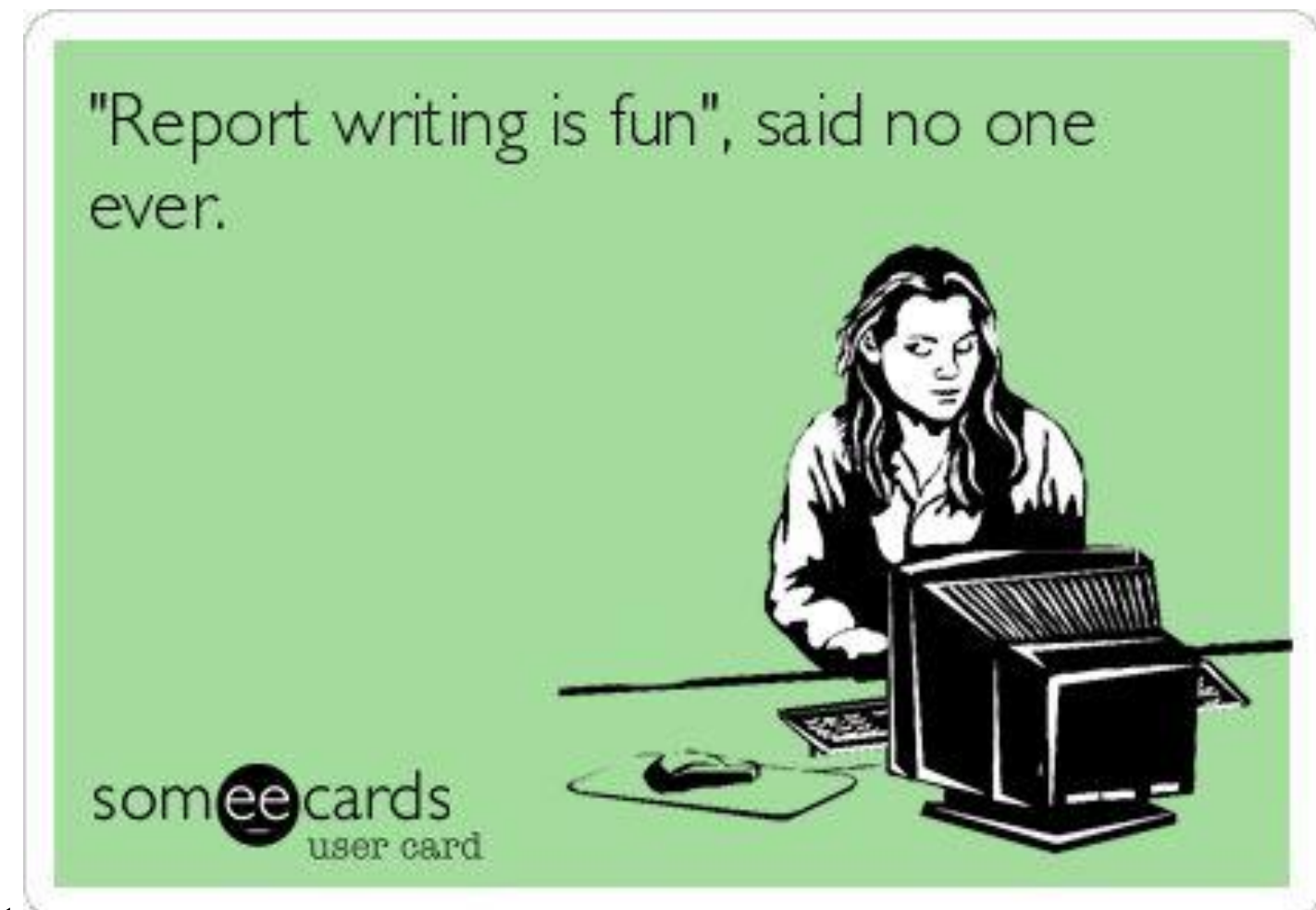


## Lesson 3 – It's never just planning

Your report is only one tool used in how elected members make decisions – they care about matters which are outside of the planning framework and use other information to make decisions

### Key lessons

- Your Council Plan is your friend – aligning a decision with a Council Plan goal/aim/objective – ensures consistent decision making
- Policy and strategy is Council's remit – respect this even if it doesn't align with best practice planning theory
- Deputations have power – consider who may present and make sure your leadership is equipped with information to respond in timely manner
- If you know a misinformed objection or deputation is coming through, provide your Council the factual information that's missing
- Be helpful wherever you can (even if you disagree) – process is as important as outcome.





# Lesson 4 – Delegation use

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Just because you have delegation doesn't mean you have to use it

## Key lessons

- We aren't always the experts
- Responsible use = continued/expanded use – avoid it being taken away
- Public forums allow debate and a wider range of factors to be taken into consideration
- Council should have a say in decisions which have potential to set precedence for future decisions
- Sometimes can demonstrate an issue to inform direction on future framework reviews





# Lesson 5 – Be Humble

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Everyone is human and mistakes can be made with best intentions

## Key lessons

- Look into complaints thoroughly and determine diagnosis
- Take accountability for what went wrong – own it, you'll build trust.
- If issues pop up multiple times – capture in a policy position (remember policy and strategic direction = Council)
- Admit when it's not working and consider training, process improvements or framework changes
- Inform CEO and prepare appropriate messaging to elected members – key details and what is being done to make sure it doesn't happen again



# Turning it around at the City of Melville

- Significant development within Canning Bridge outside of ACP controls (up to 100% variations)
- Escalation of complex and simple compliance matters
- Cumulated in an investigation ('Weir Report') and adoption of recommendations by Council
- New leadership – new outlook and determination to rebuild trust
- Listened to community/CEO/elected members and followed through with meaningful action



Improved quality and timeliness of correspondence with elected members within communications protocols



Canning Bridge ACP review to align with community and Council expectations



Restructure to create separate Approvals and Compliance units



Review of key existing policies and preparation of new policies to address gaps and align with Council expectations (remember Policy is their remit)



New Council Plan providing greater clarity on direction and roles and responsibilities in the Planning Directorate



Weekly management meetings to ensure alignment including diagnosis and awareness of emerging political issues



Proactive engagement sessions with elected members on a range of planning issues



Ensuring ELT are well informed of political issues and what's being presented to Council



# Conclusion

High trust environments are productive and efficient – healthy conflict

Effort and time needs to be invested into building/maintaining trust

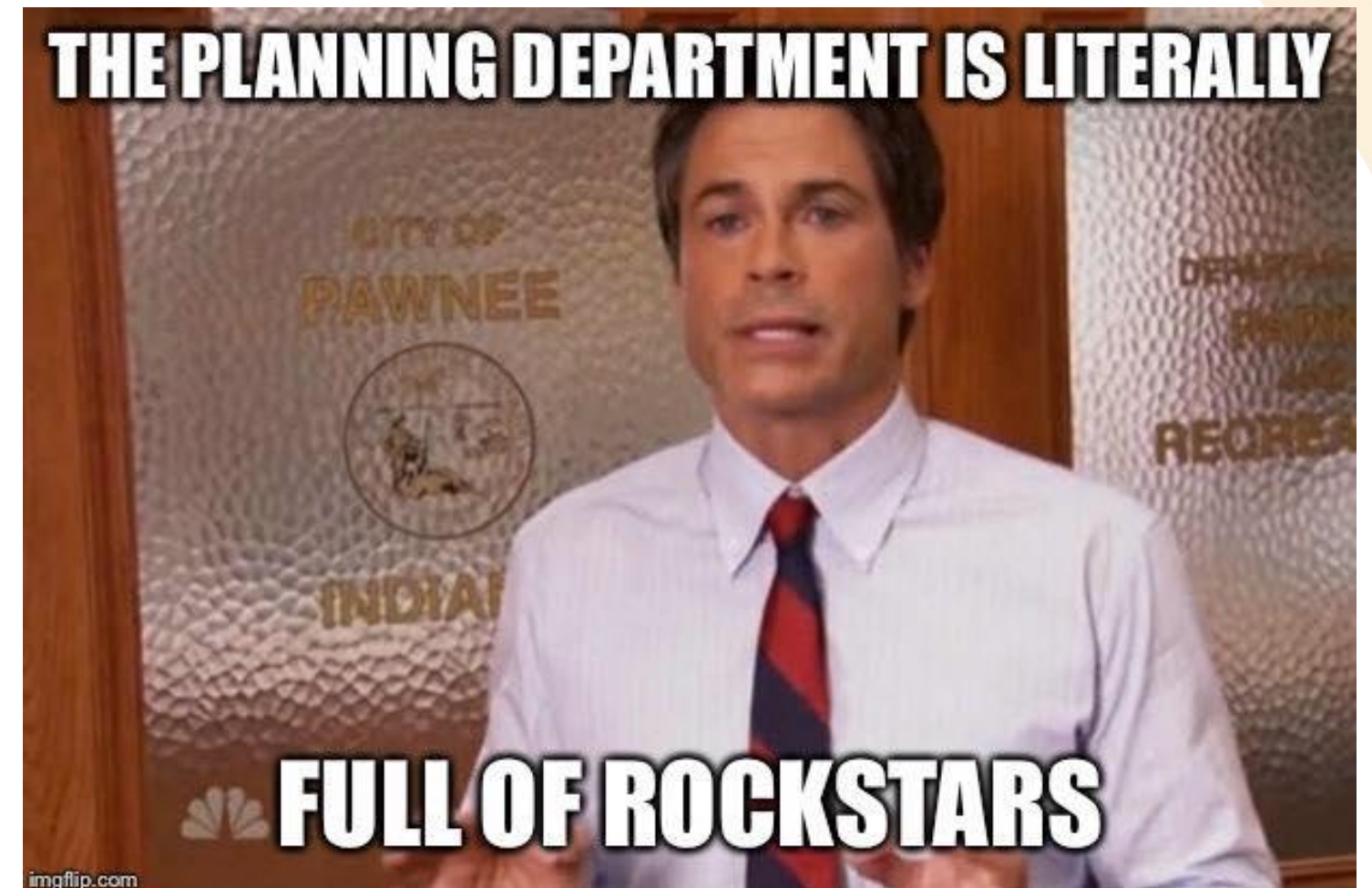
Alignment may not always be reached – let it go

Sometimes a small action is part of a bigger plan to build trust and demonstrate alignment

Pay attention to what happens at your council meetings and contentious issues at other LGs / State level

Respond with a straight bat and admit when you don't know, come back with the detail

Make your executive and EMs look good = instant brownie points



*Most importantly, stick to your professional values and be true to yourself. It might not be easy in the short-term but it will pay off in the long-run.*

# Thank you!

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## Co-contributors

- Peter Varelis – Director Planning at City of Melville
- Gail Bowman – CEO at the City of Melville

## References

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# Thank You

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