

# Annual Report

2023/24



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## Acknowledgement of Country

The ERG recognises the traditional custodians of the land we call the eastern region. We acknowledge their rich cultural heritage and spiritual connection to the land. We pay our respects to their elders past, present and emerging and value their ongoing contribution to the cultural heritage of the region.

# From the Chair

Welcome to the 2024 Annual Report of the Eastern Region Group of Councils.

As a group of five Local Government Authorities we share a vision for Melbourne's east, and a commitment to work together to improve outcomes for our communities.

This report provides an update about our activities, working closely with officer groups, other regional alliances, government and stakeholders.

Our federal and state election platforms, developed in the 2023 financial year provided a strong basis for our continued advocacy and project work over the past 12 months. This included advocacy for a capital works funding and projects to support our communities, grow our economy, and sustain our built and natural environment.

We completed the Health Innovation and Care Economy project in November, and thank the Metropolitan Partnerships for their funding support, and the expert contribution of the many and varied sectoral stakeholders involved.

We continue to work closely with the MAV and other councils towards improving the financial sustainability of the sector, impacted by rising costs, rate capping, and the more recent Windfall Gains tax and waste best practice guidelines.

State Government 'Big Build' projects continue to impact our communities and environment, and the ERG has met with key government agencies, such as the Suburban Rail Loop Authority to work towards optimising local benefits from such major projects. This year, as governments seek to address cost of living pressures and housing affordability through accelerating housing growth, our focus has been on local government's role in planning, and our response to the Housing Statement released in September 2023. The statement included a commitment to establish municipal housing targets, a new Plan for Victoria and to review the Planning and Environment Act.

The ERG initiated a Voice for the East campaign to raise awareness of these significant changes and the potential impacts of greater rates of housing development in our established areas. To support the community to make themselves heard as part of a Plan for Victoria we commissioned and shared our regional research, Plan East, developed by SGS Economics and Planning in December 2023.

We continued our call for stronger relationships across all levels of government and to stress the need for early engagement and strong local input to decision making. We raised our concerns about threats to council's roles in planning and building, the region's high rate of canopy tree loss and the inadequate access to transport services for many of our residents. We have planned meetings with our local state members of Parliament in August and September.

In advance of the October 2024 council elections, we contributed to the debate about councillor training and the proposed mandatory code of conduct, being represented on the Local Government Mayoral Advisory panel by Whitehorse Mayor, Cr Denise Massoud. We have also commenced the process to develop our 2025-29 Strategic Plan which guides our work on our shared priorities under 'four pillars': community, environment, economy and infrastructure.

It has been a busy year. As we head into the end of the current 4-year term I would like to thank my ERG colleagues for their support and contribution to the ERG and wish them well in the year ahead.

Thank you all for your hard work and support.



**Cr Jude Dwight**

Chair, Eastern Region Group of Councils  
Mayor, Knox City Council



# About the ERG

We are a collaboration between five Councils in Melbourne’s east: Knox, Manningham, Maroondah, Whitehorse and Yarra Ranges. On behalf of our communities we collaborate on advocacy, research and integrated planning towards a healthy, connected, sustainable and prosperous region.

## Our region

The region is the traditional home of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation and extends from 15km from Melbourne’s CBD, eastwards into the Yarra Valley and Dandenong Ranges. It includes well-treed suburbs and urban centres, such as Doncaster, Box Hill, Wantirna and Ringwood, and many townships including Warrandyte, Yarra Junction and Olinda.

The Region is considerable in the context of the wider Melbourne metropolitan area. Together, ERG Councils host around 750,000 residents and some 300,000 jobs - an urban area equivalent to almost two Canberra’s and 30 per cent of metropolitan Melbourne. The region’s population was estimated at 746,067 in 2023.

The region’s economy is significant, containing 11 per cent of Greater Melbourne’s jobs and over \$49 billion Gross Regional Product (GRP). The top five employing industries are health care & social assistance; retail trade; education & training; manufacturing; and construction.

## Our vision

We work towards our vision through a focus on our four strategic pillars:



The map shows the Eastern Region of Melbourne, with the ERG area highlighted in orange. The region includes areas from Doncaster in the north to Ringwood in the south, and from the CBD in the west to the Yarra Valley in the east.

-  **Communities** that are more resilient and cohesive, and who enjoy an improving quality of life, with better health and wellbeing and great access to services
-  A region known for its **environmental** stewardship and regional responses to sustainability (water, waste, energy and emissions), with space for people & nature, where healthy ecosystems support healthy people & growing economies
-  **Economy:** Through diverse local employment opportunities that support an adaptable workforce, the region is ready for the jobs of the future and will enjoy a connected, competitive, diverse & prosperous future.
-  **Buildings & infrastructure** that promote social cohesion, equality of opportunity, resource efficiency and health in a region that is easy to get around and where active or public transport is preferred for short distances.

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## Working in partnership

**Effective working relationships with government, regional stakeholders and council officer groups are critical to our success.**

Stakeholders include the Eastern Alliance for Greenhouse Action (EAGA); Eastern Affordable Housing Alliance (EAHA); Eastern Transport Coalition (ETC); Melbourne East Regional Economic Development Group (MEREDG) as well as local government peak bodies and other regional groups, such as the Municipal Association of Victoria, LGPro, Northern Councils Alliance, Greater South East Melbourne, LeadWest and the M9.

Through over 50 meetings involving over 300 Council Officers, we have actively supported and contributed to a range of officer networks and project groups including:

- Gender Equality
- Reconciliation
- Sport & Recreation
- People & Culture
- Learning & Development
- Planning & Building
- Procurement
- Communications
- Governance

# Achievements in 2023/34

## ERG Strategic Plan

**2024/25 is the final year of the ERG's Strategic Plan 2021-2025. The Plan sets out a vision for the ERG and the region, framed around 'four pillars': Social, Economic, Environment, and Infrastructure & Buildings. Each pillar is supported by a series of objectives that are being pursued by the region's Councils, regional groups and through ERG advocacy and action.**

As well as supporting the good governance of the ERG, 18 actions formed the basis of our workplan involving integrated planning, shared services, joint procurement and advocacy. Implementation highlights include:

- **Advocacy** was predominantly to the State Government and related to the Housing Statement, amendments to the Victoria Planning Provisions and Planning Schemes, and seeking a more cooperative approach to better support regional priorities and community needs. Other advocacy focussed on the financial sustainability of councils and governance, including library funding, Waste Management Guidelines and the unintended consequences of applying Windfall Gains Tax to council land
- We completed the grant funded **Health Innovation and Care Economy** project in conjunction with the Eastern Metropolitan Partnership. This project recommended opportunities to strengthen the health, innovation and care sectors in the east, developed with comprehensive research and stakeholder input.
- The **Joint Fair Access Policy** was developed involving seven councils. It aims to improve gender equitable access and use of publicly owned community sports infrastructure and support the *Melbourne East Regional Sport and Recreation Infrastructure Strategy 2022-2032* implementation.
- We continue to support the Eastern Region Procurement Network (ERPN) to **accelerate joint procurement**. This has seen an increase in collaboration for the joint tendering of shared services and exploration of opportunities for shared procurement, training/capability building and reporting.
- Regular support to several council officer groups, including in the areas of **reconciliation and gender equality**, to assist and progress opportunities regionally.
- Working with **EAHA** and the Charter Group of Councils to understand and address the minimum social housing supply needs for the region through submissions, information sharing and projects.
- Annual member and stakeholder **survey** to obtain feedback on the ERG and the 2021-25 Strategic Plan to inform future priorities and the development of the next strategic plan.
- Liaison with and support to **EAGA** to reduce energy use and greenhouse gas emissions.
- Ongoing operational support to deliver bi-monthly ERG and CEO meetings, as well as direct project delivery and regular **communication** to members.
- Foster productive relationships with key stakeholders through our website, social media (LinkedIn page) and e-newsletter and meet regularly with council Communications teams.



## Delivering the Health Innovation and Care Economy project

The health innovation and care economy plays a critical role in our region’s liveability, economy and supports Melbourne’s internationally recognised MedTech ecosystem.

The \$198,000 [Health Innovation and Care Economy – Towards a Regional Investment Strategy](#) was led by the ERG and funded through the Metropolitan Partnerships Development Fund.

The strategy contains advice to government and was developed with stakeholders over 18 months. It builds on the region’s strengths and identifies priorities that support economic growth, job creation and business innovation.

The region’s strengths include well-established medical and academic institutions, a highly skilled labour force, and significant exports of health care services and medical product manufacturing:

- Health care services and human pharmaceutical and medicinal product manufacturing have supply chains in the region that contribute \$866 million and \$312 million of goods and services purchasing flows respectively

The strategy set out 13 projects across four areas that stakeholders could deliver in partnership with government. The four areas are to:

- Strengthen local supply chains
- Build a highly trained local workforce
- Improve employment opportunities for local health workers
- Provide local health services that respond to local community needs



## Fostering effective government relations

Effective partnerships between levels of government are essential. We continue to strengthen our relationship with local Members of Parliament, peak bodies such as the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) and with Local Government Victoria (LGV).

We align our advocacy with EAGA, ETC and EAHA, and meet regularly with Communications Managers across the region, and supported a professional development forum for their teams.

Advocacy has included:

- Minister for Planning - Housing Statement and amendments to planning provisions and planning schemes
- Minister for Local Government - Library funding, Waste Management Guidelines, Windfall Gains Tax
- Minister for Roads and Safety - Graffiti and maintenance on the Eastern Freeway

## Other activity



**Reconciliation** Managers across the region meet quarterly and delivered a successful [Cultural Safety Forum](#).

Melbourne East Regional **Sport and Recreational** Strategy Group (MERSRS) successfully developed an innovative **Joint Fair Access Policy** across seven councils - Boroondara, Knox, Manningham, Maroondah, Monash, Whitehorse and Yarra Ranges. The policy addresses barriers experienced by women and girls, transgender and gender diverse people in accessing and using community sports and recreation infrastructure and builds the capability of the Group and their stakeholders.

The **ERPN Procurement** Managers (including Monash and Boroondara) meet regularly to identify and pursue opportunities for joint tendering, training/capability building and reporting.

# Plan East and A Plan for Victoria

The State Government Housing Statement released in September 2023 announced that a new Plan for Victoria would be developed. This would plan for 800,000 new homes over a decade, and to almost double the number of homes by 2051. Of these, at least 70 per cent are planned to be built in Melbourne’s established areas.

Due to the potentially significant impacts on the regions’ natural assets, infrastructure, open spaces, schools, and services, a major focus for the ERG has been to support councils and communities to contribute to the Plan.

The Plan for Victoria consultation was around four pillars that outlined state governments priorities. They are:

- Affordable Housing and Choice
- Equity and Jobs
- Thriving and Liveable Suburbs
- Towns and Sustainable Environments and Climate Action.

To inform our advocacy, we engaged SGS Economics & Planning to provide advice about what infrastructure investment, risk mitigation, planning policy and other matters are required from the State for ERG Councils to manage growth without adverse impacts.

That advice, [Plan East](#), identified a range of issues for councils. Multi-disciplinary input from CEOs, council officers, Mayors and Deputy Mayors assisted to refine and prioritise those issues under four themes. We also considered the broader vision and objectives of the ERG Strategic Plan 2021-25 and previous state and federal election advocacy. Our four regional priorities are:

- Improve community accessibility and productivity by increasing sustainable integrated transport options and reducing car dependency.
- Fund and better coordinate the planning and delivery of the major infrastructure needed to support sustainable growth for the region without adverse environmental or amenity impacts (blue and green infrastructure).
- Protect the character and amenity of the region, including through infrastructure that works with the natural environment (blue and green infrastructure).
- Promote sequenced infill housing development in the region that incorporates activity centres and growth corridors, Suburban Rail Loop (SRL) precincts, and areas for greyfield housing.

We undertook extensive engagement with the community and key stakeholders, including over 50 community groups to gain feedback on Plan East, build community awareness about a Plan for Victoria and the associated Housing Targets, and to encourage communities to have their say and make submissions to the State Government. This engagement was branded, ‘[A Voice for the East](#)’.

**Help create the communities we all want to live in**  
Support the East to ensure the State Government plans for 800,000 homes in Victoria is good for all

Give feedback to your local Council

**Community access and productivity**  
Increase sustainable transport options and reduce car dependency through bus and train network improvements.

**Infrastructure to support growth**  
Fund and deliver drainage, recreation, social and community infrastructure to support sustainable growth and protect amenity and environmental values.

**Our natural assets**  
Maintain and improve access to quality open space and our urban tree canopy to build climate and community resilience.

**Managing housing growth**  
Leverage major projects and local council expertise to deliver diverse and affordable housing in areas with access to services that are not exposed to flood and climate risk.

Our submission to a Plan for Victoria draws on this work and complements the individual ERG Council submissions being made in response to Housing Targets and a Plan for Victoria.

# A Voice for the East

The 'Voice for the East' campaign raised awareness and encouraged a strong community voice to government so that the Plan for Victoria would better reflect the views and needs of the region. Communities were asked to 'help create the communities we all want to live in' and to 'have their say on the future of the region'.



Regional communications and engagement commenced in April 2024 and included:

- **Webinars:** for all ERG Councillors and for the 'top 10' organisations (over 50 community groups) identified by councils for the Department of Transport and Planning
- **Pop ups:** were delivered across the region to raise awareness, and Plan East / A Plan for Victoria information was integrated into council's planning and Council Plan review engagement activities
- **Video communication:** ERG Mayors recorded a [short video](#) on the draft Plan East priorities which was shared broadly
- **Other communication and engagement activities** included a [media release](#), social media posts and printed collateral (post card and brochure) for use in council newsletters and websites

The ERG helped the community to understand the State's plan to accelerate growth and develop a Plan for Victoria. We encouraged communities to have their say. These events and activities provided valuable feedback to the ERG and Councils on local matters that informed our submissions to a Plan for Victoria.

Key themes emerged from the community consultation in response to the four Plan East priorities, including:

- To improve **community accessibility and productivity** and reduce car dependency, bus services (frequency and routes), train services, walking and cycling paths must keep pace with a growing population and address existing service gaps
- The planning and delivery of the **major infrastructure** needed to support sustainable growth should consider essential community infrastructure (schools, transport, health services, libraries, cultural events) closer to home
- Fewer state taxes, and removal of **constraints on Councils'** ability to service growth
- The protection of flora, wildlife, gardens, sports grounds and open space are fundamental to the character and amenity of the region and infrastructure must work with the **natural environment** and be productive (such as fruit trees as street trees, and cheaper access to solar energy)
- Preference for sequenced infill social and affordable sustainable **housing growth** near stations, in activity centres and growth corridors, SRL precincts, to minimise loss of canopy trees and habitat, and reduce impacts of car parking on amenity



# Highlights from regional partners

Collaboration and alignment to support regional groups is a significant factor for success. Some highlights for the key local government groups active in the eastern region in 2023/24 include:



## Eastern Alliance for Greenhouse Action

EAGA continues to make significant progress to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and facilitate climate change adaptation through leading regional local government programs that include:

The 18 month [Business Renewables Buying Group](#) (BRBG) pilot has resulted in seven businesses signing contracts for 100% Renewable Energy for the next five years, saving over 16,000 tonnes of CO2. Based on this success, 31 councils, including three EAGA members have now signed on to replicate and expand the project over the next two years.

The [Energy Savers](#) program successfully assisted 38 businesses across the region in 2023 to access over \$800,000 in federal funding for energy efficiency upgrades. This capped off the successful 2022/23 financial year in which the Energy Savers team engaged 1218 businesses across the EAGA region.

EAGA is helping to coordinate [the Greenhouse Alliance Neighbourhood Battery Investigation](#) (GANBIM) project, which will deliver detailed business cases for neighbourhood batteries in council-selected locations in July 2024. The business cases will have a strong focus on community benefit. The project is funded by the Victorian Government's Neighbourhood Battery Initiative (NBI) and involves no cost for the participating councils.

In the coming financial year, EAGA's project work will involve continuing to support the expansion of the [Victorian Energy Collaboration](#) and BRBG, as well as managing the [Solar Savers](#) and Energy Savers programs. Additionally, EAGA will play a key role in organising the 2024 Victorian Greenhouse Alliances' Conference in August.

In 2023/24, EAGA and has worked with the other Victorian Greenhouse Alliances to provide nine submissions (see EAGA submissions [here](#)) to consultations and inquiries on topics including:

- the National Adaptation Plan Issues Paper
- the Federal Inquiry into Residential Electrification
- advocacy for a 'multilevel governance' approach to climate action.

EAGA's will continue to advocate for:

- science-based targets linked to national and sectoral carbon budgets to limit global warming to 1.5°C and drive rapid transition to zero emissions.

- a multilevel governance model to address the fragmented approach to climate policy, funding, and resourcing for effective coordination of all levels of government and to empower all spheres of government to fulfill their climate ambitions.
- A commitment to a higher ambition Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) that reflects the urgency of the climate crisis and demonstrates leadership in global climate action.



## Eastern Affordable Housing Alliance

2023/24 was a transitional year for the Eastern Affordable Housing Alliance, with EAHA welcoming their new Lead Officer, Anna Gordon in January 2024.

In September 2023 the State Government released its 10-year [Housing Statement](#) as cost-of-living pressures added to the lack of affordable housing nationally.

EAHA released the [Preventing Homelessness Among Older Women Phase Two Report](#) in December. This project improved understanding of the extent and factors leading to homelessness for older women in Melbourne's east and included key findings and potential solutions focussed on two key challenges:

- Using vacant and under-utilised homes and buildings - some 64,000 properties are left vacant in Victoria each year and over 75% of Australians over 65 have a spare bedroom
- Ensuring affordable housing in Victoria's 476 retirement villages and independent living units

Following the release of the Report, EAHA explored how these key solutions may be implemented and engaged Deakin University students through the 'Deakin FreelanceHUB' to investigate how a housing portal could generate ideas and solutions that leverage vacant and under-utilised buildings.

EAHA is also preparing for the 2025 Federal Election, and with the ERG participates in the Charter Group and Inter-Council Affordable Housing group which foster collaboration on projects, advocacy, and information sharing. The Charter Group is 13 councils working to increase the supply of social housing and improve the homelessness support system.

## Regional Local Government Homelessness & Social Housing Charter



## Melbourne's Eastern Region Economic Development Group



In 2023/24 MEREDG has continued its focused on supporting local businesses through a number of diverse programs and activities including events, networking, place based activations and revitalisations supported capital works improvements to local centres. These initiatives facilitate ongoing business engagement and support.

This year a group procurement methodology was developed for access to a subscription based economic tool that provides in-depth and up-to-date economic insights for member LGA's as well as a regional data set.

A key strategic driver for the MEREDG **Model Provisions project** was the development of the Service Victoria Business Permit System (BPS) for which repeatable permit models would make it easier to roll out across councils using the same IT enabled solution. The objective of the MEREDG BAF funding was to work towards a greater level of alignment for selected permits across the MEREDG Councils.

The project aims to support business growth and boost productivity by streamlining compliance and approvals activities for businesses operating across multiple councils, allowing for faster and easier approvals so that businesses can get on with business sooner.

The benefits of greater alignment identified are:

- **Faster approvals** - supporting businesses which operate across multiple council areas by reducing the time taken to understand requirements and reducing the costs of compliance.
- **Improved customer experience and reduced administrative burden** - MEREDG Councils could reduce their administrative burden and resourcing when dealing with queries and improve customer experience in delivering consistent services across the different councils.

MEREDG has enabled information sharing and the opportunity to leverage the group's collective experiences across activities, programs and services delivered to local businesses.

An exciting project stewarded by Manningham will see the establishment of a dedicated business coworking space, expanding upon Council coworking opportunities in the eastern region including BizHub coworking in Ringwood and Eastern Innovation in Monash.

## Eastern Transport Coalition



The Eastern Transport Coalition has, over the course of this financial year, prioritised working with the Eastern Regional Trails Strategy working group (ERTS).

**Prioritising regional trails.** The ERTS comprises transport officers from the ERG councils of Knox, Yarra Ranges, Maroondah, Whitehorse and Manningham with neighbouring Monash and Boroondara Councils.

The ERTS priority projects, first developed in 2018, have been at the heart of active transport advocacy by the ETC and supported by the ERG at state and federal elections over the past five years.

As many of the projects have successfully received funding or part-funding, there was a need to review and update the ERTS priority project list, resulting in ten priority projects that have been agreed by Councils.

A draft advocacy campaign plan for the next federal (likely 2025) and state (Nov 2026) elections has been prepared with in-principle endorsement from the ERTS and ETC. The development of a detailed and costed advocacy campaign plan is now underway.

**A better bus network.** The ETC continued its long running campaign for improvements to regional bus services and for a full bus network review across the eastern region.

The ETC and Councils supported the community campaign, run by transport activist Peter Parker, resulting in a state budget funding announcement for the 80 bus route. This will reinstate Sunday services, improve Saturday frequency and extend operating hours on the popular Princes Highway bus route.

**Improving pedestrian safety.** The ETC priority list of mid-block arterial road pedestrian crossing projects was positively received when presented to the State Government for funding, however the package was not funded in the budget, and remains a key advocacy priority.

The ETC continues to closely monitor the SRL precinct planning process run by the State Government, and the completion of the business case process for the Caulfield – Rowville Trackless Rapid Transit project.

**Vale Lucas Sikiotis.** ETC members were saddened at the recent passing of their colleague and long-serving ETC member, Lucas Sikiotis from the City of Greater Dandenong. Lucas was a thoughtful and active member of the ETC whose contributions and company were appreciated.

## Financial Position - 30 June 2024

	2023 (\$)	2024 (\$)
<b>Income</b>		
Annual ERG Council member contributions	228,000	<b>175,000</b>
Carry forward surplus <sup>#</sup>	220,067	<b>372,317</b>
<b>Total funds</b>	<b>\$ 448,067</b>	<b>\$547,317</b>
<b>Expenditure</b>		
Salaries	132,893	<b>139,774</b>
Travel / Phones / Catering / Sundries	4,833	<b>7,664</b>
Consultancies - total	102,524	<b>164,416</b>
- Graphic design and website	4,855	3,000
- Regional economic and demographic data	6,600	13,200*
- Government relations advice	15,000	5,000
- Procurement review	32,300	0
- Health Innovation and Care Economy project	36,769	105,316
- Contact mapping	7,000	0
- Plan East	0	37,900
<b>Total expenditure</b>	<b>\$240,250</b>	<b>\$311,854</b>
<b>Surplus (Deficit)</b>	<b>\$ 207,777</b>	<b>\$235,463</b>

<sup>#</sup>includes external project funding. \*2024-25 subscription paid in 2023-24 to obtain a discount

## Members & meeting attendance 2023/24

The ERG comprises the Mayor, Deputy Mayor (or Councillor) and the CEO (or their delegate). Membership is renewed annually following Council mayoral elections in November. The ERG elect their Chair and Deputy Chair at the December meeting. The ERG generally meet every two months.

<b>July - November 2023 (2 ERG + 4 CEO meetings)</b>		<b>December 2023 - June 2024 (3 ERG + 7 CEO mtgs)</b>
<b>Knox</b>		
Cr Marcia Timmers-Leitch Mayor	2	Cr Jude Dwight, Mayor (ERG Chair)
Cr Jude Dwight, Deputy Mayor	2	Cr Sorina Grasso, Deputy Mayor
Bruce Dobson, CEO	6	Bruce Dobson, CEO
<b>Manningham</b>		
Cr Deidre Diamante, Mayor	2	Cr Carli Lange, Mayor
Cr Tomas Lightbody, Deputy Mayor	1	Cr Laura Mayne, Deputy Mayor
Andrew Day, CEO	6	Andrew Day, CEO
<b>Maroondah</b>		
Cr Rob Steane, Mayor (ERG Chair)	2	
Cr Tasa Damante, Deputy Mayor	1	
Steve Kozlowski, CEO	6	Cr Kylie Spears, Mayor (ERG Deputy Chair)
<b>Monash</b>		
Cr Stuart James (Mayor)	0	Cr Paul McDonald, Deputy Mayor
Cr Nicky Luo, Deputy Mayor	1	Steve Kozlowski, CEO
Dr Andi Diamond, CEO	2	
<b>Whitehorse</b>		
Cr Mark Lane, Mayor (ERG Deputy Chair)	2	Cr Denise Masoud, Mayor
Cr Prue Cutts, Deputy Mayor	2	Cr Mark Lane, Former Mayor
Simon McMillan, CEO	4	Simon McMillan, CEO
<b>Yarra Ranges</b>		
Cr Jim Child, Mayor	2	Cr Sophie Todorov, Mayor
Cr Sophie Todorov	0	Cr David Eastham, Deputy Mayor
Tammi Rose, CEO	6	Tammi Rose, CEO



