

EAST GIPPSLAND NEWS

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New ratepayer group wants action

The East Gippsland community is being asked to raise any concerns it may have with the recently formed East Gippsland Community Action Group.

The action group's origins predate last year's October council election following pressure in the community for reform and a vehicle for united representation.

President of the group, George Neophytou, and secretary, Jeanette Wagner, stood in the last elections, but failed to win a seat.

Mrs Wagner told the *Advertiser* the group's charter, among other things, is to facilitate, assist and provide input to the East Gippsland Shire Council decision making on matters of particular concern to the community.

"We've had an awful lot of people approach us concerned about different things, particularly in regards to Ben Buckley," Mrs Wagner said.

"We don't want to work against council, but with them."

While a number of objectives are under consideration, of particular alarm, the group says, is the "lack of openness, transparency and the perceived secrecy of the council".

"The statistics indicate this council has an abnormally high number of matters dealt with on a confidential basis compared to all other councils in Victoria," Mr

Neophytou said.

"While we are not disputing legitimate and sensitive matters should be dealt with under confidential processes, there appear to be matters not under this scope but marked as such, presumably solely to keep details from the community."

The group points to the record number of 39 candidates in the 2016 council elections as proof there is a swell of community concern that change is needed.

It's also in Cr Ben Buckley's corner in relation to allegations of breaches of the councillor code of conduct, which resulted in the Local Government Investigations and Compliance Inspectorate calling for a councillor code of conduct panel to hear charges.

On one hand in the group's letter to the mayor it says the group does not want to interfere with the process surrounding Cr Buckley, but in the next breath asks council do just that, by requesting councillors move the following motion:

"That council through its powers under Section 77 (2a) of the Local Government Act 1989 removes the chief executive officer's previous designation of confidentiality to matters allegedly breached by Cr Buckley."

Mayor, Cr Joe Rettino, said that he could not accede to this request.

Cr Rettino said he looked forward to working with the action group to resolve or assist with any matters or concerns it wishes to

bring to council's attention. He also offered to arrange an informal meeting between councillors and the group.