

6.2.5 Petition Response - Hills Hub - Public access

Responsible GM: Lili Rosic
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Recommendation(s)

That Council

- note the response to the petition received from the Hills Photographic Society,
- note Council officers will continue to work with the Hills Hub Operations Group to increase the opening hours of the Hub within Council's approved resources,
- note the Hills Hub spaces are bookable by the public, during and outside of open-to-the-public times, and
- notify the head petitioner of Council's resolution.

Attachments

1. CONFIDENTIAL REDACTED - Petition - Request for review into restricted usage of Emerald Hills Hub 373243 [6.2.5.1 - 16 pages]

Executive Summary

A petition from the Hills Photographic Society (Society) was tabled at the Council meeting in June 2023 (attachment 1).

The petition is requesting the Hills Hub foyer and exhibition spaces to be open to the public for longer hours and for Council staff to be available to assist with community requests. This request has been previously discussed that the Emerald Village Township Committee Meeting in April and May and at the Hills Hub Operations Group meeting in June.

The petition mentions the various uses of the Hills Hub by the public including: to meet for a coffee in the lounge area, informal meetings, to swap a book and to visit an exhibition in the arts space. The head petitioner petitions Council to fund a full-time officer or change the hours of an existing officer to enable the Hills Hub to remain open to the public from 10am to 5pm.

The Hills Hub is currently open to the public from 10am to 1pm Monday to Friday with the assistance of volunteers who welcome and assist members of the public. In recent Hills Hub Operations Meetings, Council officers have discussed the option of increasing the Hills Hub open-to-public hours from 9:30 am to 2:30 pm Monday to Friday. The implications of the proposal to increase operating hours for the volunteers, who assist when the building is open to the public, is also being considered by council officers and the Hills Hub Operations Group more broadly.

Under the current operating model for council managed halls and hubs and resources allocated it is not possible to open the Hills Hub to the public from 10am to 5pm as suggested in the petition.

Council officers working at the Hills Hub will continue to provide support during the hours the Hills Hub is open-to-the-public. This includes being available to answer questions about the building or spaces available. As always, any general Council enquiries received are referred to the relevant council officer for action.

Current licensees using the Hills Hub are Emerald University of the Third Age (U3A), Emerald Men's Shed, and Emerald Village Association (EVA). In addition, other regular bookings include 'Hub Play and Connect Playgroup', first-time parents groups, toastmasters, Hills Photographic Society, art exhibitions, dance classes, STEM classes for 5-12-year-olds, youth program, and employment service.

Council officers will continue to work with the Hills community to make the Hills Hub as successful as it can be within the approved resourcing and operating model.

Background

The Hills Hub building construction was funded by contributions from all levels of government and the local Bendigo Bank Subbranch. The Hub opened in March 2020, Council employed a Placemaker for approximately two years to assist the community groups to settle into the new building and facilitate establishment of the site. The Placemaker worked with the proposed licensees to enter into formal licence agreements for their use of the spaces in the building. The Placemaker also opened the foyer spaces to the public on weekdays alternating from mornings to afternoons and worked on the initial hiring procedures.

The Hills Hub Operations Group includes licensees of the building and Council staff and meets regularly to discuss the operation of the Hub and any issues or concerns.

At the end of the Placemaker contract in June 2022, Council committed to work with the Hills Hub licensees to ensure that Hub was kept open to the public for a few hours each weekday in line with the new operating model and resourcing. After consultation with the Hills Hub Operations Group, the current open-to-the-public times of 10 am to 1 pm each weekday were implemented. The Hills Hub licensees provide a volunteer during these public hours to welcome people entering the building. Council staff are on hand if the volunteer needs to refer a hirer or community enquiry to them.

The Hub spaces are bookable by the public, during and outside of open-to-the-public times. When hirers book the spaces in the Hills Hub they are responsible for those accessing the building. Most choose to only have the main doors to the building open for the arrival of their guests due to the supervision/security risk.

The community can make general enquiries of Council via the web, email or phone. The Council officers working at the Hills Hub assist the volunteers and with space or hire enquiries and refer enquiries they cannot answer to the relevant Council team as required.

The Hills Hub is located next door to the Emerald Library, the Emerald Library is open to the Public from 9 am to 6 pm most weekdays extending through to 8 pm on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and open from 10 am to 2:30pm Saturdays.

The public toilets next to the Hills Hub have been updated and are also available for the public to use.

In recent meetings, the Hills Hub Operations Group has been discussing the option of increasing operating hours from 9.30 to 2.30pm Mondays to Fridays. Further discussions need to proceed with the volunteers prior to committing to the increased opening hours.

Policy Implications

The recommendation to Council is consistent with the approved resourcing and operating model for the Hills Hub.

Relevance to Council Plan

1.1 We empower our communities to be healthy, connected and resilient

1.1.2 Enrich local identity and opportunities for the community to connect through art, history and cultural expression.

1.1.3 Lead by example in creating an inclusive and welcoming community for all by facilitating community education, capacity building, connection and celebration of our diversity.

1.1.4 Facilitate a partnership approach to create safer communities.

1.1.5 Work closely with the community to deliver programs that build community resilience, relating to a pandemic or other disasters.

Climate Emergency Consideration

The Hills Hub is used as a relief and/or recovery centre during emergency events when appropriate to do so. This use is as part of Council's Emergency Management Plan.

Consultation/Communication

Council staff continue to consult with the Hills Hub Operations Group and have discussed the opening hours of the Hills Hub and support of Hub users with the Emerald Village Association.

Council staff have met with representatives of the Hills Photographic Society to discuss the concerns raised in their petition.

Financial and Resource Implications

There is no additional cost associated with the information provided in this report and resources are funded in Council's operational budget allocation in the 23/24FY.

If Council chose to have a staff member attend the reception area and open the Hub from 10am to 5pm this would require additional Council funding.

Conclusion

Council thanks the Hills Photographic Society and the broader community for its feedback submitted through the petition. Officers have met with the Hills Photographic Society to discuss their concerns and talk through issues they have experienced when accessing the venue during their booked time. In addition, officers will continue to work with all groups wishing to book space in the Hills Hub to make their ventures as successful as possible.

Council will continue to work with the Hills Hub Operation Group to determine if the opening hours for the community can be extended on weekdays. Officers recognise the contribution that volunteers of the Hills Hub licensees make to ensure the Hills Hub is a great place to visit.