

Comments on Special Resolution 2 put to the Members at the next Adelaide Showgrounds Farmers Market AGM.

Background

Over the past year some stallholders on the management committee have proposed stallholder control of your market's management committee more than once. The most recent committee debate of this topic was about 2 weeks ago about a near identical resolution to the second resolution for constitutional change. Albert Conterno, Sabine De Vuono and Bill Cooksley argued for stallholder control.

The majority of the committee voted against the proposal, but they did favour a review of the whole constitution, which is sensible from time to time.

There are currently 5 stallholders on the committee of 9, and the chair is also a stallholder.

So, a committee controlled by stallholders did not vote to put a motion to members to entrench stallholder control of your market. Why not?

- Because there was no real reason for change, and
- Because it could be harmful to the market.

The constitutional amendment proposed seeks to entrench a stallholder (or producer) majority on the committee. In order to achieve control and increase the number of stallholders the Showground's representative is removed, and specialist roles are proposed to be abolished as voting members (and therefore attendees at Committee meetings). The legal specialist is removed, even as an advisory role.

No real reason

Despite attempting to uncover reasons in a long debate, no reason emerged other than that the concept of control by stallholders was deserved. One response was that some market members thought that the market was controlled by stallholders, but the relevance of that mistaken belief on the wellbeing and success of the market for shoppers and stallholders is not evident. Importantly, the stallholders who wanted change could point to no issue upon which a vote occurred at their perceived expense (other than the vote on constitutional entrenchment of control).

Potential Harm to Market

Your farmers' market is successful both financially and in membership growth. In fact, membership has increased by 30% since 2018. This can be attributed to the guidance, leadership and good management across all areas, and is something to be proud of.

These days it is a well-established governance principle that boards need to offer a diversity of skills. A management committee needs intellectual rigor, and a breadth of knowledge and experience. The architects of the constitution sought to balance producers, community members, and specialist positions with skills required. The existing constitution of your farmers' market was drafted with a great deal of research and experience gained from other farmers' markets. A model of stallholder control was deliberately avoided.

It is balanced so that no one group controls the market and diverse views and background are assured. It operates to also assure that the committee table is attended by experts in governance.

The market has around 120 stallholders 3,500 members and of course, many more shoppers. It is not sound to pass control into the hands of the very limited number of stallholders who have the time and inclination to offer their services to the Committee. From the pool of 85 to 90 stallholders who are not located regionally, there have been a small proportion of stallholders prepared to stand for election. It is easy to see potential emergence of entrenched power in the hands of very few and it cannot be assumed that volunteer committee members in many years' time will act with the best interest of the entire market at heart.

Having checks and balances such as specialist experts actually at the table guiding on governance requirements is a protection for your farmers' market. These skills have constantly been used over the last couple of years. The same quality of input cannot be expected from people who are invited when the Committee might see a reason, and only at sub-committee level.

The Showground representative, Michelle Hocking, (General Manager of the Royal Adelaide Show) has been a valuable asset to the committee improving our relationship with our landlord and freely sharing her vast knowledge. Any conflict is handled correctly.

Our former chair Alex Palin (specialist role) took the lead with Christine Robertson to negotiate the longer term licence with the showgrounds and Michelle, properly so, did not take any part. The Showground representative has been very beneficial to the market and the position should not be abolished in the quest for stallholder control of our market. Through COVID-19 her support has been invaluable, creating quick solutions with operational staff precisely because of her site knowledge.

Each of the committee has a legal obligation to act in the best interests of the market as a whole and not one segment. It is in the Showground's interest to have a thriving sustainable market; each of the specialists on the Board is there because they have a bond with the market and desire its success, and community members can hardly be imagined to act otherwise than in the market's best interests. Stallholders have several representatives and many more stallholders have the ability to provide feedback to any member of the committee all of whom shop at the market (COVID restrictions permitting). In summary, the committee structure in the existing constitution was very well formulated for a long and prosperous farmers' market. The proposed changes will add considerable risk.

Committee roles are voluntary and it has not been easy to find suitable specialists to fill the finance, legal and retail marketing roles in the past. Those in recent roles would definitely not have applied to help in a sub-committee advisory role as proposed. That is really a consulting role and these are normally paid. The Showgrounds Market risks losing these skills if the amendments proceeded.

Online Voting Removed

The ability to conduct online voting is removed in the proposal, refer 6.2.(e). Online voting is a more democratic method encouraging a greater participation of members. It is also helpful in the times of COVID-19. Without the provision, no online voting can be held. Why would fewer people selecting from a pool of fewer people be a good idea? Online voting is accepted by a great many reputable organisations – e.g. RAA, The Law Society. No explanation is offered for this change.

Qualification to nominate

A provision has been added requiring that members can only nominate if they have been financial members for 2 years before the election. This is not explained but it is usual for any financial member to be permitted to nominate.

Practical Issues

Attracting quality persons to the committee will to a certain extent depend on the perception of the committee itself. There will be more likely to be harmony when the checks and balances are in place through the Showground and specialist roles. The committee make-up as it currently stands provides the diversity, check and balances necessary to ensure a positively functioning entity.

Sincerely,

Majority Committee Members

Lynne Dickson
Michelle Hocking
Geoff Page
Gay Wallace
Diana Williams