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Lock the Gate locked out from consultations

Lismore Nationals MP Thomas George has come under further fire amid accusations of conflict of interest after revelations that his son, Stuart George, who is a Richmond Valley Councillor and holds a position on the Rous Water council, has taken up a position with gas company Metgasco as a land administration officer.

Some coal seam gas opponents have described a 'community meeting' to discuss coal seam gas mining held on 5th December by Mr George as "reeking of manipulation and deceptive conduct".

The meeting was held with Brad Mullard, executive director of minerals to the NSW Government's Department of Trade and Investment. It was to enter into 'community dialogue' with Brad to explain coal seam gas issues exclusively. But local anti CSG groups got wind of and spread word about the 'exclusive' meeting and were not happy.

Kyogle Group Against Gas member Leah Hobbs said they were frustrated because they had been trying for months to get a meeting with Mr George, but he had not responded to their requests. CSG liason officer of Nimbin Environment Centre and member of Rock Valley Gas Rangers,

Wanda Halden, says neither of those community groups were initially invited to the "community meeting" that was hosted at Lismore Workers Club. Ms Halden phoned Mr George's office to request the attendance of both groups. Mr George later agreed to add the two organisations as attendees.

Inside the Worker's Club a group of around 80 grew during the wait to register for the meeting and lined the hallway to the boardroom, where the hand picked community representatives gathered for the meeting. Lock the Gate placards made a sunny sight and concerned citizens made sure all present knew that they felt frustrated they were not invited and at what they felt was a "disrespectful process". "Do you have shares in Metgasco, Mr George?" one heckler asked.

Also in attendance were representatives from Norco, Farmers Federation, Richmond Dairies, Kyogle Group Against Gas, three mayors including Jenny Dowell, and about twenty others. It was a surprise to Ms Halden that the CEO of Metgasco, Peter Henderson, was also present, with a prominent position at the table.

Mr George said he put it to the meeting whether the protesters should be admitted, with a Farmers



Photo: Terra Sword, NR Echo

Federation representative moving to close the doors to the protesters. At this stage Ms Halden left the meeting in disgust. "Thomas George has segregated our community from a secret, invite only, non-public meeting, all the while members of the community have been requesting for months to have a meeting with him in the public arena," she said.

"I knew then that this meeting was a sham. Upon registering, we were instructed to wear fluoro wristbands as a form of identification. I felt a bit like a cow being ear-tagged and I felt apprehensive about the way the local community was being treated," Wanda said.

Lismore's mayor, Jenny Dowell, disagrees. "I felt it was a fruitful exercise," she said. "I think it was

an important meeting, with a wide representation of the community present, including industry, farmers and environment groups. I do not think it was inappropriate for Metgasco to be present at this meeting. They need to hear people's concerns also, and there are plenty of concerns," she said.

"The meeting was scheduled for one hour, but went for over two. It was cool and calm, and I am certain that Brad Mullard went away with no doubt about the level of the community's concerns that were raised. Everyone in attendance had some concerns about the impacts of CSG mining," Jenny said.

Leslie McQueen from Kyogle Group Against Gas (GAG) said that while she felt a great pride in

her community that everyone at the meeting clearly stated their concerns about the potential threats posed by CSG mining on local communities, she felt disheartened and doubtful about the message getting through to the top, through the "lies and vested interests." She said that Brad Mullard spent the meeting "singing the praises" of the CSG industry and that Thomas George failed to make his own position clear or answer any questions himself. "I was also disappointed that I was one of only four women at the meeting," Leslie said. "Many at the meeting spoke for the right of individuals to be able to keep CSG activity off their properties."

"I am astounded that after we unanimously voiced our opposition to CSG, Thomas still appears to be fence sitting, and saying that farming and CSG can co-exist," Leslie said. "He's not representing his constituents on this, and I question his impartiality. His 'concern' is patronising and false. They are just going to fob us off and go ahead, business as usual."

Last month the NSW Government extended until April a moratorium on the controversial fracking process used in CSG mining. Mr George could not be reached for comment before going to press.



Rally for koalas

Tweed residents concerned about the fate of koalas on the Tweed Coast will rally on Saturday 10th December in front of the entrance to Kings Forest at the intersection of Old Bogangar and Tweed Coast roads.

The rally, from 10am to 12 noon, will provide a chance to discuss the plan for the Kings Forest development and help with submissions.

Rally organisers say the first stage of the Kings Forest development, currently on exhibition, will impact on vital koala habitats and major corridors.

Following earlier concerns, an amended Koala Plan of Management has been prepared but a spokesperson for the rally organisers said it would never be able to redress the fundamental problems of the development footprint.

"In 2005 the NSW Planning Department overrode strong and repeated recommendations from the NSW Environment Department which wanted to remove the development from

both the eastern portions and from the Cudgen Paddock to the south," the spokesperson said.

"The current Tweed Shire Council and Council staff endorsed this position for the recent Concept Plan proposal but were also overridden by NSW Planning, as were the views of largest number of community submissions in NSW history."

Tweed Shire Council's latest Koala Study shows numbers of coastal koalas plummeting to an estimated 144, way below viable population levels.

"Every time Tweed residents have been asked, they have identified protection of the environment as their highest priority," the rally spokesman said.

"If this, and similar, development is allowed to proceed, it will show that state governments do not care about the views of the community."

Concerned residents are invited to bring home-made placards and let the new State Government know their feelings.



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