

Reporting the Community Meeting to save the Sherbrooke Shire Offices - to become a Cultural Centre for the region

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Full house: Residents packed the Upwey Community Hall last week to voice their disapproval of the sale of the former Sherbrooke Shire offices and depot. Pictures: ANDREW BATSCHE.

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Residents reject office/depot sale

by GREG RUSSO

MORE than 300 people packed the Upwey Community Hall last week to protest against the sale of the former Sherbrooke Shire council offices and depot.

In what was probably the biggest show of public opposition seen in the Dandenongs since plans to build a McDonald's restaurant in Belgrave were thwarted two years ago, residents overwhelmingly supported a vote of no confidence in the Yarra Ranges Council.

The gathering of more than 300 people supported seven motions to prevent the former shire offices and depot being sold until at least the return of democratically elected councillors in March.

If the motions fail residents have warned of sweeping public protests and rallies against the council and may boycott the products of any prospective company that is granted the Glenfern Rd depot site.

The motions called for public deputations to meet with the commissioners and State Planning Minister Rob Maclellan to have the sale of the site withdrawn.

Residents also want Mr Maclellan to investigate whether the council acted legally in requesting him to rezone the site and make changes to the residential areas of Upwey, Tecoma and Belgrave.

Residents of all ages packed the Upwey hall for 2½ hours last Thursday night.

Nearly all the seats were taken 10 minutes before the meeting started and at least 100 people were forced to stand.

The meeting was organised by the United Neighbourhood Organisation of the Hills (UNOH) group and was chaired by former Sherbrooke Shire president Michael Buxton.

Speakers included former Sherbrooke Shire president Louis Delacretaz, UNOH president Lin Onus and the Member for Monbulk, Stephen McArthur.

Yarra Ranges commissioners and council officers were invited to the meeting, but did not attend. Instead, the council prepared a statement that was read to the meeting and has offered to meet a delegation from the meeting.

In their place, meeting organisers had photos of

commissioners and the chief executive officer taped on seats and placed on stage.

Residents argued that the decision to sell the site was purely money-driven and feared proceeds from its sale would go outside the hills.

Others who spoke said they were concerned the Dandenongs were being shut out by the council and warned they would not give up the land without a fight. One woman suggested setting up blockades in Glenfern Rd.

One man said: "This land should not be sold. There are some things more important than money."

The meeting was told the Dandenongs represented about 12 per cent of the Yarra Ranges' population to which one man responded: "If that 12 per cent refused to pay their rates, would we be noticed?"

A woman said: "We have to take back our right to protest and to say we don't accept the decision."

UNOH president Mr Onus called on the community to unite because "we should be together on this one".

UNOH secretary Carolyn Lomas said: "We are a community to be reckoned with and we don't like being pushed around." The comments were greeted with loud applause.

Mr McArthur said he would support a delegation to meet Mr Maclellan. He also revealed the Victoria Police had no plans to buy the former shire offices.

Yarra Ranges chief commissioner Richard Longmore told the *Free Press* the decision to sell the site was an economic one but the council would welcome any plans that guaranteed a return on the site.

"We aim to sell the offices as soon as we can ... and it has always been a matter for public discussion," he said.

Mr Longmore rejected comments the hills were being shut out by the council. He cited the \$1.6 million being spent on the Belgrave library as one example.

"They are (the Dandenongs) being treated no differently than any other part of the shire," he said.

Mr Longmore said part of the proceeds from the sale of the offices would be returned to the hills.

UNOH members are expected to meet with Mr Maclellan this week.