

Show hand, council urged

Church calls for council to oppose more electronic gaming machines

By Allan Murphy

THE Anglican Church has called on Mildura Rural City Council to show its hand over a proposed increase in poker machines within the municipality.

A petition lodged with council by Archdeacon Michael Hopkins has called for council to "completely oppose" the granting of additional electronic gaming machine licences "without the majority support of residents and ratepayers as determined by a valid and independent poll".

Archdeacon Hopkins, of the Northern Mallee Parish, said it would be a "poor council" that refused to vote "either for or against" the petition which contains the signatures of 501 residents.

"I hope that we have in Mildura a local council that is proud to stand up for its current and future citizens and take on the lead given by the Victorian Government to tackle gambling reform," Archdeacon Hopkins said.

"It would be a poor council indeed that only notes that the petition has been received and does not deal with the content and vote either for or against the petition thus declaring their position," he said.

However, councillors have been recommended to do just that – note the contents of the petition.

In a report to be tabled at tonight's monthly meeting of council, councillors will be told that in noting the petition, council could consider it in conjunction with any future applications for increased electronic gaming machines "within the context of the broader social and economic benefits that a particular proposal may bring".

While the petition does not specifically mention the proposed Mildura Jewel casino and entertainment complex, it is understood the document relates to the possible increase in gaming machines at the venue.

Archdeacon Hopkins said a further 116 signatures had been collected and delivered to Anglican Church offices in Mildura since the petition

was lodged with council on June 24.

"I understand that there are still more sheets yet to be returned," he said.

Archdeacon Hopkins urged those opposed to the granting of additional licences in Mildura to attend the council meeting which begins at 5pm in council's Deakin Avenue chambers.

"By gathering for this important vote by our local council we are sending a clear message to both state and federal governments of our position," he said.

Archdeacon Hopkins said it was timely that council was able to consider the petition following the release of the recent Productivity Commission's report on gambling which stated that "... problem gamblers account for about 40 per cent of total gaming machine spending (the average of a range of estimates as high as 60 per cent and, most conservatively, as low as 20 per cent)".

He said Australians spent about \$10.5 billion on gaming machines in clubs and hotels and \$1.4 billion on EGMs in 13 casinos in 2008-09.

"Over the past 10 years there has been a 14 per cent increase in EGMs in casinos compared to a seven per cent increase in clubs and hotels," the Archdeacon said.

"I am pleased that the government has placed a cap on the overall number of EGMs in Victoria even though 30,000 seems high.

"Each local council across Victoria must have a strong voice to approve any change in the number (increase or decrease) of EGMs in their area."

However, Archdeacon Hopkins said it appeared the Victorian Government was attempting to take away that right by creating a 37-day period for local government to notify the Victorian Commission for Gambling Regulation of their intention to make a submission regarding EGMs in their area.

"This timeframe will effectively freeze out local government from the EGM debate in communities across

Victoria," he said.

'We are sending a clear message to both state and federal governments'