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Council won't recognise Aboriginal land owners; Politics 'Acknowledgement of country' voted down

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Across the public and private sector it is considered a sign of respect to acknowledge traditional Aboriginal land owners at the start of a meeting or event, but one Liberal-dominated council has repeatedly refused to adopt the practice.

The Hills Shire Council, in Sydney's north west, again rejected a motion on Tuesday night to update its meeting code of practice to include an acknowledgement of the Darug people, the traditional owners of the area, as well as arranging an annual smoking ceremony for council chambers.

The motion, moved by three Labor councillors, proposed the council begin each meeting's order of business with the words: "Council acknowledges that this meeting is being held on the traditional lands of the Darug people."

But the one-line statement, known as an "acknowledgment of country", was voted down by a block of seven Liberal councillors, despite requests from Darug elders to adopt the practice.

Darug elder Ros Fogg, who was among a group of locals that appealed to the council in June, said the outcome was "really disappointing". "This is a really big issue of recognition," she said. "If we can't recognise there are still Darug people living on Darug country, that's a shame."

Labor councillor Ryan Tracey told the meeting: "Councillors should listen to the community and Darug elders in their request."

But the motion failed after two Liberal councillors - Mike Thomas and Peter Gangemi - mounted arguments that the practice was divisive, tokenistic and grounded in political correctness.

Cr Thomas said he was "disappointed" the debate had been brought before council, and told the room an acknowledgement of country generated exclusivity. "When you treat one group differently to others, that's exclusive," he said, adding: "It's never been clear to me how we can recognise people based on race and not be racist."

The Hills Shire Council was a "modern, progressive and sophisticated council", he said, which "treated all people equally".

The Hill Shire Council's resistance to adopting the practice has placed it at odds with its neighbouring councils, including Blacktown, Hornsby, Ku-Ring-Gai, Parramatta, Cumberland, Penrith, and Hawkesbury councils, all of which begin their meetings with an acknowledgement of country.

The NSW government and the federal government regularly offer an acknowledgement of country at government events or ceremonies.

But Cr Gangemi dismissed the argument that the council was out of step, telling the room "we make our own decisions".

An acknowledgement of country "can be a tokenistic gesture by non-indigenous Australians to make them feel better about indigenous Australians" and contained no practical benefits, he said.

"The land belongs to all of us equally now. While efforts like this motion mean well ... it enhances past divides and actually pushes people apart," Cr Gangemi said.

"It's simply an embarrassment," said Raymond Harty who, since he was elected to council in 2004, has been involved in four attempts to have the council adopt an acknowledgement to country.

Cr Gangemi, Cr Thomas and mayor Yvonne Keane did not respond to requests for comment.