

Submission to the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry

Emergency Management Shortcomings of the Moreton Bay Regional Council during Flooding Events of 11 January 2011.

Cr Chris Whiting, Moreton Bay Regional Council.

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Executive Summary.

This submission is relevant to the Terms of Reference of the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry, as it addresses issues relating to part c) of the Appointment of Commission. The submission deals with “aspects of the response to the 2010/2011 flood events, particularly measures taken to inform the community and measures to protect life and private and public property, including immediate management, response and recovery” in the Caboolture district of the Moreton Bay Regional Council area.

The response of the Moreton Bay Regional Council (MBRC) to the storm event on Tuesday 11 January 2011 was inadequate in the Caboolture area. The creation of evacuation centres was poorly organised; the public believed there was insufficient public information released during the event; the Local Disaster Management Group (LDMG) did not function adequately; and in the assessment after the event, there may be some reluctance to examine the problems experienced on the day. I believe these four issues, explored below, constitute an insufficient ability to meet the terms of Council’s responsibilities under the Local Disaster Management Plan, and the *Local Disaster Management Act 2003*.

Background.

The Council’s Moorina rain gauge, in the headwaters of Burpengary Creek, recorded 404 mm of rain on 11 January 2011 and 579 mm over 9 to 11 January.. This resulted in a Burpengary Creek flood peak of 11.19 metres at Dale Street, Burpengary, the highest ever recorded level, and flooding of approximately 1 metre above the Q100 flood level at the Caboolture South sewage treatment plant, on the Caboolture River. An emergency evacuation signal went out to residents of Caboolture and Strathpine via mobile and fixed line telephones, advising them to evacuate immediately to higher ground. This caused a large degree of confusion and unrest, and a mass movement of residents to what were presumed to be evacuation centres.

Evacuation Centres.

Issue 1 - That Council played little or no role in creation of evacuation centres.

It is clear that most evacuation centres were set up through impromptu community initiatives. Council set up evacuation centres in inappropriate locations, in an “ad hoc” manner, propelled by events and evacuees. Two evacuation centres officially nominated by Council, at the Caboolture RSL and 33 King Street Caboolture, were at locations contrary to our Local Disaster Management Plan which nominates local halls and schools as the first line evacuation centres. Here is my record of the creation of formal and informal evacuation centres in the Caboolture area on 11 January, as taken from interviews with people directly involved in the centres:

- Woodford Community Hall. This evacuation centre was set up on the initiative of the officer in charge of the Woodford Police Station, Jason Randwick, aided by Cr Adrian Raedel. It was created as there was no provision made for a Woodford evacuation centre at that stage by Council. Council did not operate this evacuation centre, and attributed the operation to the Hall Committee, as Woodford was isolated for approximately one day. Evacuees were at the Hall for some days, on beds provided by Woodford Prison.
- Caboolture RSL. Council notified the Caboolture RSL, a licensed and gaming venue, during the flood event that it was to be an evacuation centre. I believe it was inappropriate as a location for an evacuation centre, as it was inside a licensed club which had closing times and possibly required extra staff to attend to evacuees. This centre was also located on a floor accessed by escalators, with limited disabled access, and not nominated previously in the Local Disaster Management Plan.
- 33 King St. I believe this was an inappropriate evacuation centre, as it was accessed by elevators, on a floor only accessible with a swipe card, and was in very close proximity to the other centre at the Caboolture RSL. People leaving or arriving would have to be escorted by Council staff with a swipe card. Evacuees had first arrived at the Caboolture Memorial Hall after the evacuation signal was received. However, the Hall is temporarily converted to a library and has no adequate seating area. Residents therefore made their way to the Council building, seeking guidance. Staff made the decision to take them to the only available space in the precinct, which was a vacant space in the Council offices at 33 King St.
- Caboolture Anglican Church. This unofficial evacuation centre was created after the emergency evacuation signal went out, and it was created by the community radio station FM 101.5. Radio management stated they created the evacuation centre in response to the lack of information about evacuation centres coming from Council at that point. FM 101.5 contacted the Caboolture Anglican Church who set up the unofficial evacuation centre, and the radio broadcast news of the centre.
- Burpengary Baptist Church. This evacuation centre was created after the pastor of the church heard about the evacuation centre located at the Caboolture Anglican Church on FM 101.5, and liaised with the radio station to publicise it.
- Burpengary Library. I discovered this informal evacuation centre in the late afternoon of January 11 as I was driving by the Burpengary Library. I saw people standing around outside the Library, so I stopped to enter and enquire about what was happening. I found more people inside, and that people had disembarked off the train at Burpengary station when the trains were halted. Commuters said to me they were directed to the Burpengary Community Hall by the station master, but they arrived to find it shut and undergoing renovations. Library staff informed me that commuters simply went next door to the Library, and stayed there. Whilst I was there, Council staff were starting to transport people home using Council vehicles. I personally dropped off two foreign students who lived at Morayfield. At no stage was this declared an evacuation centre.

Communication with residents.

Issue 2 - That residents were not receiving timely or relevant information from Council on 11 January about the unfolding disaster.

Under Section 31 of the *Disaster Management Act 2003*, the role of the LDMG established by Council is to ensure the community is aware of ways of mitigating the adverse effects of an event. However, there is strong public opinion that the Council or the LDMG did not adequately communicate with the public, nor make them aware of how to mitigate the effects of the flash flooding. Some of the comment posted on the website of the Northern Times newspaper reflects this opinion:

“Shazza writes:

Posted on 11 Jan 11 at 04:47pm

I have to agree that MBRC are very slack....we live in Caboolture and have no real idea if we are safe or not...we have a 16 day old baby and are ready to go if need be.. The stupid thing is that the warning came through when we couldn't get out and still can't get out. We are pretty much sitting here waiting to see what happens. MBRC website has absolutely nothing on their web page to advise the public....”

“Aaron R writes:

Posted on 11 Jan 11 at 11:16pm

I would like to send a heartfelt thanks to the staff of the Caboolture Herald who worked tirelessly today to keep the info flowing via this website. I know that the staff worked all day in the office knowing that they may not be able to get home to their loved ones tonight. It is good to know that we can rely on the local paper to supply us with the information we require at this time unlike the council who has been frustratingly absent during in this major weather event.”

“Jimbo writes:

Posted on 12 Jan 11 at 06:56am

It seems to me that the Moreton Bay Regional Council must be taking the - "if we ignore it, it'll go away" approach to handling the areas flooding. There has been minimal information provided via the MBRC website - it's an absolute joke.”

“Lance Buller writes:

Posted on 12 Jan 11 at 02:51pm

People living in Caboolture South and Morayfield received the text message to immediately go to higher ground yesterday. They rang SES for further advice, NO information they rang Council NO information. Then 101.5 announced evac centre at Anglican Church in King St. only trouble you couldn't get there across the floodwaters. On the ground council workers and ses workers have done a great job but there has been NO communication and NO information ...”

“denise writes:

Posted on 13 Jan 11 at 08:25am

I live on the pine river on tuesday when it was flooding we were unable to get any information to what was happening and what we should be doing the opposite side strathpine got told to evacuate we had no info, tried to contact council to no avail looked up website as told to do in an emergency no

information we were lucky and our side of the river did not come into houses, but it was so scary having no information on our region and what was happening

“Margaret writes:

Posted on 13 Jan 11 at 07:25pm

The fears that MBRC does not have the capacity nor capability to respond to disasters is well founded. I know someone who works for MBRC ... he tells me that Councils ability to respond in an organised manner to disasters since the amalgamation is now almost non-existent.

Over the last couple of years a number of people who had the skills for disaster management such as has been required in recent times have left and not been replaced. The MBRC needs to do some serious rebuilding of its capabilities to respond to dramatic situations such as the recent floods.”

Comments from other residents who have spoken to me reflect the view that there was little relevant or timely information on the council website, nor on the local community radio station, during the flood event on 11 January. There were no Council spokespersons on local radio station FM 101.5 during the flash floods that morning. A spokesperson for the community radio station stated there was frustration that they could not get relevant or timely information on the flash flooding. The only information they did receive was regarding road closures. The spokesperson stated they were informed the Caboolture RSL was an evacuation centre at 8.40pm that evening.

This should be contrasted with what is stated in Section 5.4 of the Local Disaster Management Plan (March 2010 version, available on the Council website), that warnings will be issued in the most efficient and appropriate manner, including media warnings issued through community radio stations FM 101.5 and 99.7FM.

The Local Disaster Management Group.

Issue 3 - That the LDMG was not functioning during the emergency.

This issue may be at the centre of the two issues or shortcomings mentioned above. I have been informed that there was no councillor in the Emergency Co-ordination Centre (ECC) during the event. The Chair of the LDMG is Brian Battersby, and the Deputy Chair is Cr Bob Millar. Mayor Allan Sutherland stated he was on Moreton Island on 11 January.

It is not clear whether there was an actual meeting of the LDMG on the morning of 11 January, or whether there was a quorum for an LDMG meeting, or in fact who was running the ECC. I have requested this information from Council, and to see the attendance log of the ECC for 11 January, and so far *Council has not released this information, nor permitted me to view the log.* Confusion over the role of the LDMG and whether it was actually functioning on 11 January was compounded by the statement from the Mayor that “the Emergency Management Committee [was] running, for all intents and purposes” (page 3, Northern Times, Friday 21 January).

The emergency response in the Moreton Bay Regional Council area on 11 January in fact *seems* to have been managed by the District Disaster Management Group (DDMG). Superintendent Pat Ryan, Chair of the DDMG, stated he sanctioned the

evacuation order, after a teleconference with the State Disaster Co-ordination Group (SDCG) (Northern Times, 4 February 2011).

However, under the *Disaster Management Act 2003*, it is clear the responsibility for local disaster management rests with the LDMG. Under Section 29 of the *Act*, a local government must establish a Local Disaster Management Group for the local government's area. Under Section 31 of the *Act*, the LDMG is to manage disaster operations in the area. The fact that the LDMG seemingly was in no position, for whatever reason, to request the emergency evacuation signal, and it had to be issued by the DDMG in consultation with the SDCG, is most worrying to me.

The DDMG sits between the State Disaster Management Group and the LDMG. The function of the DDMG under Section 26A of the *Act* is to coordinate disaster operations in the disaster district. Under Section 23 of the *Act*, part of the functions of the DDMG is to provide reports and make recommendations to the State group about matters relating to disaster management and disaster operations in the district, and to regularly review and assess the disaster management of local groups in the district. It also reviews communications systems with and between local groups in the district. Clearly, the DDMG has not been created to manage local disaster operations.

Examination of problems.

Issue 4 - That there has been a reluctance to admit or examine shortcomings.

There are indications that there may be a reluctance within Moreton Bay Regional Council to fully examine the shortcomings experienced during the flood events of January 11.

The first indication may be ascertained from an item in a recent Co-ordination Committee item on 1 February, at a Council meeting. The item states:

“ITEM 6

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF LOCAL DISASTER
MANAGEMENT GROUP – REGIONAL (GC)

Cr Greg Chippendale said he considered there was a good deal of misconception within the community of the roles and responsibilities of the Local Disaster Management Group. He advised that this Group was not Council-owned and comprised representatives of various organisations including, Queensland Police Service, Queensland Fire & Rescue Services, Queensland Ambulance Service, State Emergency Services, Emergency Services, Council officers and others. Cr Chippendale requested that information be conveyed to the community, either through Council's publication “Moreton Living” or through the media, on exactly how the Local Disaster Management Group was comprised and how it operated. The Chief Executive Officer advised that a fact sheet would be compiled in consultation with relevant officers and this would be distributed as soon as available.”

This interpretation of who has responsibility for emergency management response should be contrasted with what the State government has written regarding local disaster management, as found on <http://www.disaster.qld.gov.au/about/>:

“Local Government

- The functions of a local government under the DMA are to:

- ensure it has a disaster response capability (as outlined under s80 (2) of the DMA);
- approve its local disaster management plan prepared under part 3 of the DMA;
- ensure information about an event or a disaster in its area is promptly given to the District Disaster Coordinator (DDC) for the Disaster District in which its area is situated;
- perform other functions given to the local government under this Act.

Local government is best situated to provide first-hand knowledge and understanding of social, economic, infrastructure and environmental issues within their respective communities and are ideally placed to support their community from a disaster management perspective. This is achieved through the Local Disaster Management Group (LDMG) where Local Governments coordinate their response to a disaster.”

The second indication may be found in statements by the Mayor. Whilst the Mayor has stated there are some issues regarding Council’s response, and improvements can be made, he has also said “[e]verything that was running through the control centre was extremely well done.” (page 3, Northern Times, Friday 21 January).

The third indication is that there has been no comprehensive and public examination of the workings of the LDMG during the flood events of 11 January at the time of writing. There have been some briefings of councillors regarding some aspects of the flood event, but there has been no full and comprehensive report to a public Council meeting. Part of the functions of the LDMG, chaired and run by the Council, under Section 30 of the *Disaster Management Act 2003*, is to regularly review and assess the disaster management.

Conclusions

There has been harsh public criticism of the response of the Moreton Bay Regional Council to the flooding events of 11 January 2011. The examination of the four issues above reveals there may be substance to these criticisms, and there may be shortcomings in Council’s emergency management response capabilities.

In terms of meeting our emergency management obligations, it may be Council has not abided by parts of the Local Disaster Management Plan, nor discharged obligations under the *Disaster Management Act 2003*. This would include not creating appropriate evacuation centres, not adequately communicating to the public, not operating a fully-functional LDMG, and as yet, not fully or publicly assessing the disaster management of the event.

I therefore request the State government evaluate the emergency response capacity of Moreton Bay Regional Council.

Cr Chris Whiting

11 March 2011