

Murphys Creek community consultation – 17 March 2011

Summary of discussion

Background

The Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry held a community meeting at Murphys Creek on 17 March 2011. Sixty-one residents attended the meeting. The following summary is an overview of the issues raised with Commission staff by residents from Murphys Creek, Spring Bluff and Postmans Ridge. It is not meant to represent the views of the community as a whole.

Issues arising

What were the strengths of your community identified after the flood event? What worked well?

- The local tavern was used by the community as a central coordinating hub in the immediate response as well as for quite some time after the flood. The generosity of the tavern owners and the efforts of the manager of the tavern were very much appreciated. This unofficial evacuation and community centre was perceived to work well because it had a coordination group directing volunteers, and was run by local residents for local residents, unimpeded by “red tape”.
- Local community members and outside volunteers provided much of the immediate response and recovery effort. Community members conducted rescues, cleared debris, checked on each other and provided ongoing support. Volunteers from several states assisted in the clean up and repair. The community supported each other with accommodation and water, and people in the surrounding areas of the Valley provided cooked meals and other assistance.
- Efforts to clear access routes to isolated residents were coordinated effectively, sometimes using local resources that were more effective in the conditions (eg. trail bikes could access areas that could not be accessed by police and other emergency vehicles, using their own GPS systems to plot landmarks and pinpoint areas needing investigation).
- The emergency response was coordinated and viewed by residents as successful because helpers knew the residents and the geography of the area. People with particular medical needs were therefore effectively identified early.
- The generosity of businesses in surrounding areas ensured that locals had access to essentials including food, meat and generators as well as other materials that were useful in the immediate aftermath (eg. a Toowoomba business donated office supplies to help in the supply of the evacuation centre).
- The immediate response from police, Australian Defence Force and State Emergency Services was viewed as helpful, although some people raised concerns about how the outside assistance was provided.
- Information received from the local ABC Radio was very helpful in the immediate response. The ABC used its helicopter to identify washed away cars so that they could be searched. The media spotlight on the community helped make outsiders aware of what was happening, which attracted other support.

What did not work well or could have worked better?

Before the event:

- Some people felt that lack of clearing of local creeks backed up floodwater and could have contributed to other areas being flooded. People expressed concern about the lack of maintenance of drains, roads and culverts which was perceived by residents to have contributed to the extent of flooding.
- The issue of planning approvals for critical infrastructure built next to local creeks was also raised (eg. the local rural fire brigade service was built beside the creek and its equipment was lost and trucks inundated, reducing its ability to provide evacuation and emergency response).
- The need for timely warnings was highlighted. However, some residents stated that warnings would not have helped residents of Murphys Creek but may have helped others living further downstream. Others highlighted the difficulty they had interpreting weather warnings.

During the event:

- The lack of mobile phone coverage limited the ability of people to communicate in the emergency, including with friends/family about whether people were safe, and limited the ability to obtain information. Some residents were trapped on their properties without power and/or telecommunications systems and were unable to receive updates about the current situation.
- The length of time to get through to emergency personnel as well as the emergency response time was raised as a concern.

Immediately after the event:

- People felt that the emergency services that attended did not have authority to make necessary decisions "on the ground". Concerns were raised about the extent to which the bureaucracy was involved and referral to senior staff required before decisions and actions could be taken.
- People highlighted the need for emergency services personnel to use local people and local knowledge to ensure timely and effective responses.
- Concerns were raised about the length of time it took the local council to respond formally to the situation in Murphys Creek as well as its priorities in the immediate aftermath. For example, the council began rebuilding creek crossings, but some residents felt that this was less important than clearing the creek to prevent potential future problems.
- Various services (including Lockyer Valley Regional Council, police, SES, Emergency Services Queensland and the ADF) kept separate lists of missing persons. There was little collaboration between these services, which led to confusion. In the end, the community had to create their own database.
- People highlighted the need for timely compensation for those who were out of pocket for the expenses of the emergency response and immediate aftermath. The tavern owners provided food, supplies, shelter, access to telephone and many other services at their own expense. As at the date of the consultation session, they had not been compensated.
- There was no phone connection available for residents for around two and a half weeks after the flood event. Furthermore, there was only one phone in the local tavern, which made it difficult for those coordinating the community response centre.
- There was no information about the restoration of essential services. For instance, many residents were relying upon power generators, but were not aware when power was actually restored.
- Problems have arisen with delays in the pay out of insurance policies and some residents indicated that policies were too inflexible. For instance, some insurers required destroyed residences to be rebuilt on the same land, even when the owner would prefer to sell and relocate.