

Theodore community meeting – 29 March 2011

Summary of discussion

Background

The Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry held a community meeting at the Theodore RSL Hall. Twenty-six residents attended the meeting, including the mayor, two councillors and the council CEO. The following summary is an overview of the issues raised with Commission staff by Theodore residents. It is not meant to represent the views of the community as a whole.

Issues arising

1. *Early warning systems*

- There have effectively been four separate flood events that affected the town since 28 December 2010.
- There is no effective early warning system in the area – there is a manual gauge only at the SES station, which is insufficient for the town.
- The town itself was very motivated and active in addressing all the issues as soon as possible after the flood hit.
- The equipment in the area is inadequate to make accurate flood predictions for the town.
- A local councillor for the area went from house to house preparing people, and organised community meetings at 9.00 am and 3.00 pm when floods hit so that the community was informed about developments.
- A councillor used the fire truck's loudhailer to inform the community when community meetings were being held and at what location.
- The council had been progressively preparing the town for floods since the big event in March 2010 and had learnt lessons from that – council established an evacuation plan which worked well.
- The emergency plan was activated the Friday before the biggest flood event so the town was already on notice.

2. *Preparation and response*

- The local disaster coordinator had local knowledge and knew the topography of the area, which really helped in the immediate response phase.
- There was some delay in having elderly people evacuated from the hospital to the town hall (evacuation centre) but the conduct of the SES was outstanding when it did occur.
- SES, fire officers and police all worked well together and acted as a cohesive unit.
- Council officers and councillors carefully considered what they said to the community at certain times as they did not want to create unnecessary panic.
- People also self-evacuated to the airport, which was recognised as being on elevated land.

- Some helicopter flights transported non-essential food instead of using the flights to carry essentials. This needs to be improved so that food supplies are prioritised, and coordination of food drops needs to be improved generally.
- Helicopter pilots were very professional and were highly commended.
- Locals were unhappy they had to leave their domestic animals behind during the rescue phase. It was suggested the military needed to change its protocols so that animals could be evacuated with their owners. It was estimated that three-quarters of the town were of this view in relation to travelling with their domestic animals.
- There are major issues with the management of donations. Cartons of clothes were being dropped in town even when it was still under water. It takes a long time to sort and process clothes and it detracts from other key recovery tasks. Locals suggested people should make requests for what they need and then fill the need, rather than have large masses of clothes donations sent to the area. They may end up having to dump lots of clothes. One community member suggested there needed to be an inquiry into the donations itself.
- People in the evacuation town of Moura were terrific in assisting evacuees.
- Army Blackhawk helicopters came to the town but they arrived late, when the need for them had lessened. There were two helicopters available at Moura which were not activated but could have been used instead of the Blackhawks.
- Locals were upset by the fact that 80 year-old trees had to be chopped down to make a landing pad for the arrival of the Blackhawks.
- People were kept out of the town too long after the flood struck and some wanted to get back sooner to attempt to salvage some of their possessions.
- Government agencies were on the ground quickly after the event and there were no major delays in accessing these services.
- The recovery centre needs to be set up at least a day before locals are allowed back in to the town. It should not happen as locals are coming back – it's too late then. There was a lack of coordination at the recovery centre at the beginning. This is a lesson the council has learned for next time.
- Police being in charge of the recovery worked excellently and they worked well with EMQ.
- EMQ should take more heed of people on the ground and next time should coordinate resources based on local information.
- One of the coal companies provided accommodation to some people whose homes were flood affected.
- Light planes were used to undertake reconnaissance and then report back to the evacuation centres at Moura about the situation in the town.
- It took a while for farmers in the region to get fodder drops for their animals. They wouldn't do drops in certain areas and some farmers did not know who to contact to get fodder drops. One fodder drop was free because there were some medicines also dropped at the same time.
- While the police officers on the ground were very effective, they really needed more officers and could have used another six officers in the immediate response period. It took too long for other police officers to be dispatched to the town to assist.
- There are currently five SES officers in town.

3. Communication

- ABC news coverage in the area needs to be improved but it is effective for those residents who can access local ABC coverage.
- ABC radio has overlapping frequencies in the area which makes it difficult to figure out what's going on in which location – there needs to be consolidation of this so one message is being aired.
- Residents from Allana Heights informed council staff at Biloela about the need for nappies and medication, which were transported by helicopter.
- The Minister for Agriculture, Food and Regional Economies has visited the town twice since the flood to discuss issues with residents.
- A councillor on the ground was in constant contact with Cockatoo Station, which is upstream from Theodore, in order to get updates on the water levels.
- A local councillor and another community member established an email list of residents to provide ongoing updates on the situation. Those with access to email found this invaluable.

4. Infrastructure / essential services

- The farmers are unable to get their animals out of their properties to the sales yards and abattoirs. This has been a major issue and the incapacity of the roads means that the farmers are unable to support themselves financially. Their livelihoods are being badly affected in some cases.
- Council wants more money from the Queensland Reconstruction Authority to improve the roads, especially Fifth Avenue to the airport.
- Gyrenda Weir had a 1.5–2 metre peak above that of the town.
- A levee was built out of the town on a farm and this has disrupted the flow of water, which may have contributed to the flooding – council is considering this as part of the wider flood study currently being undertaken.
- The best mitigation for the town would have been if the Nathan Dam had been built. Locals were of the view that the dam would have made the flood peak a lot lower.
- Castle Creek was the waterway that flooded properties on that side of town as it couldn't empty into the Dawson.
- Water and sewerage were both badly disrupted by the floods and took a while to be reconnected.
- In some areas the power was shut off for three weeks, which residents considered to be too long, and this caused a lot of problems. Residents suggested there should be a common sense approach by energy companies to power reconnections and a relaxation under disaster conditions so that people can start the clean-up on their properties.
- One of the water entities is situated in close proximity to the SES shed which meant that information could be shared effectively and information was consistent.

5. Insurance / financial assistance

- Some people were unable to make a claim with the Queensland Government because the water did not go into to their living areas, even though it caused a lot of damage under their house and destroyed other possessions. Locals suggested that the assessment process for eligibility for financial assistance needed to be changed.
- In general, self-funded retirees have struggled to obtain financial assistance from the government.