



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

Hansard Wednesday, 14 November 2007

JOHNSTONE SHIRE COUNCIL, WATER ACCESS CHARGES

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (10.25 pm): I rise to speak about widespread concerns in the areas of my electorate covered by the Johnstone Shire Council, specifically in relation to the additional water access charges that have been levied on water users outside of map defined areas in rural areas of the shire. I table a non-conforming petition signed by 631 individuals objecting to the imposition of an additional annual water access charge of \$370 on property owners outside of map defined areas of the Johnstone shire.

Tabled paper: Non-conforming petition relating to additional water access charge charged to rate payers living in rural areas.

The impact of this additional water access charge has been exacerbated by the recent general rate increase in the order of 15 per cent that has been imposed on ratepayers of the Johnstone shire. A number of constituents have raised with me concerns that the rates and charges levied on rural properties in the Johnstone shire are not adequately returned to these ratepayers in the form of adequate infrastructure servicing these rural areas, such as roads and bridges.

There is a view that the administrator of the Johnstone shire has been given a brief by the state government to address the difficult financial position of the current council by substantially increasing rates and charges levied on ratepayers without adequate regard for the capacity of those ratepayers to meet those increased costs. The concern amongst many people in rural areas of the Johnstone shire is that they will be subject to these increases in rates and charges without receiving a commensurate level of services from the council.

The new water access charge was levied on properties outside the map defined urban or township areas. The council has advised that the additional water access charge has been implemented owing to the connections to the water reticulation system costing more to operate, maintain and replace than for those properties that are situated within the urban township map defined areas. However, the argument is made that the relative lack of expenditure on other services and facilities in these rural areas of the Johnstone shire is considerable.

It is appreciated that, owing to the difficult financial circumstances of the Johnstone Shire Council, preparing the 2007-08 council budget would be a difficult process and some unpopular decisions would be inevitable. However, addressing the budget problems needs to be done in an equitable manner. The administrator himself is not to blame, as he is required to adhere to the terms and conditions of his appointment by the state government. I ask: what role will the state government play in assisting with this problem?

Previously I have spoken in this House about the lack of public disclosure with respect to the amount of financial support that will be provided to the Cassowary Coast Regional Council, which will be created following the amalgamation of the Johnstone shire and the Cardwell shire. The new Cassowary Coast Regional Council will be created as a result of the implementation of state government policy of forced local council amalgamations. If the state government does not take some responsibility for the difficult financial position that the Johnstone shire is in, the local community will continue to suffer under the burden of high and increasing rates and charges for many years to come.