Queensland Floods Submission

Summary

I live at [redacted] East Brisbane with my husband and four very young children. On 12 & 13 January 2011 our property flooded, as did many others in our street and neighbouring streets, due to floodwaters from Norman Creek. My primary and lasting view is that the Queensland State Government, Brisbane City Council ('the council') and Wivenhoe Dam Operator, SEQ Water, failed in their obligations to mitigate against Brisbane suffering from another devastating flood following the 1974 floods. By flood mitigation I mean making improvements to the structure and operation of Wivenhoe Dam, building flood levees and flood gates at creek entrances to the river and installing storm water drains that do not overflow when the river rises, amongst others. I consider the recently announced amendments to building regulations and changes to buildings to 'flood proof' them as the secondary issue only. It is too late for many people who have already renovated their houses to implement flood proof renovations now. If Brisbane adopts proper measures to control its river then you do not need to build houses to withstand flood waters. I also recommend that all the parties mentioned above change their attitude to flooding of Brisbane from one which appears to accept that floods happen here to one which says 'we must do all in our power to prevent another flood'. With this in mind I have outlined my submission into three areas:

1. Changing attitudes towards floods
2. Flood Mitigation Measures to protect Brisbane
3. Brisbane City Council Building Approvals and changes to buildings to accommodate floods.

1. Approach to Floods

How can a major city of 2 million people continue to prosper if it cannot control its river? The apparent acceptance of the attitude that every now and then, during extreme weather conditions, it will flood is unacceptable. Brisbane needs to do all in its power to avoid flooding in order to succeed as a modern city.

Brisbane should seek advice from other places which have successfully controlled their rivers like London, Florence and the Netherlands, to name just a few. Why doesn't Brisbane have levees, flood gates and other flood mitigation measures if a dam is not enough? Why has Brisbane not investigated installing flood gates at river/creek entrances to protect those properties close to creeks?

I believe Brisbane has a unique acceptance of floods due to its history of flooding. What other major city in the world with a population equivalent to Brisbane's experiences two devastating floods within 40 years?

2. Flood Mitigation-Operation of Wivenhoe Dam

I have read every article I can find about the operation of the dam in the lead up to and during the Brisbane flood. I am firmly of the belief that if the dam had been managed differently, the flood, and more particularly, its devastating extent, may well have had a different outcome. My belief would appear to be supported by 'The Australian' newspaper.

I hope the Commission addresses the following questions:

- Why did the state government and SEQ Water not change the dam operation manual in September 2010 when it was clear that the El Nino drought was over and a La Nina weather pattern was

forming? Surely the dam manual must take into account the significantly different weather patterns created by El Nino and La Nina.

- During December 2010 it was hard to find a sunny day in Brisbane and the South East when it did not rain, and rain a lot. Who was in charge, and who had the authority, in the state government, council and SEQ Water to take some positive action to mitigate against the flooding which subsequently occurred to Brisbane? I totally disagree with comments made in defence of the SEQ Water that the volume of rain could not have been foreseen. It had rained so much every day for most of December and early January. Why did the incessant rain, accompanied by future forecasts for ongoing heavy rain not prompt further action to protect Brisbane?
- I have read that the Southern Oscillation Index (SOI) reached a level so high in December that it was comparable to conditions before the flood in 1974. Surely this was a warning of what type of rainfall could come.
- The Australian newspaper was able to articulate very clearly in an article on the Saturday after the flood how the dam could have been operated better and that the flood was avoidable. I will not rehash those facts now but I would hope that the Commission invites the expert who provided information to the Australian to the hearing.
- Who in management at SEQ Water and in state government made the decision to not require the dam to satisfy national dam standards? I have read that the dam did not comply with those standards.
- Why was 190% the dam peak? I thought there was 100% for drinking water and then up to 200% for flood mitigation. What happened to the extra 10% of capacity?
- How can the SEQ Water Chief Executive be quoted in the paper as saying the manual 'served us well'. The water released from the dam caused more homes in Brisbane to flood in 2011 compared to 1974.

What about levee banks? Surely there must be some areas along the river and creeks where levee banks may have helped? In my area, East Brisbane, I strongly recommend, in addition to floodgates, the building of levee banks along Norman Creek to ensure the water flows over parkland areas and avoids houses. I was amazed to see that flood waters did not make it to some areas along Norman Creek that are parklands. Was the implementation of levee banks a recommendation made from the 1974 floods?

3. Brisbane City Council Building Approval

Our street is a prime example of council's inconsistent decisions when approving building renovations on land that could potentially flood. We commenced extensive renovations in February 2005. We lifted our house and built in underneath. We engaged an architect, engineers, builders and all our plans were approved by council using a private certifier. After the private certifier approved the plans, those plans were forwarded to council who approved them as well. The house next to us at [redacted] was also built in underneath and, I believe, approved by council. However, when the owners of [redacted] went to build in underneath their house some 6 months after our renovations commenced, in approximately mid to late 2005, they were declined by their certifier. That home owner subsequently lifted his house above the 8.5 metre restriction so that the ground level ended up being over 1 metre off the ground. In late 2009 my neighbour at [redacted] asked whether our house renovations had council approval as he had been advised that council would not approve lifting and building underneath [redacted] All properties from [redacted] up to the end of the road near the creek experienced flooding and many of those houses had living spaces at or near ground level which suffered major damage in the January floods.

I hope the Commission puts the following questions to council as I believe its inconsistent decisions, are not restricted to our street but are reflected in its decisions made in flood prone suburbs:

- Why is it that council can approve building approvals for some houses and not others in the same street, but all with a similar risk to flooding? [redacted] is a useful example of this discrepancy in council decision making processes.
- It is too late now, for those of us who have renovated extensively, to make use of any changes to council laws to allow renovations to lift total roof height over 8.5 metres now.
- Given this the council and state government must look at flood mitigation measures to stop Norman Creek flooding if the dam cannot prevent a Brisbane River flood.
- I anticipate that many of the flooded suburbs in Brisbane would be in the same situation as us, in that their residents have already done extensive renovations, and it is only practicable now to return the house back to its pre-flood condition, rather than embark on more expensive changes and structural renovations.

Conclusion

Most modern cities in the world can control their rivers so that they do not suffer catastrophic floods. Brisbane must look at all flood mitigation measures available. This needs to be the primary focus of the state government and council over the next few years. Whilst the dam is a significant piece of infrastructure, designed to protect the people of Brisbane, to achieve its goal, it has to be properly managed and that means being able to adapt to different weather conditions so it can achieve one of its two main purposes, namely, to prevent Brisbane flooding. The recently announced changes to building regulations are, too little, too late for many owners. The main problem remains the Brisbane river's ongoing potential to cause devastating flooding without proper mitigation measures being implemented.