

[REDACTED]
West End Qld 4101

16 January 2011

The Honourable Justice Catherine Holmes
Commissioner
Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry

Dear Justice Holmes,

Re: Flood recovery in the Riverside Precinct of South Brisbane/West End

I write to you as the Chair of the Body Corporate of Regatta Apartments. I would like to tell you about Regatta Apartments, how we fared in the flood, how we have gone about repairing the damage and the lessons we have learnt, as there are wider implications for the redevelopment of our area and other parts of Brisbane.

About Regatta Apartments

Regatta Apartments is a complex of 59 units – five two-storey townhouses and 54 units in the six-storey tower block.

The complex home to about 120 people ranging in age from less than one year old to more than 80. The residents are professionals, tradespeople, retired people, students and children. We have a strong community ethic, an active body corporate and regular social events to strengthen our sense of community.

The size of our complex means it is possible to know most of the neighbours – at least by sight. This sense of community was vital in our preparations as the flood waters rose, in coordinating the clean-up and coping with inconvenience in the weeks after the flood.

Preparations at Regatta (Tuesday 11 Jan to early AM Wednesday 12 Jan)

In the lead-up to the flood we were able to remove of all but two of the cars from basement carpark and most belongings from basement lock-ups. Most ground floor furniture and possessions were moved either offsite or to the upper floors of the complex. As early predictions put the possible flood peak at 2m above 1974 level, some high-value items were also moved from the first floor units. This massive effort was undertaken by the affected unit owners and volunteers from elsewhere in the complex.

Some residents relocated voluntarily to friends and family while others stayed over night. Residents from interstate or overseas were not easily able to do this. I am not sure but it would seem logical that there would be a higher proportion of interstate and overseas people in inner city apartment complexes than elsewhere in Brisbane – something that has implications in an emergency requiring evacuation such as the January floods.

Effect on Regatta

The basement carpark flooded early in the morning of Wednesday 12 January. The police ordered remaining residents to evacuate around 8am on the Wednesday.

Parts of the courtyard and groundfloor balconies flooded at flood peak Wednesday evening – less than an inch below groundfloor apartment level.

When the flood waters receded the following damage was revealed:

- The electrics in the basement were ruined – lights, exhaust fan, security system, gate motors
- The air conditioning units in basement – which service the bottom three floors of the complex and the townhouses – need refurbishment
- Two cars were submerged
- The contents remaining in basement lockups ruined
- The complexes two lifts were out of action, with one requiring major repairs which are still weeks away from being completed
- The security system was destroyed
- The carpark was filled with water and mud, which took two days to pump out, another day to clean (with the help of dozens of volunteers) and was of action for almost four weeks
- Thick mud deposited throughout the gardens
- Power outage from Wednesday ~8am to Saturday ~7pm

The cost to rectify the damage to common property (not including the air conditioners) is estimated to be about \$80,000-100,000

Discussion

Regatta Apartments has suffered significant damage and disruption but has come out of the floods in much better shape than most other apartment complexes in the area. The reasons for this are:

- Luck – the flood peak was 7mm below groundfloor apartments
- Power boards for the complex on the ground floor rather than in the basement as in some other complexes
- A single story basement carpark rather than a multi-story carpark as in some other complexes – these proved both difficult and dangerous to pump out and clean
- The cohesive community spirit within complex – many residents and friends helped with the cleanup and for the most part residents have been understanding regarding inconvenience in the recovery
- Presence of tradespeople among the resident population, which meant access to equipment to pump out the basement and do the initial clean of car park and skills to organise work crews to work safely (a complex with a population predominantly of students, or of retired people, or of professionals, would not have been able to do this – our diversity was a key strength)
- Various ages of residents – this meant there were people available to do hard and heavy work
- Many volunteers – we were able to get the complex into a state where volunteers could help on the Sunday when they were available
- Very committed and capable resident managers.

Most other apartment complexes in the Riverside South precinct have suffered much greater financial loss than Regatta, caused by, for example, flooding to the river homes built below the main complex level, substantial damage to the power boards where these were located below ground floor, and damage to the basements themselves.

The other apartments also suffered much greater inconvenience – reports from the other complexes include power and communications out for weeks, no lifts, sewage in basements, difficulty pumping out the basement and repeated flooding of multi-storey carparks.

Under the Brisbane City Council's South Brisbane-West End Neighbourhood Plan, an extra 25,000 residents and 55,000 workers would be accommodated in this area. It was chaotic when residents and workers were trying to get out of the area on the Tuesday morning as the river

began to rise. In a future emergency, the chaos that would ensue if the Council's population targets were to be met would be unbelievable, both in the attempts to evacuate and in the resettlement of people during the flood and until it was safe to return. The worst flooding was not on the riverfront (apart from the river homes at Flow and Leftbank Apartments) but in the area half way back to Montague Road. These low-lying areas are not suitable for redevelopment and should be left as open space – which is sorely lacking in the area already.

The main recreational space in the region is Riverside Park. Most of the recreational infrastructure in the park was damaged or destroyed. The grassed area was completely covered in mud and the grass has been killed with removal of the mud. The concrete walkway on the river edge has been damaged in several places. Riverside Drive is not a gazetted road and is overdue to be closed. The road surface has been damaged and most of the bollards along the road and around the carparks have been damaged or removed. Now that Riverside Park needs major work Council should take the opportunity to fulfil its promise to close Riverside Drive permanently. This would also remove a significant safety hazard – the risk of collision between cars swinging onto Riverside Drive from Kurilpa Street and bike riders using the bikeway in front of Regatta Apartments.

Recommendations

- A freeze on redevelopment in this area until a new planning scheme and building guidelines that reflect the Queensland Flood Commission of Inquiry recommendations are in place
- Walls or levees at individual complexes to be built to allow rapid sandbagging/infill of basement entrances to prevent flooding
- Powerboards on new and existing developments to be on the groundfloor and above, not in basement
- No airconditioner units in the basements of future developments
- New river homes and units to be at level at least higher than Regatta ground floor
- Single-storey basements
- Smaller complexes (ie maximum of around the size of Regatta – six storeys and 60 units – rather than 500+ of some of the proposed complexes)
- Encouragement of mixed ages and socio-economic backgrounds within individual complexes – not just students, professionals or retired people in any given complex. This could be achieved by unit design and pricing structure.
- A much lower population density than has been planned – an 25,000 extra people would cause chaos to evacuate and house in a crisis
- Parkland to be developed in the lower ground between Montague Road and Riverside Drive
- Riverside Drive to be closed immediately and Riverside Park redeveloped in line with Council's pre-existing commitments.

Conclusion

We have all learnt a lot in the last few weeks – this knowledge should be captured and reflected in Council's plans for our area so that we don't repeated the destruction and devastation we have just suffered, but at a much greater scale, in the future.

I would be happy to discuss these matters with you or with your officers. I can be contacted by phoning [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely,

Paul Rees
Chair
Regatta Apartments Body Corporate Committee