

John and Jacqualina Vreeling

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11.03.2011

To the members of the Inquiry of the Grantham flood 2011,

The Honourable Justice Catherine Holmes

Your Honour,

**I would like to make a submission to the flood inquiry on behalf of two victims of the floods in Grantham: my parents who lived at █████ Railway St. Grantham, and my husband and I who own the property they were living in. My parents underwent a traumatic experience and we as owners are (and will continue to) suffer our own financial disaster as a result of the flood. We would like to outline in the following the details of what happened and the consequences of this for us. The suffering my parents have gone through, and the financial suffering we are about to go through, we believe is something the government could – and should have foreseen – and now should take responsibility for. We believe there is evidence for questionable planning decisions taken in the past, for lax building controls, and for infrastructure and civil works undertaken by the authorities, which we believe have exacerbated the effect of the flood. We request you take this information into consideration in the preparation of your report and the subsequent recommendations you make to government.**

The flood of 10 January 2011 almost cost my parents their lives. The water came up with unprecedented speed and caught them and their neighbours completely unawares. Within a matter of minutes the water had risen to window height in their low-set home on Railway St. They survived by clambering out of one of the bedroom windows and hanging onto the roof gutters of the house for several hours (the water would eventually rise almost to the ceiling of the house). While hanging on the gutter they witnessed terrifying scenes around them, including loss of life and material destruction. They were unable to climb onto the roof and as a result were not seen by rescue helicopters. At one point my mother received an electric shock. At another point she found it too hard to continue to hang on and fell into the water; my father rescued her back to safety. When the waters subsided a little they undertook a risky wade through waste deep water to safety. They walked towards Helidon – as the route on higher ground in Grantham was

blocked by the rail line (itself inaccessible due to a security fence along it) and the lower-lying passage under the rail bridge which was too deep to pass through. Sometime on the night of 10 January they were rescued by a police patrol and were taken to an emergency shelter in Helidon. They have been seriously traumatized by this experience and are suffering from trauma-related ailments such as insomnia, lack of appetite and depression. They are afraid to return to the property for fear of a similar occurrence.

My parents are aged 75 and 70. They have lived in this house for a number of years after living on various farming properties in the Lockyer valley. My husband and I purchased this property for them to retire in – they helped contribute towards the mortgage with a modest rent. The property is a 3-bedroom brick veneer house situated on 1 acre, which enabled them to keep some farm plant machinery so that my father could continue making a little money to supplement their pension and my mother could run a small business growing and selling plants at weekend markets. The block and extra shed was perfect for them. They lost everything in the flood: personal items and house contents, as well as all the farm machinery, plants and subsidiary items. Some of these items are being replaced by generous donations and some government assistance. They are still waiting on a reply from a submission for a small amount of funding to help them restart their small businesses. However there will be an ongoing need for assistance and support in the coming years to relocate and start up their lives again.

In addition to the disaster affecting my parents, we as property owners are also facing disaster of a financial kind. We have a mortgage on a home in Darwin, where we live and reside. With the equity in our home, we acquired a mortgage for a home for my parents in Grantham. My husband and I are both on modest salaries and rely on the rental return on the property to cover the mortgage. The house has been gutted and will need substantial investment to rebuild it. The insurance will not be near enough to cover this cost. And rebuilding will take months if not years – that is if we are able to find extra funds to cover the costs. Even then it is questionable if we will be able to find renters for the property – as my parents will not be returning. And finally, putting the house on the market is not an option as it is now worth a fraction of what we paid for it. **In fact, we as the homeowners believe it is unacceptable to allow anyone to live in a house that might at any point place people in a similar situation, where their lives could be at such risk.** Meanwhile, the mortgage on the house still needs to be paid and the bank must have the loan payments met or the mortgage will go into receivership. (The insurance did pay a rental component, but this too will run out well before the end of this year).

The suffering my parents have gone through, and the financial difficulty we are about to go through, we believe is something the government could – and should

have foreseen – and now should take responsibility for. **There is evidence for questionable planning decisions taken in the past, for lax building controls, and for infrastructural and civil works undertaken by various authorities, which have exacerbated the effect of the flood.**

The house my parents lived in is a low-set brick veneer home built around 16 years ago. It was built in lower Grantham, on land that was gazetted residential around 60 years ago. A large number of residential homes were built in this area since that time. Previous to this, the land was used for agricultural purposes. We naturally assumed in the purchasing of the property that the local council had done proper checks on flood dangers in gazetting this area for residential use. The assumptions of flood heights made by the council were quite obviously far too low. The lower Grantham area lies in a dangerous bottleneck in the valley and disastrous floods have occurred here in the past. A similar flood of this proportion occurred in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and this is information the council must have had access to. All this information has come to light as a result of this flood – we had no knowledge of this situation beforehand. At the time of purchase, we were not provided with documentation on flood levels relating to the property. We rely on planning laws to foresee these situations.

It is a great concern that building regulations regarding heights for dwellings have been quite lax. This home (built approx 16 years ago) was built a little above ground, (approx 1m) but it was obviously nowhere near the height it should be to safeguard it against inundation. The house built next door 2 years ago was built considerably lower again than our property.

Lastly one needs to question the design of the railway and lack of culverts to allow movement of water. The design of this manmade structure contributed to the damming effect of the water in the region of Grantham greatly exacerbating the effects of the water, which flowed from Lockyer and the other creeks converging on that area that day. It is quite clear that the construction of the railway line compounded the devastation of the flooding on that day.

A meeting with the Gatton/ Grantham council in regards to our plans and what assistance council could be afforded to us, had very little answers to offer. (We flew from Darwin, took leave from our work, paid for flights - for the second time in the matter of a few weeks and were extremely disappointed.) We were informed that hydrologists are resetting flood levels for that area but that that report wouldn't be ready until August. (We were not informed that there was a flood level at purchase)

The flood on Jan 10<sup>th</sup> 2011 was a disaster waiting to happen. Unfortunately it has left many people who owned homes in the 'ground zero' region of the flooding in Grantham like us in a quandary as to the ongoing future sustainability of living in

or renting out homes in this area. We believe there are sufficient grounds to put in place a 'bale out' or 'buy back' scheme for those whose properties are situated in this area and who wish to have their properties acquired. In a recent article in The Weekend Australian (Feb 26 -27 'Disaster Zone Sale Curbs for Rebuilding'), journalist Sean Parnell cited two schemes in Australia where people's homes are bought back from the government: Brisbane city council has a voluntary 'Buy Back' scheme and, the Victorian Baillieu Govt. has agreed to the Black Saturday inquiry recommendation for a voluntary "Retreat and Resettlement" scheme. In recent communication we have received, there has been suggestions about offering land in a higher location to replace low lying land, but that will not compensate for the loss of a house, particularly for those un-insured, or for those whose insurance payout is certainly nowhere near enough to rebuild. We believe and would advocate, that any compensation/buyout scheme should equate to pre-flood house and land values.

Based on the enormity of the disaster which occurred on this day and the significant loss of life it would be appropriate to consider setting aside this low lying land as a memorial for those who lost their lives.

And for my husband and I and for other homeowners it is imperative the inquiry seriously and speedily explores the option presented above. We have the future lives of Grantham residents at stake not just the loss of property and immense disruption to consider.