

PROCESS:

I need to make a statement that reflects the feelings expressed to me by constituents, both residents and businesses.

There is an appreciation of the scope and complexity of this review and the tight time-frame to complete the Commission's report. Constituents and community expectations are that this process will be fair and open and that the outcomes will significantly advantage future disaster management actions by governments and instrumentalities at all levels.

EARLY WARNING:

Personal experience of Brisbane City Council's early warning system, supported by comments made by residents, was that the reports were so general that their meaning was virtually useless in assessing local situations / changes and / or need for action. This was exacerbated by power outages resulting in difficulty in dispersal of and accessing information.

In addition, Council's own web page went down at a critical time. As well, significant difficulty was experienced by residents and myself with use of Council's Call Centre through delays etc. All of which added to the emotional stress and frustration being experienced at that time.

The loss of power meant all information was virtually by word of mouth. By establishing a mobile office at Rocklea, Moorooka Ward Office prepared flyers with important contacts etc and distributed these locally to affected locations. We worked closely with our Federal and State Members, Graham Perrett MP, Member for Moreton and Simon Finn MP, Member for Yeerongpilly to seek to maximise information dispersal.

By around the fifth day, Council workers were observed undertaking a walk through giving out flyers. By this time Council had placed notices on street poles advising residents not to dump asbestos. Such warning was far too late as most of the houses had been stripped of fittings and fixtures.

In many cases, despite the advice that was provided, there was a lack of preparedness by some residents for such an event and a reluctance to accept the reality of what may happen if the level of the river rose to the predicted heights.

Examples:

One resident, from Golf Links Street, Rocklea, was waiting at my office early on the morning of the flood. He was in shock and very upset. He told me he was uncertain how high the flood waters would come. Despite efforts, it was impossible to acquire relevant information or to have any reliance on the accuracy of the advice obtained, being of such a general nature.

A single, older man who was a truckie, had been helping a young family next door to move their belongings in expectation of flooding. However he failed to remove his own belongings from his home as flood waters rose quicker than expected according to the advice he received. He stayed in his home during the night hoping to save possessions, although eventually it was flooded. In an effort to protect his appliances from theft, he cut the power cords. His appliances were flood damaged.

COMMUNICATION:

There was significant confusion and uncertainty regarding the communication received by residents. Some residents advised that Brisbane City Council staff called and advised them they should stay in their homes, as they would not flood, however they did. Others ignored the advice and took action to save possessions and store with friends etc.

Residents told me it was difficult to get information particularly with power outages. Residents did not feel there was enough information, did not know how high the flood waters would rise or where they could go for assistance.

At Brisbane City Council's Families & Community Services Committee meeting on the 22/2/11 advice was given by the Compliance and Regulatory (CARS) Manager that:

- LDCC was set up Sunday 9 January with 5 staff
- On Tuesday 11 January 2011 CARS staff distributed 10,000 letters to potential flood affected residents. Neither the Manager CARS nor the Committee Chairperson, Cr Knapp, could provide information on the contents or intent of that advice. A copy of that advice should have been provided in a timely manner to the Ward Office so that we could be kept abreast of the situation, and better able to support residents. The mystery of that letter remains! This is inappropriate at any time, but more so in the midst of such a disaster.
- I advised that Committee that the Ward Office could not get information from Council, despite repeated requests.
- Information received at the Ward Office was, at times, incorrect i.e. the situation regarding sandbags, their availability and location. One of the worst areas impacted by flooding had no Council organised sandbagging outlet available locally, while access to depots with sandbags was difficult because of local flooding.
- On visiting the SES at Salisbury, I found that they had organised sandbagging, but were focused on finding a site for accommodation as their own facility was expected to flood. Incidentally this site is where Council was proposing to build its new southern regional office and locate its emergency operation.

Residents raised concerns as to whether sandbagging in certain areas was appropriate at all given the level of the flooding that was experienced. This remains unanswered.

I am also aware that information obtained by Liberal National Party Councillors and Candidates was not made readily available to Labor Councillors or Ward Offices. I find this despicable given the seriousness of the situation.

When I attended the first meeting of the South Regional Team at the Southern Office I was surprised by the lack of accurate information concerning the residential area of Rocklea, in particular:

- I was advised that Rocklea and Archerfield were inaccessible. I informed the meeting that that it was accessible with three separate areas cut off by flooding and that homes in those areas were severely devastated.
- I was advised no volunteers were to be dropped in Rocklea on the first volunteer day.
- It took 4 days to get advice on the handling of asbestos

- I was informed that the Southern suburbs had been split into sectors with priority given to opening major roads and major infrastructure such as the Brisbane Markets. The difficulty with this approach, for the residents of Rocklea and Archerfield was that initial efforts were concentrated on the numerous major roads that surround the suburb and the Markets as compared to other sectors that did not have the extent of such of roads or the markets. Residents questioned Council's emphasis on infrastructure (roads etc) and the Rocklea markets rather than their homes and possessions.
- There were no army personnel assigned to the residential area of Rocklea.
- The Council officer co-ordinating Rocklea and Archerfield informed me that, despite wanting to, he had not had time to leave South Regional Centre due to the demand for meetings. There was no one on the committee except me who had actually visited the suburb and observed the devastation. Momentum was lost when the officer involved took an RDO the following day.
- While I felt listened to at that meeting, decision-making and actions were referred to the LDCC. There was no flexibility and almost a fear to step outside the framework by officers in attendance.
- I advised that I had established a mobile office on-site at Rocklea and needed assistance with co-ordination on the ground. Agreement was obtained to have an officer to assist for several hours to get an understanding of the enormity of the issue. He did this well, but was recalled to Regional Office. When this occurred I contacted the Lord Mayor to seek his assistance with local coordination. He advised that it was a matter for the LDCC.
- An Army officer from the Committee visited and undertook an assessment of the area and described as similar in look and feel to Baghdad. He recommended three army personnel be based on the ground in the residential area of Rocklea to assist with local co-ordination. After a day we were seeing results with the mobile office becoming a co-ordination point with the Army, Council LAS, Fire Brigade and voluntary fire brigade, Lions and I meeting three times a day to discuss a co-ordinated approach to working in the area. Our strategies came about from sharing information and the Army advising on the best way to co-ordinate and manage services and volunteers in the area. The 9th Battalion Defence Services had the expertise and flexibility to deliver a practical, strategic effort without having to seek LDCC approval on every decision. This made a significant difference to on-the-ground planning, management and coordination of resources.
- The following day these three personnel were reassigned by the LDCC out of Rocklea. I disagreed with the decision as did the Army Officer and discussed the situation with the Federal Member for Moreton, Graham Perrett. I also threatened to contact the Prime Minister to have these resources returned. This happened within an hour with those staff and additional Defence personnel coming to assist in Rocklea and Archerfield for the remainder of the week. This resulted in a significant change in the local community with a level of normality returning to the situation.

Some of the important learning was:

- The need for resources for local planning, co-ordination and management, and to undertake decision-making as appropriate on the ground, rather than in a Regional Office
- Desperate need for quicker decision-making less hamstrung by bureaucracy
- Imperative that those in decision-making roles have local knowledge and understanding of the actual situation
- Better communication with less emphasis on 'media hype' and 'media grabs'
- Need to actively involve local elected representatives, especially local Councillors, in more effective information gathering, assessment of need and decision-making processes
- LDCC personnel to 'say it like it is' rather than providing what is required by the administration

COUNCILLOR ROLE AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE:

As elected members, people see Councillors as leaders in our communities. Hence Councillors' roles need to be more effectively defined and their expertise of the local area and issues exploited, with more bipartisan treatment by the current administration.

The local knowledge of the Councillor was not effectively used in addressing the needs of the community. Resources that would assist residents respond to this crisis were delayed with priority directed to establishing the Rocklea Markets and access to major roads. I question why, given we know flooding was going to occur, that more stock was not removed from the markets.

Councillors' opinions should be sought and such advice considered when Council officers are making decisions from a Regional Office perspective, particularly when those officers have limited or no knowledge of the actual situation or location

Certainly, information needs to be disseminated equally, with the primary purpose of assisting residents, not scoring political points.

I must also comment on the treatment of Cr Nicole Johnston, former LNP Councillor, now Independent Councillor for the Tennyson Ward and her staff. Her Ward Office was flooded, and her subsequent treatment by the current administration appalling.

Cr Johnston did not have an office, desk, access to computer, phones etc essential for dealing with the needs of her constituents. Given that BCC has over 8,000 staff, I find it astounding a local elected representative is so hampered in performing her duties. Cr Johnston and her staff used the Moorooka Ward Office during the peak of the devastation to her community.

MISSING LINKS ON THE GROUND: NEED FOR A LOCAL RESPONSE & COORDINATION:

The major issue was the lack of a presence close-by the devastated areas to support and assist in the provision and coordination of the information and support needed by residents, businesses etc. A place to go for help or just a friendly word, food or drink.

I took the initiative to establish a mobile office for 10 days, including a tent outside the home of a local resident who was not flooded, although had no power. We provided and co-ordinated services with the help of the Moorooka Lions Club, ALP Members, a local family, the Smiths outside whose house were located, and disseminated information on a range of matters, coordinated planning with various providers, and provided food and volunteers from this site for Archerfield and Rocklea.

We were also supported by various community organisations including Queensland Health which provided Tetanus injections, St Johns First Aid, Rural Fire Services, church groups including the Buddhists, Aboriginal Groups including First Contact etc and many volunteers.

The lack of an effectively coordinated response in the early stages was a significant issue. There was a desperate need to capture local knowledge of the needs of residents. This could have been achieved more effectively by organising for trained volunteers to assess that need locally, to allow for prioritisation of that need and to plan for its remediation.

Initially the lack of volunteers, the inability to acquire toilets, the lack of access to power, food storage and drinks was significant and meant resources were deflected to such tasks other than attending to residents and business's needs.

Initially volunteers were engaged in managing traffic to try to control entry to the devastated areas but as Council took over this role, they moved to clean-up operations. However a clear plan and priorities would have meant more effective use of such resources and perhaps better outcomes for residents and businesses.

Despite repeated requests of the South Regional Team, the LDCC and the Lord Mayor's phone it took five days to get skips for the worst affected areas of Rocklea and Archerfield. It was the Army who brought trucks in to remove rotting food and rancid fridges from the suburb.

At one point 22 garbage bags of dairy products were on the footpath in front of a house and in the three days waiting for bins got buried under a pile of asbestos. The result was the bigger problem than existed in the first place; and hence longer to resolve.

It was incomprehensible that while there was food rotting in the streets and residents, volunteers and community groups asking for bins, I came across two Council officers doing food safety inspections. I reported this to the Southern Regional group who described it as 'unfortunate'.

In relation to domestic pets, there was no system in place to accommodate pets from flooded homes. One elderly single man from Rocklea whose home was inundated, came into the office to ask what he could do about his dog. He was going to find somewhere to sleep in his car for the duration of the flood and did not want to go to an emergency shelter.

The RSPCA could not foster pets due to the fact that their facility was flooded. I was unable to get in contact with Council's Call Centre. In the end we contacted a resident

involved with the local dog park who put word out and found someone to foster the dog during the flood.

The need for information and provision of appropriate animal shelters is a need which needs to be more effectively addressed as part of flood response and recovery assistance.

LACK OF RESPONSIVENESS OF THE LDCC:

The impression I obtained of the LDCC was of a very rigid, bureaucratic and rule-driven committee which appeared to have limited ability to problem solve, being more a conduit for information to Council than action to assist residents.

A number of issues resulted in this assessment. They include:

- Lack of knowledge of location and actual circumstances and conditions
- Lack of and difficulty in organising and retaining on-site coordination
- The difficulty in obtaining large waste bins – took five days
- Lack of a response to asbestos handling matters, toxic substances and oils removal and industry waste disposal. A major issue for Rocklea residents in the cleanup was that their homes had been inundated not only with water and mud but also oil based products. There were numerous leaks of oil and petroleum based products that also contaminated yards, parks and playing fields. It was difficult to obtain a satisfactory response to such issues.
- Lack of response to removal of food waste
- Lack of preparedness to utilise elected representatives to acquire local information on issues etc
- Difficulty in accessing staff to relay information or seek support
- The need for a co-ordinated team approach involving regular and purposeful meetings

EXPERTISE OF THE DEFENCE FORCES IN RESPONSE AND RECOVERY:

The Defence Services provided a structured yet flexible and considerate response to the community's needs through effective coordination and implementation of the recovery efforts by the various levels of government, community, business, residents and volunteers. They observed, listened, assessed the situation, and then acted, bringing discipline at a time when people were suffering from confusion and dismay.

Their command structure was such that they could provide a response without the delays experienced through the LDCC. They had access to resources that could be obtained quickly to overcome situations i.e. food removal.

Their efforts were much appreciated by all involved, service providers, residents, businesses and volunteers.

Having their expertise in disaster management was critical to a better recovery process.

VOLUNTEERS:

Most volunteers in Rocklea and Archerfield found their own way to the suburb. They must be congratulated for the tremendous job they did in assisting residents, organisations and businesses.

However, many residents reported that their enthusiasm and haste to assist, combined with a lack of coordination and direction meant that residents lost many of their personal and life-long belongings which were inadvertently thrown out. Items that they considered salvageable.

I was particularly disappointed that there were no buses of volunteers planned to be dropped off on the first day. The reason for this was that it was considered volunteers could not be used in Rocklea. Where this assumption came from is anyone's guess. It certainly did not come from information provided by the Ward Office or our On-site mobile office. Eventually, a busload of eager volunteers arrived after my intervention in the afternoon.

What was evident was that there was a desperate need for volunteers to be sensitised to the emotional needs of residents struggling with ruined homes and loss of personal possessions. It is not appropriate for eager volunteers, often unaffected by flooding, to unthinkingly take control of what needs to be done in the often mistaken belief that this is what is needed. Consideration must be given to grieving and in-shock residents, to respect their wishes and seek their permission to act rather than take command.

The provision of effective training, including the use of the media, to assist volunteers to gain an awareness of residents' emotional situation and needs is imperative. Likewise safety training and awareness in identifying and handling toxic products like asbestos, chemicals and rotting foods etc needs to be addressed before they are allowed to assist.

Another issue for consideration is the better co-ordination of volunteers from locations on-site to ensure priorities are addressed and planning is more effective in achieving better outcomes. This would maximise volunteers' effectiveness, make them more comfortable with their role and responsibilities, and perhaps limit longer-term issues.

The provision of 'special' volunteers, appropriately skilled and trained, to undertake an initial assessment of residents' needs and to begin the process of prioritising those needs for attention. An example being the need to prioritise the disposal of rotting food, asbestos handling, toxic substances etc.

A later issue was the apparent cancellation of park clean-ups in some Labor Wards, without advice or notice. Why was this so and was it a political decision in suburbs that did not have the same media-pulling qualities as others?

DEVELOPMENT:

In relation to the broader planning issue of flooding, it is our obligation as a City to ensure that by increasing development in catchment areas, like those surrounding Rocklea, we avoid increasing the potential for increased drainage impacting upon residential and commercial sites at Rocklea and Archerfield.

Developments like those in the Stable Swamp Creek Catchment and along Oxley Creek flood plain at Sherwood which have occurred in known flood plains, including the

development by the Brisbane Markets at Rocklea, where land filling was involved, need a different approach to what has occurred in the past to seek to better understand, learn from and apply knowledge of the recent flooding and their implications.

House raising – Despite Council approving house raising for residents, to the 8.5 meter mark, many homes were still inundated to the second level. Many residents believed that raising their homes would ameliorate the impact of flooding. A review of this criteria and the Q100 level, better informed from actual on-ground experience, needs to be undertaken to provide greater protection from such events in the future.

Rental properties - There appears to be no criteria for landlords to inform tenants that their properties flood regularly or that they should advise them that they need to ensure their contents are appropriately insured. Reconstruction of many rental properties that involved total inundation has already commenced and before long they will be back in business with unsuspecting tenants lining up for cheaper accommodation.

The inundation seems to highlight that, given Council has approved the State's main markets in a flood plain, there should be a requirement for relocation of produce and equipment quickly in the event of flooding, a Flood Action Plan specific to the Markets. Many residents have commented that despite early warning of the flooding, why did the Rocklea Markets not move more fruit and vegies away from the flood area.

COUNCIL BUY BACK:

I have received numerous complaints from residents that Council's existing buy-back program is too slow to reach a decision and has no funding available for this financial year. This is despite the Lord Mayor telling them to apply following the flood. The floods have raised the desire of home owners to opt for selling their properties and to move away from Rocklea, but action is too slow and their situations are uncertain.

There have been reports following the flooding that residents requesting buy-back, have been told that now their properties have flooded, the value has decreased and they can expect less for their homes.

In relation to buyback, Councils 10/11 budget is spent. I have forwarded approximately 25 requests for buyback to the Lord Mayor. The difficulty for residents is that many of them have lost everything, aren't insured and are uncertain of investing further in houses over which they still have mortgages, and whose fate is still uncertain. Many residents want to move on but are stuck in limbo.

Example:

I met a young, single teacher from Victoria, who had bought in Salisbury Street and lost everything and is still up for paying the mortgage. She is up for bills to connect electricity and not entitled to grants due to her wage. She is in shock, but also under financial pressure, having to work and having to decide what to do with her home. Her home is on buyback but there is no money to do it. I have called for more money in this budget for buyback and a review and widening of the criteria to include rental properties and potentially other properties beyond the Q2.

Currently there is a discrepancy where some houses are being bought back because they have been built in downstairs, therefore have habitable floor space that floods regularly, while their neighbours can't be bought back, despite regular flooding, because their habitable area is not flooded. Similarly, rental properties that flood regularly are not eligible for the buyback scheme.

If affordable housing is being lost in Rocklea due to buyback, we need to consider other options for more affordable housing in the area. Many people who live in Rocklea and Archerfield work in local industries, including at the markets and had no income due to a lack of work because of the flooding on their work places.

The Lord Mayor's Taskforce on Suburban Flooding is no longer has a dedicated team and its implementation has been spread across Council. This has resulted in a loss of momentum i.e. delay in early warning system implementation, support for house raising, accountability etc. A centralised team dedicated to its implementation needs to be re-established.

There is an urgent need to review the Q 2 Criteria for buy-back and inconsistencies with this scheme. There is also an urgent need to expand and / or approve another buy-back scheme specifically for river flooded properties.

COMMUNITY REBUILDING:

Council needs to be better able to establish and support working arrangements with local organisations to maximise consistency and outcomes. Linking such groups into co-ordinated planning and management arrangement at the local level is critical to improving communication and effectiveness of effort, reduce duplication, and to ensure that community needs are understood and addressed. Much energy is spent dealing with generous donations that require storage, protection and insurance etc that could be better utilised through more effective coordination.

Recognising the efforts of residents, volunteers, community groups and organisations, including local, state and federal government bodies etc is an important aspect of community recovery and renewal. Providing resources to maintain this effort for an appropriate time is essential.

IMPACT ON BUSINESSES:

Many businesses in the Rocklea, Coopers Plains, Acacia Ridge areas have been significantly impacted by the flooding. Many are still not in operation, and may never recover from the devastation. Many local businesses offered invaluable support to the flood clean-up and recovery effort and this needs recognition and acknowledgement. The 'double whammy' of families losing both their home and their income / business / job was a frequent event that will continue to need long-term support.

Large organisations like the Bunnings Group at Rocklea that have just re-opened (15/3/11) were able to deploy staff to other stores to seek to maintain them in employment. This is very commendable and supports the retention of much needed local jobs and human resources.

The clean-up of such businesses was significantly supported by Council with rubbish removal etc and the efforts of eager staff, volunteers and friends. The nature of some of

those businesses and their use and storage of petroleum based products, toxic chemicals etc caused a further layer of concern in relation to the flooding and dealing with the transmission of such contaminants into houses, playing fields, community buildings etc.

Taking every opportunity to relocate such businesses away from the flood plain is important.

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