

18th August, 2021

Hon. Dr. Steven Miles,
Deputy Premier and
Minister for Development, Industry, Local Government and Planning,
P.O.Box 15009,
CITY EAST, Qld., 4002

Dear Minister,

Demise of Local Government – at least in Scenic Rim

Scenic Rim Regional Council, now in its fourth administration, has continually displayed problems in how it deals with Tamborine Mountain, its residents and their Council representatives. **What is clearly evident here is the headlong collision between representative local government and authoritarianism.**

For more than a century, community input by a small isolated mountain top settlement steered its continuous growth as a much admired visitor destination as well as provision of an unusual lifestyle for its residents. Throughout its history the semi-rural environmental character of Tamborine Mountain has been achieved by dedicated Councillors in concert with its residents. Whilst migrating through several shires, Tamborine Mountain residents’ significant input into its local area plans (until the new planning scheme of 2020) resulted in an area recognized as a primary tourist attraction and a key asset of South East Queensland.

In putting this area on the map, over the years our Councillors, together with this community organization, have helped spearhead such leaps as gazetting Queensland’s first national park, lobbying earlier State government for better access roads and even raising first alarms about our growing water problems. Today, our Division One Councillors are articulate and speak with clarity and precision. Their thoughts and explanations have been relayed to residents for a great many years.

This ingrained tradition of Tamborine Mountain elected representatives to truly represent their constituents is alive and very active today. This dedication is actually extended to residents of other communities in the current sparsely populated and fragmented shire, all with their own distinctive aspirations for their area lifestyles.

The authoritarian state of local government in Scenic Rim today has grown mainly since the time of local government amalgamations in 2008. Draconian Councillor codes of conduct and media protocols sprang into being. The Tamborine Mountain Councillor at the time, right from the beginning, walked unsuspectingly into a minefield of extreme interpretations of new guidelines that challenged the application of common sense.

Brisbane City Council experienced similar problems and the issue was taken up by the Courier Mail which suddenly found itself on the outer with regard to Council news. It also picked up and published the problems in Scenic Rim.

Complaints to State government that year resulted in a reprimand being issued to Scenic Rim Regional Council, which then shifted a few things around before proceeding on in its former path.

Whilst Brisbane City Council eventually found an acceptable working path, not so with Scenic Rim Regional Council.

Over the succeeding three and a half terms, Scenic Rim Regional Council Councillors shifted more and more delegated powers to the bureaucrats. Today we have an unelected bureaucratic establishment, virtually running the business. That it exhibits a distant and sometimes poisonous culture compounds the problem..

Up in the heady stratosphere, Scenic Rim's Mayor's has a grand vision for "his" Council and for a "#OneScenicRim" proudly displayed on all Council envelopes. A one-size-fits-all view with no recognition of separate area distinctions has seen large community protests across the shire – in Boonah, Beaudesert, Beechmont and of course, Tamborine Mountain. People buy into different areas for a variety of reasons. Tamborine Mountain residents, approximately 90% of whom have arrived for a particular lifestyle, share little in common with residents of e.g. Boonah, Beaudesert, Kalbar, Aratula or Rathdowny.

To compound matters, eye watering sums are being directed towards establishing a Council precinct hub many describe as rivaling George Street in the middle of Beaudesert. These excesses are noted by residents who would prefer more being spent on their day to day locality needs. The character of individual localities should be enhanced rather than repeating a "Southbank in Beaudesert" approach criticized by locals across the shire.

Perhaps this grand vision for the whole of Scenic Rim stems from the well known "small dog" syndrome. . Set amongst the mega councils, Scenic Rim remains a comparatively small entity. With a population today of 42,000 it is hedged by the Gold Coast (710,000), Logan (341,000) and Ipswich (232,000)..

How did this situation develop?.....At the time of state local government amalgamations in 2008, there was a virtual stampede of three thousand Tamborine Mountain residents with submissions demanding to join with the then Boonah shire rather than being tacked onto the "glitz and glamour" of the Gold Coast. The strong sentiment then was to maintain the semi-rural environmental key character of Tamborine Mountain so carefully nurtured over the past hundred and more years. Our information during the Bligh administration was that this strong sentiment played a major role in how the boundaries were set. It was how "the rump" was created.

A just completed plebiscite asked residents their preference for either Scenic Rim or the Gold Coast. The significant result showed residents preferred to abandon Scenic Rim to join the Gold Coast. After about a decade of endless debate and regarding the broad mountain sentiment which has always been cautious about stepping into the Gold Coast, this result can indeed be regarded as a stampede as well.

In a short space of years residents have turned their back on a Council they consider not delivering the goods. Many residents did not vote stating they didn't like either choice with one resident in a current local newspaper stating he preferred "to stay in our Shire and find a Mayor who is a team horse of a different colour". This has been an oft repeated public sentiment.

Council's culture is set by the Mayor and the CEO. Shortly before amalgamation, the then switched on CEO of Beaudesert Shire Council was setting out to hold Council departmental discussions about the distinct differences and aspirations between the shire's various localities. This endeavour vanished in 2008 after amalgamation and a turnover of staff.

Council has regularly ignored criticism and is unwilling to take on board residents' viewpoints. "We can't please all the people all the time" (Mayor). The Mayor has even deflected criticism of Council by statements protecting Council officers thus giving the appearance it is the officers who are in line of all the criticisms. Responsibility for Council culture starts at the top. Whilst reports from residents state that Council staff are generally very courteous and helpful, how could they know of the various locality distinctions unless the upper echelons of Council factor this in.

What is not understood by Council despite frequent repetition is that Tamborine Mountain's ethos is unusual in that most residents share a common bond. This is the love of their natural surroundings and a protective instinct for the core mountain character they have invested heavily in which to live. An inappropriate decision by Council in one particular spot inevitably draws the ire and condemnation of nearly the whole community. Without a culture in Council to recognize distinctions of separate areas, Council staff are frequently left to make poor decisions. Just relying on input from a few immediate neighbours is not enough. The impact for the whole community is not considered.

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Increasing use of outside consultants.....Council has increasingly been outsourcing work previously done in-house. People are asking just what do the three to four hundred employees do. Endless strategies, plans etc. are being done by people outside the local government/resident nexus. Council even outsourced to consultants to evaluate how Council can work better. Maybe a simple “listen to the people” approach would actually work. As it is we have a Council not running in tandem with its electorate. It may as well be a state government department and save the taxpayer a great deal of money.

This is where representative local government has come in collision with bureaucratic authoritarianism.

Since the shower of bull dust that has sprinkled down on Tamborine Mountain Division One Councillors for the past three and a half administrations, residents have often suffered from serious restrictions of local government representation. There was even a period when our Councillor was out of circulation altogether. For many years residents have been aware that Councillor time available to deal with community problems has been regularly greatly diminished by the time spent fighting off petty nitpicking, eventually to be dismissed.

Many residents know to address their problems directly with Council staff. Others, unsuspectingly, ask our Councillor’s assistance in whatever is troubling them, only to be later racked with guilt at the huge amount of drama the Councillor has waded into, simply for acting on their behalf.

This is the background of the still running dispute between the Office of the Independent Assessor and the Councillor Conduct Tribunal over a Tamborine Mountain ex-Councillor’s alleged misconduct. This man left office a year and a half ago after amassing dozens of piddling complaints. His reasons for not standing for a third term were widely publicized. A Councillor from the Boonah district similarly opted not to re-stand after many years also citing unacceptable Council conditions for anyone seeking to represent their respective electorate.

Tamborine Mountain residents not having their view heard in Council.....Tamborine Mountain residents have long been aware that their representatives are continually outvoted, especially on major Tamborine Mountain issues. One such issue, concerning the height of a billboard for a proposed service station here, drew an over-riding Council decision so bizarre it quickly became the laughing stock of this whole community. Sadly, this is now an expectation of Council decision making.

Off mountain Councillors – whilst entering the arena with good intentions – find themselves in a tight position. Lacking the specialty skills and experience, they are bound to Council’s culture and edits. Today many are seen as extensions to Council, or even as oft reported, “going along for the ride”. A job, car, perks, social functions and on top of this Council writes your media reports and speeches. So why would a Councillor not keep his head below the parapet and every now and then offer a few personal subjective opinions?

To compound problems Council has scrapped its open sub-committee meetings and substituted secret meetings and forums. Here Councillors listen to bureaucrat reports (e.g. planning) and have secret discussions. They are instructed not to discuss anything further either with constituents, or even with each other. Understandably, our Councillor complained he was unable to gauge resident views to formulate his own responses. . At a public meeting of another large Tamborine Mountain organization recently, our Councillor was asked a number of questions. His replied he knew the answers but was forbidden to reveal them.

Planning reports delivered at these secret meetings.... It is common knowledge that the Planning & Environment Court is over crammed with cases where sides deliver arguments from either ends of the spectrum. The possibilities of subjective interpretations are endless. An unskilled Councillor, faced with just one planning recommendation, especially when accompanied by up to fifty (practically unenforceable)

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conditions, prudently falls into line, especially if he or she wants to avoid the wrath of dictatorial superiors as inflicted on some Councillors. Controversial Council decisions are met by residents with comments like “something rotten in the State of Denmark” and I am used to questions from residents asking if I thought money had changed hands.

Tamborine Mountain Division One Councillors over the past three and a half administrations have had sound backgrounds, skills and long time community work. They have regularly attended public and organization meetings. The community is well acquainted with their honesty and high level of application to their roles.

After two terms in Council, Nigel Waistell called it a day, explaining in the local media his dissatisfaction with Council operations. Previously, Mr. Waistell was a long time executive of Tamborine Mountain Progress Association. His participation in community affairs was already established well before his terms in Council. As this Association’s core functions are to protect the lifestyles of local residents (environmental and social), experience here is valuable. Discussing community problems and planning matters years on end inevitably builds up a fund of knowledge and skills.

The current Division One Councillor, long time resident Derek Swanborough, is in his second term, winning office on a single item ticket – the plebiscite asking residents which shire they preferred. With impressive credentials and nearly forty years working in local government, his standing can best be described by Ipswich City Councillor Paul Tully’s letter in the Fassifern Guardian & Tribune:

“Congratulations to Tamborine Mountain’s Cr, Derek Swanborough for his never-ending pursuit of the honest and ethical representation of his constituents.

I first met Derek in 2006 when he was the head of the Ipswich City Council’s Economic and Community Development Department.

He has always impressed me for his intellect, knowledge, candour and positive dedication to the communities he has served.

Cr. Swanborough’s latest commitment to “democracy on the mountain” is his personally-funded plebiscite for his constituents to consider moving their division into the Gold Coast City Council area.

Keep up the good work Derek.”

(The Fassifern Guardian & Tribune, 26th May, 2021)

High praise indeed. It is not surprising that the constant attacks on these two Division One Councillors have drawn high disapproval of Council. Well known in the community and known for their high ethical and moral attributes, these two men have been honestly doing their duty as representatives of the people. It played a major role in the reversal of Tamborine Mountain allegiances.

Council has been flying off in a tangent on shire and Council promotions such as an expansion of business/tourist activities and the promotion of relatively tiny Council enterprises. Whilst attracting some publicity, these fall far short of what is expected in the grand scheme of things. A serious re-assessment of exactly what Council is supposed to be doing is well overdue.

At this rate we are sinking deeper into a pit where “local” has lost all its meaning

Yours sincerely,

Jeanette Lockey,
Hon. President,
Tamborine Mountain Progress Association.

cc: Premier, Hon. Anastacia Palaszczuk
Mr. D.F. Crisafulli, Leader of the Opposition
Courier Mail
The Fassifern Guardian & Tribune