



Speech by

KAREN STRUTHERS

MEMBER FOR ARCHERFIELD

Hansard 29 April 1999

QUEENSLAND FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY AMENDMENT REGULATION (No. 1) 1999
Disallowance of Statutory Instrument

Ms STRUTHERS (Archerfield—ALP) (10.58 p.m.): Let me say from the outset that, if the firemen's calendar with those hunky bodies made enough money, maybe we would not have to introduce this levy. But even those hunky bodies are not enough to raise the funds that are needed for the fire service in Queensland.

There is a common perception that firefighters do simply that—fight fires. While that may have been true in the past, it is certainly not the case now. Over the past 10 years, their roles have changed progressively, and communities across Queensland are safer places thanks to that transformation. In my area of Archerfield and throughout the State the proactive side of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority—fire education and fire safety—is increasingly coming to the fore. The funds allocated for these activities are an essential investment in the safety of Queenslanders.

In 1995, 27 people died in house fires in Queensland—a shocking 27 deaths. That tragic waste of life fell to 11 in 1996 and then to five in 1997. Last financial year, four people died in domestic fires in Queensland—the lowest figure for more than a decade. The QFRA aims for zero preventable fire deaths. It is up to every one of us in this place to help it achieve that worthy goal.

While one fire related death is one too many, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that the dramatic improvement has been brought about by the hard work of firefighters. There is little doubt that it is linked to fire education and fire safety programs implemented by our fires in the cities, towns and rural areas of Queensland.

No longer do firefighters sit in stations waiting for the siren to sound to prompt them into action. They are seen every day out there—in schools, conducting public awareness programs, raising the profile of the fire service, completing safety checks and advising people about where best to position fire alarms. The aim: to reduce death and property damage. And it is working. But we cannot become complacent. Our firefighters will not let us become complacent. They will continue to push a simple but very effective message: be prepared and take precautions to reduce the fire risk. But to do this, they need proper funding.

The QFRA must be adequately resourced. This Government is doing just that. The Emergency Services Minister, Merri Rose, has seen to that. The funding rescue package gives the QFRA financial security. It gives Queenslanders and Queensland's firefighters security. The \$25.5m in additional funding which will be generated by the levy increase will allow the QFRA to maintain its high quality service delivery. Just as importantly, it will enable the fire service to enhance its fire safety and education role.

Do members recall the heroism of seven-year-old Moranbah youngster James Mallon? James was named the first Queensland junior firefighter after he led his two little brothers, Macauley and Patrick, and three-year-old sister, Anna, from their burning home to safety. James' actions proved that the QFRA Fire Ed program works. It saves lives and it will continue to do so. The program targets 40,000 Year 1 youngsters a year. There are now kids such as James in cities and towns across the State, thanks to the Fire Ed campaign firefighters have taken into schools. They are keen to get the message across to young kids. It is a message they know the children will take into their adult lives.

There are a multitude of worthy and successful fire education and public safety programs taught by our fireies. Each year taxpayers foot the bill for deliberately lit fires at schools and other Government owned properties. According to statistics, many of these fires are lit by children and teenagers. Deliberately lit fires not only cost Queenslanders millions of dollars each year but also endanger lives—the lives of our children and our family members. Last year almost 1,000 fires in Queensland were set by juveniles. One hundred and fifty-five schools were partially or severely damaged by fires, including Macgregor, Jindalee, East Brisbane and Capalaba in the Brisbane south area. Most of these fires were set by children or teenagers. More than 100 children are charged with lighting bush and structural fires each year. One 14-year-old boy started nearly a thousand fires over a three-year period. It is a miracle that he was not hurt or that he did not hurt other people.

I am sure members would agree that these statistics are alarming, but of even greater concern is evidence that child fire setting can lead to adult arson. The QFRA has developed a program aimed at breaking the fire setting habit in young children with a fire fascination program. They are to be applauded for this initiative. The Fight Fire Fascination program, aimed at older primary schoolchildren, is part of the QFRA's proactive approach to public safety and awareness.

Around 30 firefighters have been specially trained to deliver the Fight Fire Fascination program to children right across the State. The Government allocated \$33,000 for their training. Firefighters have already worked with a number of children who have been identified as fire setters. They spend time counselling the children and their parents in the home. I am delighted to say that to date they have had a 97% success rate with the children they have counselled. They have worked with children as young as three and as old as 16. Those firefighters involved with the program believe it works because children have a natural respect for firefighters.

This year firefighters plan to expand the Fight Fire Fascination program by going into schools and talking to older primary school students. They will talk to them about good fires and bad fires, what happens when you light a fire and how fire should be used as a tool, not a toy.

Like all members of the House, I am greatly disturbed by the number of fatal car accidents involving young Queenslanders. Firefighters are no strangers to car accidents.

Mr Mickel: Exactly right.

Ms STRUTHERS: The member for Logan is right on the ball with these issues. He knows what goes on in his area and he knows that firefighters play an important role in Logan.

Firefighters are concerned by the number of road accident rescues. They are called to those that involve young, inexperienced drivers quite often. In the last financial year, fire crews responded to twice as many road accidents as they did five years ago. In total they responded to almost 4,000 rescues, a vast majority of which were road accidents.

This year the QFRA plans to show Year 12 students the horrors of road accidents and the devastating effect they can have on people's lives. The Road Awareness and Accident Prevention program, RAAP, has been trialled in the south-east corner of the State and is targeted at Year 12 students. The QFRA is to be applauded for this initiative, which has already been well received by teachers, parents and past accident victims who have been part of the program to date. The RAAP program is just one of several QFRA public safety initiatives geared towards teenagers and adults.

The package of goodies provided by firefighters does not stop there. Later this year the QFRA will launch another fire safety education program, this one targeted at senior citizens. The Retire Ed program will use retired firefighters as peer group educators because of their wealth of experience in dealing with domestic fires. The Retire Ed program will provide advice on safe evacuation plans for elderly people maintaining an independent lifestyle, as well as information on the correct installation of smoke alarms and potential fire hazards around the home.

Today the QFRA is about more than just putting out fires. Each year it takes a more proactive approach to public safety. This approach is paying dividends. Lives are being saved. This shows the effectiveness of public education programs run by our firefighters. The 27c a week increase in the urban fire levy will ensure that programs such as those I have outlined will be expanded. Twenty-seven cents a week extra is a small price to pay for peace of mind, a small price to pay to ensure the service is properly funded into the millennium, and a small price to pay to save Queensland lives. This disallowance motion cannot be accepted. Queenslanders' lives are at stake.
