



Speech by

Mr BRUCE LAMING

MEMBER FOR MOOLOOLAH

Hansard 22 August 2000

FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY AMENDMENT REGULATION [No. 1]

Mr LAMING (Mooloolah—LP) (2.34 p.m.): I rise to support the motion for disallowance moved by the member for Mirani, the shadow Minister for Emergency Services. I do so on the basis of the Government's lack of consultation, lack of notice, lack of consideration of a phasing-in process, complete absence of extra services out of the Kawana station and its reluctance to debate this issue promptly. This motion is not about residents in some parts of the Sunshine Coast being unwilling to pay their fair share of the cost of a service that they share equally with other areas.

Let us go to the supposed genesis of this massive hike in levies. We have been advised that it goes back to a 1997 Public Accounts Committee report. Recommendation 24 states—

"That the Minister direct the authority to review classes allocated to urban districts and implement mechanisms to ensure continued equity, within six months."

Let us examine these recommendations. The committee said to review; it did not say to equalise. It said that the aim was to ensure continued equity; it did not say uniformity. My dictionary defines equity as "fairness, principles of justice supplementing law", and who would have any argument with that? Fairness is all about what we get in our hand at our doorstep or in our community for what we pay. Residents of the Sunshine Coast have no problem, I believe, with true equity—that is, with fairness.

I want to refer particularly to the Kawana area. Let us look at the situation that has existed there for some time. Kawana is a rapidly growing area situated between Caloundra and Mooloolaba and is serviced by just one main road from the north to the south, the Nicklin Way. This road has been upgraded as the population has grown, and this growth rate has averaged in excess of 5% per annum over the past 10 years. Notwithstanding the recent upgrading, Nicklin Way is becoming very congested and at certain times in the morning and afternoon it is choked with traffic.

A recent headline from a story in the Sunshine Coast Daily, which has already been tabled, read "Let me out!". It outlined a situation of absolute gridlock for thousands of motorists following a couple of minor traffic accidents, although the situation was slightly exacerbated by the roadworks being undertaken at that time. I shudder to think of the situation if an emergency vehicle was trying to get through. As I said earlier, there is no alternative route. Had an emergency situation arisen at this time or other twice daily times of congestion, well may the headline have read "Let me through!". Honourable members would be well aware of the frustration of hearing an emergency vehicle behind them when jammed in a line of traffic. Such is the potential at Kawana twice a day. Although recent roadworks should improve the situation, traffic numbers and, therefore, congestion are building up all the time.

The situation was acknowledged in the eighties when Kawana was provided with its own ambulance and fire stations. The ambulance service commenced as a day shift. The fire station had a permanent officer and auxiliary service, which I will come back to. Even a police station was provided in the early nineties and, though only open during the day, a complement of full-time officers was provided. What has happened over recent years? The Kawana ambulance is now providing an excellent 24-hour service, an evening shift is being trialled at the Kawana Police Station, and I have made representations that this very necessary service be implemented permanently.

However, we have lost our permanent officer at the fire station. We have gone backwards. I realise that there may well be valid workplace health and safety reasons for that, but the answer to any problem should have been to increase the number of permanent officers, not to abolish the one

position we had. The ambulance service is going forward and the police situation will go forward as soon as the staffing allocation model is rectified. It is time to bring the fire service situation in Kawana in line with other emergency services.

I said I would come back to the auxiliary fire service at Kawana. Let me say quite clearly that I believe that they do a great job. I have spoken to a number of people in the community, including quite a few permanent fire officers who have nothing but praise for our auxiliaries on the coast. On behalf of the Kawana community, I acknowledge the work of Captain Steve Christie and his hardworking crew. Auxiliaries do a great job in Buderim. My call for permanent officers is no reflection on the work of the auxiliaries.

The former situation with classes of urban districts for fire levy purposes had Kawana listed in C class. Theoretically that would indicate that it was serviced by a station staffed by one plus five full-time officers. As outlined earlier, Kawana is in fact serviced primarily by our hardworking and efficient auxiliaries. Once again, in theory that could indicate a case for a D class levy. I do not, of course, advocate that as I am well aware of the very valuable backup value of the A class stations in Caloundra and Maroochydore. Both of those stations have been upgraded recently, although I believe the new Maroochydore station will not be open until September.

I also acknowledge the increase in staffing levels in those stations with permanent staff, which does not include Kawana. The question the Kawana community is asking is: how do these changes really benefit Kawana? To answer such a question, one needs information. This applies particularly to the local State member in whose electorate the major change is to occur. Does the Minister not think that such a change and such a financial call on a community deserves some courtesy such as advice to the local member and an appropriate public consultation process? I note the Minister's response to the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee that there had been extensive consultation with local members of Parliament. That is not so, at least in my case.

The only consultation that was initiated was to talk to the local council as to how to implement the proposed change. Did the Minister ask that I not be advised? I do, however, acknowledge the courtesies extended to me by senior officers after I found out about the increase and their willingness to provide further information. Although gathered, this information was not made available to me and I had to rely on placing questions on notice, the answers to which were not available to the Opposition until a month later. Even then, the questions were not fully answered, even though the information was available.

At the end of the day, this is supposed to be a democracy. We on this side of the House can only conduct this debate on behalf of our constituents with information that definitely should have been made available when requested. We now have the answer to those questions and they indicate to me that the fire levy revenues in the north coast region are budgeted to increase by 16%. What a tax grab! My estimates indicate that revenue will clearly outstrip expenditure. This clearly indicates an opportunity to enhance services to the whole region, including Kawana.

How do these changes affect Kawana? As far as I can ascertain, there should be an enhanced backup out of Caloundra and Maroochydore. That benefit is not dismissed; it is recognised and appreciated. However, one piece of information I requested referred to the response times into Kawana from Caloundra and Maroochydore, as well as Kawana. I refer to average times provided at the public meeting I called on 31 May. I took notes hurriedly at the meeting and believe them to be correct. The average response time from Maroochydore into Minyama, which is the northern most part of Kawana, is eight and a half minutes. The average time from Caloundra into Wurtulla, which is the southern most part of Kawana, is eight minutes. The average time from Caloundra into Warana, which is the central part of Kawana, is 10 minutes. The response times provided in the Minister's answers to questions on notice are not identical but are similar to these times.

It is interesting to note that the average time out of the Kawana station is 7.25 minutes, beating the Caloundra and Maroochydore stations. Being average times, thankfully many are shorter. Sadly, many must also be longer. This is of concern to me. Unfortunately I do not have the research source, but I have been advised that the critical response for maximum opportunity to save a life is seven minutes. Without taking away any credit from the efforts of our Caloundra and Maroochydore officers, who do extremely well considering the distance and traffic congestion on the Nicklin Way, it is obvious that Kawana relies heavily on our auxiliaries. In fact, they turn out to 120 to 150 calls per year and are nearly always on the spot first. There are two very good reasons for that: Steve Christie and his crew are enthusiastic and efficient and, perhaps even more importantly, they do not suffer the tyranny of distance and the frustration of traffic congestion. The bottom line is that Kawana may well enjoy an enhanced backup but will continue to be serviced mainly by our auxiliaries.

Indeed, if equity is the Minister's goal, then we should examine what we do not have and will not have at Kawana under the new regulation. We will not have a permanent crew such as Caloundra and Maroochydore ready to respond and arrive as quickly as they do into those areas. We will not have a permanent crew on hand locally to attend to fire inspections, training and public education. However,

we will be paying as if we do. If equity and fairness are what this is all about, let us have some comprehensive service. As to the increase itself, it is obvious that this Government does not have any idea of the impact of such increases, particularly in one hit and without prior warning, on pensioners, struggling small businesses and other low-income earners. At least give them something for it.

A letter has been tabled in the Parliament to Mirvac written on behalf of 87 affected small businesses in Kawana Shoppingworld. The answer is for the fire service to take a leaf out of the ambulance and police books and put in some permanent staff, even if it is initially only a day-shift crew. The best option would of course be a full crew of one and three, and that could be augmented by the auxiliaries and would also be able to attend to those other very important aspects of fire safety. I know that the cost will be brought up, but neither of these options could come close to the half a million dollars extra the Kawana community alone is being called upon to pay.

This proposed increase should not proceed without specific increases in services out of the auxiliary stations. Now that this arrogant Government has proceeded without consultation, without advance notice, without any phasing in, without providing specific extra services out of those stations and prior to this debate, I call on the Minister to immediately make available a permanent fire crew, particularly at Kawana.
