



Speech by

Shane Knuth

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

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STATE BUDGET 2004

Mr KNUTH (Charters Towers—NPA) (12.13 p.m.): I would like to speak to the Queensland budget 2004. I acknowledge, and I am delighted to see, a funding boost for people with disabilities. The Charters Towers electorate has one of the highest number of people with disabilities per capita, and this portfolio plays a significant part in my electorate. I believe people with disabilities as a part of our society need to be allowed to gain a valued place in our society and we all need to work to enhance the quality of life of those with disabilities.

I welcome the government's initiative to provide funding of \$220 million over four years and address some of the issues that I raised during my maiden speech, such as the imminent need for accommodation and respite care. We need to ensure the funds are managed so that the net benefit to disabled Queenslanders is maximised and not lost through layers of bureaucracy and regulation, that on-the-ground services are delivered. There are many families who are struggling to get access to occupational therapists, speech therapists, social workers, respite care and available respite facilities which are so desperately needed.

There is also an imminent need for training programs for people in dealing with all types of disabilities and services for those who need ongoing therapy. It is also important to ensure that our special education units are equipped and regularly upgraded and wheelchair access is provided. Many people in my electorate are forced to travel long distances to access services that are not available in their area. I hope this budget will provide these services, and I look forward to working with the minister and service groups to ensure that people with disabilities and their families' needs are being met.

Communities is my other portfolio. I was disappointed that this budget did not provide QGAP offices to be equipped with EFTPOS facilities. QGAP offers a vital service to rural and remote communities. QGAP is able to accept money on behalf of transport departments, Suncorp insurance departments and Natural Resource and Mines and Justice departments. Some 206,000 transactions occurred in QGAP offices last year alone. In one QGAP office in my electorate the total collected on behalf of the government had exceeded \$1.1 million in the first nine months of this year. Every QGAP office is disappointing customers because it cannot offer up-to-date payment methods.

There was \$35.9 million over three years to be provided for the Queensland Ambulance Service to employ 240 additional officers. I hope that two of these officers will be provided for Richmond and Georgetown. Richmond has been left without a dedicated ambulance officer. Hospital staff at Richmond have to drive and operate the town's ambulance because the government will not provide the people of the town and districts with a dedicated ambulance officer. Hospital staff are doing a wonderful job ensuring that residents have access to ambulance services. Unfortunately, hospital staff are virtually on call 24 hours a day, which puts a lot of pressure on staff and patients. Georgetown is another town in the same situation as Richmond Hospital. Staff travel hundreds of kilometres to assist accident victims. We all know how valuable ambulance services are to our rural communities, and I call on the government to provide ambulance officers in these towns.

I welcome the \$750,000 funding to the Charters Towers and Surrounding Districts Netball Association to upgrade six all-weather courts. This will provide their members and the wider community with a safe and appropriate netball area which can be utilised for sporting, social and education events. To date, this has not been possible as the oval that is currently in use for netball is barely grassed and in wetter months becomes a muddy mess. At present there are 322 members in the association, making up 34 netball teams of over 100 spectators each competition.

On the weekend of 15-16 May 2004 the Charters Towers Netball Association had 18 teams participate in a Townsville based carnival. Five of the 13 divisions were won by Charters Towers teams, and six Charters Towers players were awarded best and fairest of their division. This is a phenomenal feat by this sporting body and they need to be congratulated on their efforts. This proves that netball in Charters Towers is going from strength to strength, and the allocated funding to upgrade six all-weather courts will bring great benefits for the region.

I was disappointed that the budget did not provide greater incentive packages to encourage more nurses, doctors and dentists to work in rural, regional and remote areas. Often health workers sent out by agencies are not prepared for remote area conditions and only stay six to eight weeks. This is a continual high turnover of staff which puts pressure on our nursing and health care staff and patients. If we lose a dentist, it can take up to three to four months for a replacement and some people have no other choice than to travel 800-kilometre round trips just to get a tooth fixed.

The government has boasted that this year's 2004-05 Health budget will increase by \$500 million—10 per cent over last year's budget. There was no increase to the Patient Transport Subsidy Scheme that still pays 10c a kilometre, the same as it did a decade ago. Those who miss out are people who live in regional and rural Queensland who do not have access to specialist medical care as do their city cousins. Far too often they have no other choice but to use their own cars to access specialist medical care because they have limited public transport running on infrequent schedules.

Ten cents a kilometre is an insult when we consider the cost of running an average family car is at least 50c to 60c a kilometre. In the past 10 years car registration and insurance costs have soared, and fuel price and maintenance costs have increased substantially, yet the scheme is the same rate as it was a decade ago. The subsidy scheme should be at least increased so patients can receive a fair return for accessing the specialist treatment that is not provided by government.

The government boasts record capital works funding. The electorate of Charters Towers is rich in minerals and supports other industries such as grazing, farming, education and tourism. The electorate contributes more than its fair share to the Queensland economy. It deserves to receive a substantial dividend from the Queensland government.

Moranbah and the towns of the surrounding district produce more than \$6 billion gross revenue a year in coal. The residents of Moranbah, people who pay their fair share of tax, see all the wealth siphoned out of their town and receive only a few crumbs in return. The people of Moranbah see their town as rich in minerals and have a poor water supply. Water infrastructure is an important issue in Moranbah. Eungella Dam is now at 25 per cent capacity, and with the new mines kicking off it is important that the government recognise that this town desperately needs a dam. When the water runs out this government will have a lot to answer to. The government boasts of record capital works funding, yet it will not give back to an area that provides it with much revenue.

It was disappointing that little funding was made available to seal the Hughenden to Lynd road. The sealing of this route is long overdue, having been lobbied for some years. These rural communities have become the forgotten people of Queensland. All they are asking for is a few dollars to keep these communities alive. This link has a regional significance and is important as a north-south link from the Atherton Tableland and Cairns to Hughenden and centres south and west. Livestock, transport carriers, backpackers, tourists and locals use this road, but at times long sections of the road become impassable in the wet. The significance of Porcupine Gorge alone gives good reason that the government should consider this a priority.

These communities desperately need for this road to be sealed. Upgrading the road makes plain commonsense. It is the future inland highway from Cairns to Melbourne that can alleviate congestion on the coastal route, provide increased tourism, economic benefits to transport companies and breathe life into these rural communities.

The south-east corner is having infrastructure problems because of the large influx of people moving into the area each month. This problem could be solved if the government focused more on infrastructure development in these rural and regional areas. We need to encourage people to stay and move to the bush. That is why we need these dirt roads sealed. We need good infrastructure and other incentives to provide jobs and to keep people in the bush.

It is of great concern that stock inspectors are being replaced with third party providers to carry out tick inspections. Third party providers do not have the power to deter truck loads of cattle which are

bypassing the dip or are qualified to monitor and report animal diseases and stock movements. The prevention of the spread of cattle ticks into the clean areas of western Queensland is an extremely high priority. The township of Alpha, which dips an average of 25,000 head per year plus approximately 900 horses, will not have a stock inspector because of the funding shortfall. This is an insult when one considers that a multimillion-dollar industry is placed in jeopardy because the government, which boasts of a budget surplus, is too lousy to provide a stock inspector. I call on the government to address this issue as this is a serious issue.

I feel that it is my duty to bring these issues before this parliament. Often the needs of those who are in the bush are overlooked, and I hope that this government will address these issues before the next budget.