



Speech by

Shane Knuth

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

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APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL; APPROPRIATION BILL

Mr KNUTH (Charters Towers—NPA) (4.35 pm): I rise to speak to the Queensland budget 2005.

Mr Lucas: A former QR employee.

Mr KNUTH: That is true. I was a track worker and welder. No-one in this House would dispute the important work undertaken by Disability Services Queensland and the Department of Communities in providing early intervention and support for many individuals, families and communities. The opposition has been lobbying strongly for increased resources for these departments for some time to assist in meeting the current level of unmet need that exists in the community. For this reason, I am pleased to welcome the increase in the budget to improve the services provided by these departments.

The Charters Towers electorate has one of the highest per capita rates of people with disabilities. This portfolio plays a significant part in my electorate. I believe that people with disabilities as a part of our society need to be allowed to gain a valued place in our society. We should all work to enhance the quality of life of those with disabilities. I welcome the extra funding for disability services. It is up \$68 million from last year. The total operating budget is \$520 million. This funding boost will help provide new and improved services to the needy. However, we need to ensure that the funds are managed so that the net benefit to disabled Queenslanders is maximised and not lost through layers of bureaucratic regulation and that on-the-ground services are delivered.

There are many families who are still struggling to get access to occupational therapists, speech therapists, social workers, respite care and respite facilities, which are all 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 that wheelchair access is provided. Even though much more needs to be done in the disability sector, I believe that, in the last two years, we have come a long way. I will take the time out to congratulate the Minister for Communities and Disability Services, Warren Pitt, for his passion and dedication to work to improve the quality of life of people with disabilities.

I also welcome funding of \$737,000 for the Charters Towers Health Service District to provide new equipment and help manage the demand for services in the district. The new equipment will include an anaesthesia ventilator and trolley, defibrillators, an infant incubator, infant resuscitation trolleys and a pulse oximeter. The funding is all well and good—and I welcome and appreciate it—but it is only crumbs in comparison with what the region is looking for. The Charters Towers electorate produces over \$6 billion a year in gross revenue in mining and agriculture. The present Health budget is \$5.354 billion. It is disappointing that this government boasts of its generosity in providing \$737,000 in funding to the Charters Towers Health Service District.

People in these regions want to be able to access services in the towns where they live. They are looking for general surgeons, obstetricians, anaesthetists, occupational therapists and other specialist practitioners. They want to have babies in their home towns. This is the bigger picture and it is what the people are looking for but are not seeing.

It was disappointing that there was no increase in the Patients Transport Subsidy Scheme. This is an ongoing issue. It has been raised numerous times through petitions and by other members of parliament. The subsidy is still only 10c per kilometre, which is the same as it was 15 years ago. As fuel prices keep rising and we continually see more and more health services removed, patients are travelling further and further and more frequently to access health services that were once provided in their home towns.

It is also costing patients, especially the elderly, an arm and a leg to travel these distances. For all of the red tape that they go through to get access to the subsidies, they are only a pittance. I notice that \$4.03 million is allocated for 70 additional paramedics across Queensland who will be employed in 2005-06. Ambulance workers save countless lives and provide a wonderful and essential emergency service. However, Charters Towers ambulance services have been hit hard by the roster reforms that are not working as these workers are constantly fatigued from continually being recalled to duty. I hope that the additional paramedics will be granted to Charters Towers to cater for the staff shortages.

I welcome road funding of \$3.4 million provided to upgrade the Gregory Development Road from Cape River to Greenvale. This has been an ongoing issue as this road has caused a lot of accidents and has been referred to as a deathtrap and a billygoat track. The extra funding will no doubt benefit the region. However, this road should have been completed years ago. I also welcome funding of \$6.5 million to upgrade the Flinders Highway between Hughenden and Townsville. These are good dollars well spent, and sealing and upgrading these inland highways will help breathe life into these rural communities.

It is disappointing that little funding was made available to seal the Hughenden to Lynd road, or the Kennedy Development Road as it is called. The Kennedy Development Road is the road that the media are calling the worst road in Australia. Within a two-week period we have seen nine accidents on this road and untold numbers of near misses. How many people must be injured or how many fatalities must there be before action is taken? We keep hearing this myth that because a limited number of people use this road it does not justify an upgrade. This is a myth. If the government had the foresight or vision to seal the Kennedy Development Road it would open up the west for transport to southern markets, increase tourism and increase the safety of the residents in this region. Hundreds of thousands of cattle were to be trucked out of this area last year and the road condition is deteriorating.

This road is of regional significance. It is the future inland highway from Cairns to Melbourne and a north-south link from the Atherton Tablelands to Hughenden and centres south and west. It will alleviate traffic congestion on the coastal routes, provide increased tourism, provide economic benefits for transport companies and open up southern markets. It will breathe life into these communities and help alleviate the infrastructure problems of the south-east corner because of the large influx of people moving into the area each month.

The significance of Porcupine Gorge alone is good enough reason for the government to consider this a priority. The Cairns and Hughenden chambers of commerce, the Richmond and Flinders shires and the general public are behind this project and are calling on the government to seal this road.

I have spoken about this next issue many times, and it is disappointing that it was not catered for in this budget. In fact, it is of deep regret. I refer to the desperate need in Moranbah for solid and reliable water infrastructure. The Moranbah region produces \$6 billion in gross revenue annually and contributes \$800 million a year to the state coffers in royalties. Employees pay their fair share of tax, yet year after year residents have been hit hard with the lack of water. The situation now can only be described as a crisis.

Moranbah relies on the BMA Billiton-Mitsubishi alliance to supply water to the town. For years 10 to 11 megalitres has been provided to the town each day. However, due to the expansion of industries and the lack of water infrastructure that has never been provided by this government, BMA acquires water from Eungella Dam for mining purposes and provides the town with water from the McKenzie River. This source has a limited capacity and the town has had to restrict its water use to five megalitres per day, and now there is talk of a reduction to four megalitres per day. We have a situation where there is a boom in the mining industry—a massive expansion—and less water to go around. Residents constantly face water restrictions, and they are sick of it. There is currently a total ban on all sprinklers and soaker hoses. Residents can only water their plants using a hand-held hose between 5 am and 9 am and 5 pm and 9 pm. Outside these hours, hoses must be disconnected from taps. Penalties are imposed for people who fail to abide by these restrictions.

SunWater has identified a number of dam sites, including the Isaac River, and the estimated cost of the dam is \$50 million. It is an insignificant amount of money when one takes into account the money gained by the state government in terms of royalty payments and freight profits. There is a concern that the mines will cease to operate because of the water crisis. The government must come out and tell the Moranbah people what its exact plans are for the town, now and in the future, so that the water crisis can be alleviated. No longer can the government rely on intermittent rainfall or expect the mines to outlay multimillion-dollar pipeline projects when it is this government's responsibility to provide water infrastructure.

The south-east corner is having infrastructure problems because of the large influx of people moving to the area each month. This problem could be solved and alleviated if the government focused more on infrastructure development in these rural and regional communities. We need to encourage people to stay and move to the bush. That is why we need these state dirt roads sealed and we need water infrastructure and other incentives to provide jobs and keep people in the bush. I feel that it is my duty to bring these issues before the parliament. Often the needs of those in the bush are overlooked, and I hope that this government will address these issues before the next budget.