



Speech by

**Shane Knuth**

**MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS**

Hansard Friday, 9 June 2006

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## **APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL; APPROPRIATION BILL**

**Mr KNUTH** (Charters Towers—NPA) (10.48 am): In speaking to the Queensland budget 2006-07, I welcome the extra funding for disability services, with a total operating budget of \$633 million. This funding boost, I hope, will help provide new and improved services such as access to speech therapists and social workers, and I will continue to lobby for a 24-hour respite care service in Charters Towers. However, it is imperative that funds allocated for capital works and disability budgets are actually spent. The government budgeted to spend \$40 million last financial year but spent only \$6.8 million. This means that the most vulnerable in our society are missing out on necessary funding. We need to ensure that the funds are managed so that the net benefits to disabled Queenslanders are maximised and not lost through layers of bureaucracy 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 and respite services. Respite facilities are desperately needed in regional and rural Queensland.

It is also important to ensure that our special education units are equipped and regularly upgraded and wheelchair access is provided. I welcome the \$6.65 billion to be injected into Queensland Health in the long term and the overdue pay increases for doctors and nurses. While encouraged by the increase I am still disappointed that greater incentive packages were not provided to encourage health workers to work and live in rural and regional areas. There is a long way to go to fix the health crisis and to see maternity services and medical surgery returned to the bush. It is paramount that incentives are provided.

What the people in these regions want is to be able to access services in the towns they live in. They are looking for general surgeons, obstetricians, anaesthetists, occupational therapists and other specialised practitioners. They want to have their babies in their home towns. This is the bigger picture. This is what people are looking for but they are not seeing it. The maternity wards at Moranbah, Claremont, Alpha, Aramac, Richmond and Hughenden have been closed down. There are no maternity services there. It is absolutely ridiculous to expect pregnant mums to travel 800, 900 or 1,000 kilometres to give birth to their babies and stay in motels for up to three weeks.

Mums were able to have their babies in their home towns 10 or 15 years ago. This is the year 2006 and they cannot. I ask the minister to open the maternity wards in the rural towns that I have just mentioned. This is a very important issue. The Patient Travel Subsidy Scheme is also important. We cannot afford to have pregnant mums who are 400 or 500 kilometres away from the nearest hospital spending three weeks in a motel before they give birth. It is a very dangerous scenario. I hope this issue will be addressed.

It was disappointing that there was no increase in the Patient Travel Subsidy Scheme. This is an ongoing issue and has been raised numerous times through petitions and by other members of parliament. The subsidy is still a lousy 10c per kilometre which is the same as it was 15 years ago. As fuel prices keep rising and more and more health services are removed from rural areas, patients are travelling further and further and more frequently to access health services that were once provided in their home towns. It is costing patients, especially the elderly, an arm and a leg to travel these distances. Given all the red tape they have to go through to access this subsidy it is only a pittance.

Some \$6 billion has been injected into the health system and yet we cannot increase the patient travel subsidy. It is the same as it was 10 years ago. This is a joke. The government should put its money where its mouth is. It should put money upfront and show rural and regional Queensland that it actually gives a damn about them. It has taken away their services, it has closed down their hospital, medical and maternity services and now people are travelling thousands of kilometres. The government is only prepared to pay them a pittance. With this \$6 billion injection it is a great opportunity to be able to increase this patient travel subsidy.

I welcome the funding of \$400,000 to upgrade the bathrooms at Eventide. It is good news for our aged-care facility. I reiterate that I will continue to push to upgrade the Eventide Pandanus unit to a high-care dementia unit. This is a very important issue. This is a wonderful facility for Charters Towers and the surrounding district. We are unsure whether the aged-care facility will be privatised or off-loaded. I vehemently oppose any plans to off-load that facility.

This aged-care facility is very important to the residents of Charters Towers and surrounding districts. We have an ageing population. It has come to the point where we have quite a large number of dementia patients who have been on waiting lists for up to two years for dementia specific units in Townsville and also the Tablelands. This is putting a lot of pressure on their families. We have a wonderful aged-care facility that was built in 1929.

The Pandanus Unit was once going to be upgraded to a dementia specific unit. Rather than upgrade it the government closed that unit down and moved the 20 beds to Townsville. This is absolutely ridiculous. We have a facility there. Our elderly people are on waiting lists for two years and are putting much strain on their family members. When they do get the opportunity to get into places in Townsville or the Tablelands they are separated from loved ones. We have a facility available.

I call on the minister to be understanding. He is big-noting himself about what a great job his wonderful government is doing for health services. We want to see him put his money where his mouth is and provide dementia care in the facility that is available in Charters Towers.

I notice that there was funding for an additional 350 police officers across the state. I call on the minister for police to ensure that the mining town of Tieri receives the services of a police officer. I have raised this issue a number of times. It is not good enough for police to patrol once or twice a week. The township of Tieri is looking at a mining boom. We had a police officer. He is now on leave and is about to retire. They have not replaced him.

We have police officers patrolling the area once or twice a week. This is no longer a low-priority area. They say that this is a low-priority area and there is no need to have a permanent police officer there on a daily basis. This is absolute nonsense. These mining towns are booming. We have lots of contractor camps and many contractors from other towns throughout Australia living in these contractor camps. They are not necessarily a part of the community. They work in the mines. Children are crossing the road to go to school. There are concerns about the safety of those children. It is very important that a police officer is provided for the township of Tieri. I have raised this time and time again. We want a police officer in the town of Tieri.

Some \$35 million was allocated for 144 additional paramedics across Queensland over a four-year period. Ambulance officers save countless lives and provide a wonderful essential emergency service. However, the Charters Towers ambulance service has been hit hard by roster reforms and the closure of our night time service which did not have the support of the community. I hope that additional paramedics will be provided—and I hope the minister is listening to this—to Charters Towers so we get our night time service back.

Last year, on behalf of the residents of Charters Towers, I tabled a petition comprising over 3,000 signatures calling for the government to take action to rid the city of Charters Towers of virus-carrying smelly flying foxes. We are not asking for much. We are just asking that the government consider the quality of life of residents—who include nursing mums, the sick, the frail, the elderly—before this smelly pest. There are still thousands of flying foxes living and screeching amongst residential homes. Once again I state that the people should not have to continually put up with this filth.

In the Treasurer's budget speech she stated that the government has released a 10-year Blueprint for the Bush to build sustainability, livability and the prosperity of all rural Queenslanders. The blueprint commits more than \$150 million over the next four years to a range of initiatives that will assist rural communities. If the Treasurer is genuine about livability, the Treasurer should urgently recognise the rights of Charters Towers residents to have a livable community. The Treasurer should allocate funding under the Blueprint for the Bush plan to secure the services of two National Parks and Wildlife Service officers to either be employed by the EPA or likewise the state government provide the funding for the local council to employ two rangers on a permanent basis to be responsible to move the bats all day every day until the bats are completely driven away.

This is about having staff available to continually disturb the flying foxes until the flying foxes get the message that Charters Towers is not a welcoming place. It is not right for residents to live with noisy, smelly, virus-carrying, stinking flying foxes. Once the bats are removed, employees can freely—

**Government members** interjected.

**Mr Messenger:** Would you want your children living in that condition? Would you have your child living with those viruses?

**Government members** interjected.

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Mr Lee): Order! Honourable members, the member on his feet has a couple of minutes to go. Let us let him finish.

**Mr KNUTH:** I challenge anyone to live every day with thousands of screechy, smelly, virus-carrying flying foxes above their homes and the ticks and creepy crawlies on the floor that they bring and then call on the government for help, only to have it say, 'If you don't like it you can find a house and move elsewhere.'

**Ms Male** interjected.

**Mr KNUTH:** It is true. This is the position: to move the bats there has to be a vet on site to assist the wounded flying foxes when they are being moved. How ridiculous is that! How stupid is that! Have members ever heard such nonsense as having a vet on site, and the process has to stop at 9 o'clock in the morning because the bats will stress out. This is the problem.

Once the bats are removed, employees can freely be seconded to work for the parks and wildlife department or the local city council whilst still being available on call to manage the flying foxes as they attempt to return to the city centre. This is very simple and is not much to ask for. The small amount of funding will provide relief to residents, who have put up with this scourge for six years. This is about putting the quality of life of residents before vermin. This method is not too drastic and it should not upset the conservation movement that the state government is so frightened of. This funding is only crumbs compared to the \$60 million that the government will spend on yet another footbridge. I ask the Treasurer, Premier and minister for environment to show understanding to the local Charters Towers residents and take the initiative to provide this funding so that residents can enjoy the quality of life Charters Towers has to offer. Residents cannot wait another two years for a bat habitat, and there is no guarantee that the bats will locate to that position. This is about doing something now.

I welcome road funding of \$5.5 million that was provided to upgrade the Gregory Development Road from Cape River to Greenvale. This has been an ongoing issue, and this road has caused a lot of accidents and has been referred to as a deathtrap and a billygoat track. The extra funding will not benefit the region. However, this road should have been completed years ago. I also welcome the massive funding injection of \$11 million to upgrade the Flinders Highway between Hughenden and Charters Towers, up \$4.5 million from last year. This is good money well spent, and sealing and upgrading these inland highways will help breathe life into these rural communities. I also welcome road funding of \$13.5 million that has been allocated to improve sections of the Peak Downs Highway. This road has caused a lot of accidents. It has been a catastrophe. While more funding should have been delivered, the extra funding will no doubt benefit the mining companies.

It is disappointing that little funding was made available to seal the Hughenden to Lynd road or the Kennedy Development Road, which the media has called the worst road in Australia. We keep hearing this myth that because a limited number of people use this road it does not justify 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, increasing tourism and the safety of residents in this region. Hundreds of thousands of cattle were trucked out of this area last year, and the road condition is deteriorating. The road is of regional significance. It is a future inland highway from Cairns to Melbourne and the north link from the Atherton Tablelands to Hughenden and centres south and west. It will alleviate traffic congestion from the coast, provide increased tourism, provide economic benefits for transport companies, open up southern markets, breathe life into the communities and help alleviate the infrastructure problems the south-east corner faces from the large influx of people moving into the area each month. The significance of Porcupine Gorge alone is good reason for the government to consider this a priority. The Cairns and Hughenden chambers of commerce, the Richmond-Flinders shire and the general public are behind this project and call on the government to seal this road.

An issue that I have spoken about many times before relates to the desperate need for a solid, reliable water supply for the township of Moranbah. In light of the announced funding of \$129 million to complete the Burdekin to Moranbah pipeline, which I support, I ask the minister: when the pipeline is completed, will the minister guarantee to the residents of Moranbah a constant, reliable water supply without the community having to beg the mining companies for its fair share of water allocation? As members would be aware, this project is not fully funded by the state government. This funding has mostly been contributed by the mining companies, yet the state government is giving people the perception that it

is building the pipeline—and no doubt this is a desperate measure. This is an issue that I have raised time and time again in parliament. That is, the mining industry has the potential of closing down if the water issues are not resolved.

The state government has a moral responsibility to ensure that residents are provided with a reliable water supply. Residents are sick of being on water restrictions, and this has been going on since way before the water crisis in the south-east corner. When we take into account the cost of \$260 million to complete the Burdekin Dam compared to the \$300 million to build this pipeline, three dams could be built at this price. SunWater has identified a number of dam sites, including the Isaac River, and the estimated cost of the dam is \$50 million. The Urannah Dam site is another site that has been identified.

I have said many times over that 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 rural and regional communities. We need to encourage people to stay and move to the bush. That is why we need these dirt roads sealed, water infrastructure and other incentives to provide jobs and keep people in the bush.