



Speech by

Evan Moorhead

MEMBER FOR WATERFORD

Hansard Thursday, 9 August 2007

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IMPLEMENTATION BILL

Mr MOORHEAD (Waterford—ALP) (7.50 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Local Government Reform Implementation Bill 2007. Today is exactly one year since I became the Labor candidate for the Waterford electorate. In that time I have faced a number of difficult decisions. This legislation is one of the difficult ones, but I did not get elected to this place to shy away from the tough decisions. This is one issue that, no matter what the state government did, it was never going to be popular. If the state government were to sit back and let local government continue to struggle under the pressure of growth in Queensland we would soon be criticised for doing nothing when we should have foreseen what would happen. The other option—the right option and that option contained in tonight's bill—is to act now to build a strong local government system that can deal with the challenges of growth, that can plan for affordable and sustainable development. Doing nothing is not an option.

Local government is a fundamental part of government in Australia. This level of government is charged with some of the most important decisions for our communities, not least of which is its task to plan and control development of communities. Local governments are responsible for the amenity of our suburbs—whether our homes are a nice place to live. The amenity of our home affects so many other aspects of our life: our wellbeing, our family, our environment and our community support. Strong local governments are essential to ensure that we can plan for the challenges of growth.

In common with the state government, local government is fighting to cope with a thousand or more southerners moving to south-east Queensland each week. Even local government admits that there is a problem. Planning applications have been delayed due to a lack of town-planners. Some developers have more town-planners and more lawyers than the councils they are applying to. Local governments are finding it hard to cope. Even the Local Government Association of Queensland recognises the challenge facing local government.

The LGAQ came to the state government to establish the Size, Shape and Sustainability program. This program, funded by the state government, would see local governments examine and negotiate options for restructure, whether through shared service delivery or through changes to local government or changes to local government boundaries. This program was allocated more than \$25 million and was proudly supported by the state government. But after 18 months, the reality is that the Size, Shape and Sustainability program had not progressed and was not likely to.

The two local governments in my electorate, Logan City Council and Gold Coast City Council, had not even agreed to start negotiations. I understand that the Gold Coast City Council had said it would only participate in negotiations if other councils would agree that no changes to borders would be considered. There were only two agreed amalgamations between two small rural councils after 18 months of talking and more than \$1 million being spent. The cold hard truth is that no local government politician was prepared to make the difficult political decision to share services, to amalgamate or to make common-sense changes to borders. Local government reform requires the agreement of those people who are taking the risk of their own job—local councillors. I must put on record my support for the local government councillors in my area. They are honest and hardworking people who do the best for their constituencies.

While the changes from the Size, Shape and Sustainability program would, if agreed, go to a referendum, voters were never going to get an opportunity to have a say because local governments would not agree to any proposals that affected their current circumstances. Given this stalemate to this important reform process, the state government had no option but to act as it did in April this year. The flaw in the Size, Shape and Sustainability program was that it relied on those who had an interest in maintaining the status quo to agree to any change.

The Local Government Reform Commission, established in April this year, put in place an independent group of eminent Queenslanders to resolve the matter. An independent body reviewing boundaries is nothing new. The state and federal government election boundaries are determined by an independent electoral commission. The independence of the Local Government Reform Commission is beyond question. The commission was chaired by Bob Longland, a former Electoral Commissioner, and included Di McCauley, a former National Party local government minister who served under the Bjelke-Petersen government; former LGAQ president Tom Pyne; former local government minister Terry Mackenroth; and Bob Quinn, a former leader of the Queensland Liberal Party and a member of the Parliamentary Committee for Electoral and Administrative Review which examined the external boundaries of local authorities in 1992.

Because the independent commission was to make such an important decision, I wrote to all residents in the Gold Coast area of my electorate outlining the process, the need for reform and the way in which they could make submissions. A number of residents took the opportunity to make a submission and some contacted me for assistance in making their submission.

My position on the issue of local government reform is clear and has been on the record since April when the first round of legislation was passed. I wrote to constituents explaining the process and why it was needed. I made it clear that I supported the independent review process. I also made it clear that I would be making a submission to the Local Government Reform Commission that the Logan River had served our area well as a border between Logan City and Gold Coast city and it should remain.

As I promised the people of Beenleigh and surrounds, I made that submission. I expressed clearly my view that the current borders had served us well since the 1995 amalgamation of the Albert shire into the Gold Coast city. While we have not always received a fair deal from the Gold Coast City Council over the past 10 years, Councillor Hackwood has been successful in improving our share of funding from the Gold Coast City Council. A lot of hard work has been put into improving the situation.

Beenleigh and surrounds make a unique community. Historically part of the Albert shire, Beenleigh is a large country town with a strong sense of community and a strong sense of history. Halfway between Brisbane and the Gold Coast, we have never fitted neatly into the Gold Coast box, but nor have we ever fitted neatly into the greater Brisbane area box.

The process is obviously one independent of politics. When the decision of the Local Government Reform Commission was released I was surprised to say the least. These decisions have been made without fear or favour and free from any vested interest. When the umpire has made a decision the process cannot be undermined because we do not agree with the decision.

The commission faced competing submissions: a submission from Gold Coast City Council arguing for the status quo and a submission from Logan City Council for its boundaries to be extended to that part of the Gold Coast north of the Pimpama River. The commission has based its decision on its view that the Beenleigh/Eagleby area had a greater community of interest with the greater Brisbane metropolitan area, particularly when it came to employment. Essentially, the commission noted that more and more people from Beenleigh and surrounds are working in Brisbane, Brisbane south and Logan than ever before. There were also similar observations in the 1994 Hoffman report that led to the Albert shire amalgamation with the Gold Coast city. The decision to include Beenleigh and surrounds within the new Logan City Council is one that will divide community opinion. Some residents oppose the change, some support the change but many just want to know that they will get quality services for reasonable rates after March 2008. I have been contacting personally those people who have contacted my office to discuss this matter. The key concern raised is about the protection of the identity of Beenleigh and surrounds as a distinct, historic and close-knit community.

I truly appreciate that this change has created significant uncertainty in this regard. A divided council will go some way to ensure distinct representation for Beenleigh and surrounds. In fact, our area will go from one councillor out of 14 to two councillors out of 12. I assure those people who are concerned about the distinct identity that if they live in Beenleigh today they will live in Beenleigh tomorrow. We will continue to grow and prosper. We are a close community and the fact that the local government authority is different will not change our beautiful and unique community.

We have survived the Albert and Gold Coast amalgamation to come out stronger and this amalgamation will be no different. There was great concern about the 1995 amalgamation with the Gold Coast city but those changes have only led to better services and better value for rates.

The new Logan City Council will be a diverse community stretching from rural Mundoolun to residential Woodridge, from Loganholme and Daisy Hill in the east to Heritage Park and Regency Park in the west. Within this broad diversity our status as a distinct community will be respected.

This change raises many issues for the transition of ongoing projects and services currently underway. I have already spoken to many local groups about the transition issues they face. These are all matters which will be considered by the transitional committee and interim CEO that will be established shortly after this legislation passes. As I have committed to those groups, I will be raising these matters with the transitional committee to ensure that the new local government can get off and running in March 2008 and that no time is lost in the meantime.

Can I finish my contribution on this. The Gold Coast City Council must deliver on the commitments to Beenleigh in its 2007-08 budget. The ratepayers of Beenleigh and surrounds have paid their rates in good faith and the Gold Coast City Council has an obligation to deliver quality services up until March 2008. This obligation is not only a moral obligation but also a legal one.

Subsection 229(1)(a) and subsection 229(2)(a) of the Local Government Act 1993 make it clear that councillors have an obligation to act for the entirety of the council. I will be keeping a keen eye on the ongoing expenditure of the Gold Coast City Council to ensure that Beenleigh gets a fair go. I thank the minister for local government and the Premier for their support of the member for Albert, Margaret Keech, and I in making it clear what is required of the Gold Coast City Council in the coming months. I commend the bill to the House.