



Speech by

Andrew Powell

MEMBER FOR GLASS HOUSE

Hansard Tuesday, 15 September 2009

SUSTAINABLE PLANNING BILL

Mr POWELL (Glass House—LNP) (4.51 pm): At the outset I want to add my support to the comments made by the member for Callide. I, too, have an electorate that has some 12 small regional and rural communities all of a similar size. I basically support everything the member has said. I rise today to contribute to the debate on the Sustainable Planning Bill. I note from the outset that the opposition will be supporting this bill but with amendments. Clearly a bill of this size and complexity has a significant number of aspects that could be considered. But I want to begin by exploring the name change, a very obvious but relatively inconsequential amendment to the Integrated Planning Act.

'Sustainable' and 'sustainability' are words used frequently these days and some would say so frequently that they have lost their original meaning. What is that meaning? The Oxford dictionary online says that industry, development or agriculture is sustainable when it avoids the depletion of natural resources. The generally adhered to definition—particularly when it comes to planning and development—considers the need to balance environmental, economic and social factors of our society.

Others are not so concise in their definition. Another reference to sustainability suggests that it is regarded as both an important but unfocused concept, a bit like 'liberty' or 'justice', and a 'feel-good buzzword with little meaning or substance'. Sceptics already abound when it comes to sustainability, and rightly so. I came across one blog that had the following to say, 'The word sustainable has become so pervasive that its usage is often just plain silly.' The author goes on to note the following real-life examples: 'sustainable toothpaste', 'sustainable tourism', 'sustainable economics', 'sustainable music', even 'sustainable sports cars'. I agree with the author as he continues—

There's no doubt that doing things in a truly sustainable way is a noble goal. Accomplishing a worthy goal in a way that's infinitely repeatable is best, and that's what sustainable really means ... It's still a good goal, and as such, sustainability deserves not to be diluted into a meaningless buzzword. Thus, true environmentalists should be the first ones to object to the misleading pop-culture usages of the word that we see every two minutes.

The blogger concludes—

When you hear [the word sustainable] be sceptical. Figure out what they're really trying to say, and what their motivation is. And for [goodness] sake, don't buy any bone-powder toothpaste just because it says 'sustainable' on the package.

So, despite being an advocate for true sustainability—the sustainability I was taught through my science degree—I, as the blogger warns, am sceptical when I hear it used. I am hopeful that this name change—from the Integrated Planning Act to the Sustainable Planning Bill—is more than an opportunistic attempt to cash in on the latest buzzword, particularly given that the core principles of 'ecological sustainability', as defined in both the current act and the bill before the House, have not changed at all. I hope there is more substance to the name change than just acknowledging the increased use of terms such as 'environment' and 'sustainable'—used some 82 times in the current act but some 1,253 times in this bill.

I am hopeful because, if the sustainable planning enshrined in this bill is, as it should be, largely about getting the balance right between environmental, economic and social drivers, then Glass House would be a real test case. At present Glass House clearly balances protected green space, viable agricultural land, economic productivity and community living. If anything, the environment and agriculture

are on the positive side of the ledger by a long, long way. But, as the government has taken a regional approach, as it should, to planning and development, this positive imbalance in Glass House goes a long way to achieving ecological sustainability across the entirety of South-East Queensland. But the trick is to maintain this balancing act, and that is where the enactment of this legislation hopefully comes into play.

I note that, as the minister announced in his second reading speech, the proposed bill will be supported by an associated package of regulatory and statutory guidelines that will provide further guidance about the implementation of the legislative changes and enable more flexibility into the planning system. Also, the proposed legislative framework supports the long-term benefits of effective state and regional planning to guide localised planning with clear linkages across all plans and policies, and it ensures an array of quick switches to move appropriate development applications through the system more efficiently and effectively. I am also very cognisant that the day-to-day operational implementation of this bill will fall largely to our regional and local councils—councils such as the Moreton Bay and Sunshine Coast regional councils.

Considering all of this, I would like to address a number of issues that, firstly, will enhance the 'ecological sustainability' of Glass House and Queensland more widely—issues that cut to the chase when it comes to protecting the environment and protecting prime agricultural green space; secondly, will assist local councils in developing their own plans and schemes; and, thirdly, will hopefully deliver better outcomes for all in the hinterland of the Sunshine Coast. Whether it sits under the sustainable planning regulations or legislation overseen by this department or by DERM, the government, if it is serious about sustainability, needs to reconsider its system of voluntary conservation agreements. In this state there are really only two options. The first is Land for Wildlife.

Land for Wildlife supports the maintenance and enhancement of native flora and fauna on private land through cooperative agreements and advisory services. It also aims to encourage landholders to integrate nature conservation with other land management activities. But members are not supported financially. Instead, they are supported through workshops, quarterly newsletters, property visits and assessments, phone support and incentives such as free plants and access to propagation facilities. Yet, for very little in return, landholders spend one to two weeks a year on habitat management on their Land for Wildlife properties. Land for Wildlife landholders are contributing some \$6.7 million worth of time on habitat management and spend approximately \$3.5 million per year to achieve nature conservation outcomes.

The other arrangement is a formal conservation agreement with DERM. Landholders in this instance get some financial assistance in the form of pro rata reimbursement of transfer duty and/or land tax. Both options fall well short of the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water in New South Wales, particularly under its Conservation Partners Program. If a landholder enters into a formal and legal conservation agreement in New South Wales, they receive property visits, management advice, rate exemption, money for on-ground work, signage, technical notes and newsletters, field days and local networking. A number of my constituents who have land in both jurisdictions cannot believe that we here in Queensland do not offer similar compensation and assistance for undertaking such voluntary arrangements. These individuals and families take pride in the role they are playing to protect and conserve nature corridors in our state, complementing the work of the state itself, and yet they get so little in return. That is hardly sustainable.

Similarly, if the government is serious about sustainable planning, it will give more proactive support when it comes to alternative agricultural practices. From the outset, though, let me be clear: I am not calling for a relaxation in our biosecurity or food safety legislation. I am instead calling for flexibility in improving acceptable alternative agricultural practices, and I would like to give just one example. Joe and Karen Herron live in Conondale, on a beautiful property at the confluence of the Mary River and Elaman Creek—yes, the same Mary River this government is fixated with damming; a finer example of unsustainable planning you will struggle to find. Joe is a former dairy farmer and he is pretty innovative. Already he has experimented with Redclaw. Now he wants to consider free-range chickens and eggs. Fantastic, you might say. Well, you might until you realise that current regulation requires Joe to pay an \$18,000 fee just to have his application considered by council—considered, not approved; considered. Why? Because owning more than 20 chickens is considered an intensive farming practice. What farmer in his right mind would outlay that kind of money with no guarantee of approval?

Why are we making it so difficult for our farmers? We lock up their land in regional landscape, which is not a bad thing given our need to feed ourselves and to do so from as local a base as possible, but then we lock up their ability to innovate and move with changing farm practices. Joe does not want to start up a battery shed operation with tens of thousands of chickens. He wants to run a couple of hundred free-range chickens offering the eggs and poultry products to the local market in and around the Blackall Range. Why, when we are talking about sustainable planning, are we making it so difficult to truly be sustainable?

On the same note, a number of constituents have discussed with me the difficulties they are facing in keeping their family farm viable. Our current farmers are ageing. Their assets are tied up in the property, and they have been advised that because of their assets they cannot receive the pension. They are also unable or unwilling to sell the family farm in which they have invested so much time and energy. Not that long ago a farming family could subdivide a small acreage block to allow the next generation to move onto the property to assist in running the farm and to provide support to their ageing parents. Yes, the rule was abused, but we threw the baby out with the bathwater in this case.

I would like to read from a submission to the SEQ regional planning process made by the Martin family of Beerwah—

I would appreciate it if you would read the following to give you some background information on what we believe to be a perfectly reasonable submission.

Approval has already been given by Caloundra City Council (now Sunshine Coast Regional Council) for a second dwelling to be built on our farm of approx 13 hectares. Council whilst being sympathetic cannot give subdivision approval as the S.E.Q Regional plan restricts them from doing so.

We are self funded retirees aged 75 & 69. There are still some fruit trees on the farm to be kept tidy, rider mowing and some chainsawing of tree limbs, heavy work of that nature which is beyond us.

Our daughter and her husband who are both in good jobs have been advised by the bank they would get approval for a house loan but need title to do so.

The submission to cut off this one block is to give to our daughter and husband, for nil payment, land on which to build. They would then be closer to help us with the heavy chores as we get older.

The block in question is between our farmhouse and neighbours house with street frontage. From that house, up Bell Rd to the intersection with Steve Irwin Way, is all housing blocks on both sides of Bell Rd all with houses already built. This proposed dwelling would be in keeping with the street plan.

...

I understand the intent of the S.E.Q Regional Plan is to stop indiscriminate development of producing land. As our farming life has wound down to mainly maintenance, we feel our plan of a one off house block for family is being unfairly denied by the S.E.Q regional plan.

...

Our feeling is that we are little people caught up in a law to protect farming land. Governments in Australia, both State and Federal encourage people in their old age to stay in their family home. In our case this could be accomplished with family nearby.

We hope you will look favourably on this request and would appreciate hopefully approval with feedback and suggestions on how to get 1 block rezoned.

To us as a family this request seems very straight forward and compassionate.

We await your consideration and reply,

Kind regards,

RS & JM Martin.

Unfortunately, the Martin family are not alone. I also met with the Harvey family from the Glass House Mountains who are in exactly the same situation. These families have been penalised because some individuals did the wrong thing. I call on this government, as part of its regulatory guidelines under this legislation, to reinstitute a ruling, albeit a tighter one than we had before, that gives these families the straightforward and compassionate solution they are looking for.

Before I conclude, I would like to spend some time considering this government's attempt to plan for sustainable growth. I am very conscious that my comments are limited due to current CMC considerations. So, rather than focus on the additions to the urban footprint in the SEQ Regional Plan, let me instead look at some glaring omissions. This government claims to respect interurban breaks. It claims to promote transit oriented developments. It claims it wants to maintain the heritage nature and feel of hinterland communities. It claims it wants to stimulate local economic growth, and it claims it wants to reduce reliance on vehicles and on pollution. If those claims are correct, then wouldn't the government have supported the Sunshine Coast Regional Council's proposals for sensible, minimal growth in the rail corridor—growth that would have had immediate access to a soon to be upgraded rail service that will deliver passengers to principal activity centres like Caboolture and Strathpine or even the CBD itself in the south and Nambour in the north? It makes sense, doesn't it?

If that is the case, then properties owned by the Skerman family at Beerwah and the Horne and Young families in the Glass House Mountains would have made logical additions to the urban footprint. Each of these families owns land adjacent to the rail corridor. In the case of the Skermans and Youngs, the land is adjacent to the existing urban footprint. In the case of the Hornes, it is a classic infill option on Railway Parade, Glass House Mountains that already has developments to its north and south, and town water and sewerage running past its front door. But, no, in the electorate of Glass House the largest growth is slated for the communities of Wamuran, D'Aguiar and Woodford—communities that rely on a single transit corridor, the D'Aguiar Highway. As members would well appreciate, given I have raised the matter

on a number of occasions already, the D'Aguilar Highway already has question marks over its safety and its ability to support such population growth.

This bill talks about sustainable planning, but in practice it and its associated regulations leave me scratching my head. What is more, for farmers like the Hornes of Glass House Mountains or the Webbs of Taintons Road at Palmwoods who have residential developments on their doorsteps, there is nowhere for them to go. Every time they start up their tractors, they cop a barrage of irate phone calls. Every time they undertake necessary farm practices such as spraying, they are accused of environmental vandalism by their neighbours—neighbours they did not have as little as two years ago.

The government has to do more to work through the problems it has created by arbitrarily drawing a pink line on a map. For starters, it needs to apply its own filter of sustainability to its decision making. If you believe the title of this bill, the Sustainable Planning Bill, then it aims to deliver on some lofty and worthwhile goals. Unfortunately for me, the proof will be in the detail. Whilst I commend this bill to the House, I ask the minister to give careful consideration to the matters I have raised when developing the associated guidelines that will inevitably support this bill.