



Speech by
Curtis Pitt

MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE

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DISASTER MANAGEMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr PITT (Mulgrave—ALP) (3.59 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2010, introduced into this House by the Hon. Neil Roberts, Minister for Police, Corrective Services and Emergency Services. They say that the only things you can be certain of are death and taxes. But if there is one other thing you can count on, it is that the State Emergency Service will be at the front line when an emergency or disaster occurs. The SES plays a vital role in helping the community in times of need. The energy and commitment of our volunteer SES members is remarkable.

For example, the Innisfail SES unit has more than 35 active members who contribute on average more than 1,100 hours to their community each year in activities such as storm and flood responses, search and rescue operations, road traffic crashes, community education or assisting other emergency service agencies. I would like to publicly acknowledge the role that all SES volunteers play in keeping Queenslanders safe. I would also like to acknowledge in particular the leadership in Far North Queensland of Emergency Management Queensland Regional Director, Wayne Coutts.

The SES is supported in a variety of ways. Both the state government and the relevant local government contribute to supporting local SES units through providing equipment, facilities, advice and other backing. State and local governments collaborate closely to ensure that each SES unit is appropriately supported in order to perform its functions.

A good example of that is the \$100,000 state government grant for the repair and refurbishment of a facility at Edmonton. In April this year, I gave an undertaking to work with local controller, Marilyn George, and the Edmonton group of the SES to address asbestos concerns at their headquarters. The Queensland government is working in partnership with the Cairns Regional Council, which is contributing \$105,000 towards this project. The council continues to provide ongoing support towards SES operations within the area. Works at Edmonton will include the removal of asbestos flooring as well as extensive drainage works and the upgrade of a kitchen area and ablution facilities. This joint project will ensure that our emergency services in the area have a suitable facility to operate from and will allow the continued delivery of high-quality services to our community. It is cooperation like this between levels of government that is fundamental to the ongoing viability of the SES. It is important that we continue to work together to make sure that our local community is best protected in the event of extreme weather conditions.

The bill before the House contains an amendment to the Disaster Management Act 2003 allowing the chief executive of the Department of Community Safety to enter into agreements with each local government with respect to the SES unit in the relevant local government area. These agreements will spell out each party's responsibilities in terms of supporting the SES unit. Whilst the content of the SES support agreement will be negotiated between Emergency Management Queensland and the local government, it may deal with issues such as equipment, facilities, training, exercises and, as is the case with the Edmonton SES, workplace health and safety.

While the support from levels of government is vital to the continuing operation of SES units, the SES also receives significant support directly from the community through donations as well as through

fundraising activities. Many SES units conduct fundraising activities to supplement the funding they receive from other sources. I know that at the moment Michael Thurston and his crew at the Gordonvale SES are raising money by conducting sausage sizzles and lucky number boards to fund a new pull-up marquee that can be taken to incidents. This bill contains amendments to the Disaster Management Act 2003 to make it clear that SES units are authorised to conduct these fundraising activities. In addition, the bill makes it clear that the SES units can conduct other activities designed to lift the profile of the SES, including helping out at community events like shows.

An ever important part of the function of many SES units is helping out in other areas of the state when a disaster or other significant event occurs. As we know, local resources are often stretched to breaking point when dealing with an event of significant magnitude. It is important that personnel from other areas of the state can be deployed to assist when demand for SES assistance exceeds local capability. The amendments to the act require the chief executive of the Department of Community Safety, when determining the functions of an SES unit, to consider the needs of communities in areas of the state when required to conduct disaster operations. Any decision on the functions of an SES unit must be made only after consultation with the local government. Finally, the amendments contained in the bill provide that the chief executive of the Department of Community Safety is responsible for ensuring the safe and efficient performance of the functions of the SES.

I have mentioned previously the work that the Bligh government is doing to improve SES buildings. But while a headquarters is absolutely vital to an SES unit, it is the people who are the SES lifeblood. They sacrifice their own time and dedicate their lives to giving back to the community—volunteers like 84 year-old Evelyn Davies at the Babinda SES, who has been a member for more than 30 years and who this year was honoured with an Order of Australia medal. While no longer going on rescue missions—and Evelyn has seen her fair share during her time in the SES—Evelyn is still making a contribution by making sure that her fellow volunteers have a nice meal to come back to. It should be noted that when Mrs Davies heard she was getting the award her first reaction was to get 'really cranky'. At first it was because she thought someone was pulling her leg, but in reality it was because volunteers do not do these things for the accolades; they do it for their community because they want to give something back.

The health and safety of SES volunteers is of paramount importance to the Queensland government. Our volunteers often perform tasks under intense pressure and in conditions that can be dangerous. Swift-water rescue teams are essential in the Far North and this work is undertaken by our men and women in the SES in partnership with officers from the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service, the Police Service and the Queensland Ambulance Service. It is vital that we do everything we can to ensure that our SES volunteers—and all of our emergency services personnel—are safe when they are out helping others in the community. These amendments make it clear that the Queensland government takes its duty of care towards the State Emergency Service very seriously.