




Speech By
Michael Healy

MEMBER FOR CAIRNS

Record of Proceedings, 5 March 2026

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT (EMPOWERING COUNCILS) AND OTHER
LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr HEALY** (Cairns—ALP) (6.15 pm): The Local Government (Empowering Councils) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2025 has been promoted by the Crisafulli government as a measure to ‘empower councils’. In substance, however, it represents a retreat from the integrity safeguards that have underpinned Queensland local government since the reforms that followed the Crime and Corruption Commission’s Operation Belcarra inquiry.

At a time of intense development pressure, fragile public trust and escalating land values, the bill weakens conflict-of-interest rules, narrows transparency requirements and concentrates authority in ways that increase systemic risk. Local government in Queensland exercises substantial influence over planning approvals, rezoning infrastructure agreements, procurement and major public works. In a housing-constrained market, a single development approval can shift millions of dollars in value. For communities, these same decisions shape neighbourhood character, environmental protection, flood resilience, infrastructure capacity and long-term livability. Integrity in council decision-making is therefore not procedural formality; it is absolutely foundational to equitable and sustainable development.

Operation Belcarra exposed vulnerabilities in how councillors managed conflicts and how relationships with property developers could erode confidence in local democracies. The reforms that followed embedded peer review of conflicts, strengthened reporting obligations, enhanced registers of interests and reinforced independent oversight which the community thought was important. These measures were designed not only to prevent misconduct but also to protect councillors and ensure decisions were demonstrably fair.

This bill begins to dismantle those guardrails. It abolishes peer determination of conflicts, removing the requirement for non-conflicted councillors to assess whether a colleague should participate in deliberations. It narrows the definition of reportable interests, shortens disclosure timeframes and removes ‘close personal relationships’ as a trigger for declaration. It permits conflicted councillors to influence matters outside of formal meetings. It tightens, rather than broadens, interest registers. Each change may be characterised as administrative streamlining. Collectively they dilute transparency and weaken oversight in precisely those areas most vulnerable to undue influence.

Mr Dillon interjected.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms Marr): Member for Gregory, you have had a pretty good go back there.

Mr HEALY: The broader political context intensifies concern. The government has signalled support for permitting development sector donations at the state level. Political donations are lawful, but they carry inevitable perceptions of access and alignment. State governments shape planning frameworks, infrastructure funding and legislative settings that directly affect local decision-making. Councils depend on state approvals and financial support. If councillor-level safeguards are

simultaneously reduced, the structural risk becomes clear: influence established through state-level relationships may flow directly or indirectly into local planning environments where conflict controls have been relaxed.

This is not speculative. Complaints about local government conduct in Queensland have frequently centred on development, rezoning and procurement areas involving significant financial stakes. Robust governance frameworks manage these pressures through transparency and collective scrutiny. Weakened frameworks expand the opportunity for vulnerabilities. When communities suspect that approvals may reflect financial relationships or political access rather than planning merit, confidence in local democracy deteriorates. Once eroded trust is difficult to rebuild, as some already know.

Queensland deliberately strengthened its local government integrity framework after serious weaknesses were exposed. This legislation reopens many of those vulnerabilities. At a moment when development decisions carry profound economic, environmental and social consequences, the state should be fortifying safeguards, not relaxing them. If empowerment is the objective, it should be achieved by enhancing transparency, probity and collective oversight, definitely not by reducing them.