

Report to the Senate
Subject: Forced council amalgamations in Queensland
Date: 23 August 2007
Submitted by: Fay McGrath

Attention: Senator Ian MacDonald

The purpose of this submission is to state my opposition to the forced amalgamation of the Mareeba Shire with three other shires: Atherton, Herberton and Eacham.

Overall, I have strong reservations regarding the whole process which has been instigated to rush this legislation through parliament, without any apparent mandate for such drastic changes, or attempt to convince the people of its worth. Most Australians are fair-minded, and if something can be explained, and shown to be of value, they can be *talked around*. However, the *ad hoc* way in which some shire boundaries have been left untampered with, and others treated in such a transparently unfair and arbitrary manner, leaves many questions.

Equity and even-handedness are what we generally expect. How strange that our far-flung shire, advertised as almost as big as Tasmania, is forced to have three other shires added to it... Politics must have surely played a large part in this decision which seems to have no logical reason.

I am one of many who connected the office of the Queensland Governor to request that signing off on this legislation be given particular consideration. I believe that politicians are public servants and should listen to the people and convince them of the worth of such drastic changes. (Of course not everyone will agree, but a degree of respect should be shown and would be appreciated.) Possibly because only a small percentage of the population is affected by this, the State Government thought that it would only be *a storm in a teacup*, and would fade away. It is obvious that the media have only picked up on the most iconic shires such as Noosa and Pt Douglas—our plight in Far North Queensland is not particularly newsworthy.

I have attended public meetings about this matter in Mareeba, Atherton and Malanda. At each of these meetings there has been a united front, with agreement that this proposed new Tablelands super region would impact negatively on the communities involved. It was poignant to note that several speakers who had served in overseas combat or migrated to Australia after leaving oppressive European regimes were extremely disappointed and frustrated that the government could take such steps, ignoring any legitimate concerns of the people. The undue haste, and threats made to councils if polling was carried out, was breathtaking in its arrogance.

I have lived in Mareeba for forty years. Over such a long period I have experienced many changes. My husband has been a councillor for four of the past five terms, so I have had some close contact with council responsibilities and community events. (I work full-time as a teacher, but still take an interest as much as I am able.)

Report to the Senate**Subject: Forced council amalgamations in Queensland****Date: 23 August 2007****Submitted by: Fay McGrath**

Mareeba Shire is very extensive and, in fact, has more dirt roads than bitumen. There are three large towns: Mareeba, Kuranda and Dimbulah, and many smaller villages and townships. For the past two 4-year terms, there have been no divisions, and that decision has led to many improvements. Councillors are involved in the happenings of the entire shire, and even though there is a lot of travelling involved, the result is that many residents can have regular contact with councillors and can approach them with issues etc. I am very proud to observe how our shire has developed over the past five years or so, as it was quite depressing with the economic downturn and problems faced by farms and businesses as the local economy faced the end of the tobacco industry.

We were led to believe that the Mareeba Shire, due to its size, its population and its healthy finances and asset base would not be forced to amalgamate. (Mr Beattie told our mayor last September that Mareeba Shire would not be affected.)

If the proposed regional council becomes a fact, it means that there will be several towns, townships and villages added to the equation, with fewer councillors. The costs associated with this, and the angst as tough decisions are made eg where the regional office be situated, will be enormous. This will be most disappointing, as I believe one of the strong features of local government is the fact that the councillors can participate in community events and enjoy links with the people, getting to know the different communities. Mareeba Shire has a packed calendar of events, and probably the other three affected shires do too.

Although the job is demanding with so much travel, Mareeba councillors can still work part-time in their own enterprises (my husband is a cane grower and grazier). The proposed new arrangement will mean that only those who can afford to, or are willing to give up their own employment can offer their services to be councillors as a full-time position will obviously be warranted.

Is there an ulterior motive in this, to deprive the people of representation? I am yet to be given one convincing argument that this hasty decision will bring long-term benefits. All I can see currently is what will be lost in community identity, and I worry that our rates will increase as the costs of administering this super shire will be significant.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit a brief outline of my concerns.
