

**Submission to the Inquiry into
Commonwealth Electoral
Amendment (Democratic
Plebiscites) Bill 2007 by the
Senate Finance and Public
Administration Committee**



Mareeba Shire Council is pleased to be able to make the following comments on the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Democratic Plebiscites) Bill 2007.

We believe that the legislation is necessary to ensure that all Queenslanders are given the opportunity to express their views on the highly controversial issue of forced Council amalgamations.

The Local Government Reform Commission established by the Beattie Government to drive forced amalgamations in Queensland has recommended that Mareeba Shire be amalgamated with three neighbouring shires. Immediately after this announcement was made Council conducted a telephone poll of local residents and 82% of all those surveyed opposed the amalgamation of Mareeba Shire with its three neighbours. Similarly 88% favoured holding a referendum or plebiscite on the proposed changes.

This and other feedback from across the community clearly demonstrates that there is widespread opposition to the proposed amalgamation of Mareeba Shire and that residents want to be able to express their opinion on the matter.

Premier Beattie initially threatened to instantly dismiss any Council which held a referendum on the issue of Council amalgamations but has since backed away from this hardline stance. Nevertheless, despite his change of heart Council believes that the Commonwealth legislation is still needed to protect the democratic rights of Queenslanders.

Council believes that a referendum in Mareeba Shire would expose the inconsistencies in the arguments put forward by the Reform Commission to justify the amalgamation of Mareeba Shire with its neighbours.

In particular Council wishes to see the following issues brought more fully into the public debate about amalgamation of the Tableland shires:

- The Commission stated that all shires have similar economic interest. Nothing could be further from the truth as there is no commonality of interest between Mareeba and the other three shires. The areas are poles apart in terms of climate, topography, culture and types of agricultural production systems. The proposed amalgamation will only turn the healthy parochialism that currently exists into antagonism and friction.
- The Commission stated that the amalgamated local government will have a greater capacity to improve its financial sustainability than would the four individual shires if they were left alone. However, Mareeba Shire Council believes that this is a spurious argument as there are no overwhelming financial reasons to merge the four shires. The Queensland Treasury rated each Council as being in the moderate financial category which meant that each was expected to be able to meet all short and long term obligations. This shows the inconsistencies in the arguments being put forward by the

Commission to justify the amalgamation of the four Tableland shires.

- Council also believes that the Commission has been inconsistent in its recommendations in relation to Mareeba Shire when compared to other large shires such as Hinchinbrook and Burdekin.

Hinchinbrook Shire Council is rated as moderate in the Financial Sustainability Review by Queensland Treasury and the Reform Commission used this as a rationale for not amalgamating the shire. Mareeba received the same financial rating and yet the recommendation was to amalgamate for financial reasons.

The Commission decided that amalgamating, Johnstone, Cardwell and Hinchinbrook shires would create a Council where the distance between northern and southern extremities would make economies of scale difficult to achieve. In the case of the Tablelands Regional Council the distances involved as a result of Mareeba Shire being amalgamated would make the Johnstone/Cardwell/Hinchinbrook distances look like urban travel. A similar argument was used to rationalise the decision not to amalgamate Burdekin Shire Council. It is a mystery as to why these very same arguments do not apply in the case of Mareeba Shire.

Finally, Council also fully supports the inclusion of the provision in the Bill that will allow ordinary people to approach the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) or participate in an arrangement as made with the AEC despite any State or Territory law that makes provision to the contrary. As noted earlier this provision is necessary to protect the democratic rights of ordinary residents.

This submission has been prepared and submitted by Mareeba Shire Council, 65 Rankin Street, Mareeba, Queensland 4880.

The preparation and lodgement of this submission is authorised by the Mayor as indicated by the signature below.



**Cr Mick Borzi AM OBE
MAYOR**