

Development Watch Inc

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23 August 2007

Committee Secretary
Finance and Public Administration Committee
Department of the Senate

Dear Sir/Madam

SUBMISSION ON
ENQUIRY INTO THE COMMONWEALTH ELECTORAL AMENDMENT
(DEMOCRATIC PLEBISCITES) BILL 2007

Development Watch Inc is a community group based in Coolum on the Sunshine Coast, Queensland. Amongst other objectives, we seek to influence government policy that impacts on our ability to ensure inappropriate development does not occur in the Coolum area. We welcome this opportunity to provide a submission to your Committee on an amendment to the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918.

The area known as Coolum comprises Coolum Beach, Point Arkwright, Yaroomba and Mount Coolum, which is Division 5 in Maroochy Shire Council. In our submission to the Queensland Local Government Reform Commission (LGRC), we strongly argued that, if amalgamations on the Sunshine Coast were to occur, Coolum should be part of an enlarged Noosa Shire Council and remain apart from a combined Maroochy/Caloundra council. A copy of this submission is at Attachment A.

Maroochy Shire Council made a submission to the LGRC, which supported amalgamation of Maroochy Shire with the two adjoining local government areas; Noosa Shire and Caloundra City. This submission was compiled without reference to the residents and ratepayers of Maroochy Shire. The Queensland State Government has now decided that these three local government areas be amalgamated. This amalgamation was done without reference to the wishes of the residents of these areas. It was also done without advising the residents and ratepayers of the costs and benefits of such amalgamation.

Development Watch Inc submits that:

1. we support the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Democratic Plebiscites) Bill 2007;
2. any plebiscite conducted to determine community views on local government amalgamation should be conducted in all Queensland local government areas that were examined by the Electoral Reform Commission; and

3. any plebiscite conducted in Maroochy Shire should include a question as to whether the residents of Coolum wish to remain in Maroochy Shire or would rather be part of a separate, enlarged Noosa Shire Council.

Yours faithfully,

B. K. Raison
President
Development Watch Inc
Ph (07) 5446 4493

ATTACHMENT A TO
SUBMISSION TO
SENATE ENQUIRY INTO THE
COMMONWEALTH ELECTORAL AMENDMENT
(DEMOCRATIC PLEBISCITES) BILL 2007

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22 May 2007

The Chairman
Local Government Reform Commission
PO Box 16325
CITY EAST QLD 4002

Dear Mr Longland,

SUBMISSION TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM COMMISSION

INTRODUCTION

Development Watch Inc is a community group based in Coolum. Amongst other objectives, we seek to influence government policy that impacts on our ability to ensure inappropriate development does not occur in the Coolum area. We believe that amalgamation of local councils may not be the panacea to improve local government effectiveness that the Government anticipates. We also believe that amalgamation of Sunshine Coast councils into a single 'Supercouncil' will have a detrimental effect on the ability of local communities to have an effective voice in local government decisions.

If some amalgamation of Sunshine Coast councils is proven by the Commission to be necessary, Development Watch is strongly of the opinion that Noosa Council should not be part of a Sunshine Coast "Supercouncil" but should remain separate from a combined Maroochy/Caloundra Council. We also believe that the Coolum area of Maroochy Shire should be excised and transferred to a greater Noosa Council. This would combine like communities of interest and provide Noosa Council with an expanded ratepayer base.

INADEQUATE TIME GIVEN FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Development Watch would like to register a complaint about the short time allowed for the public to be able to assess the implications local government amalgamation and to make submissions. Amalgamation of local governments has far-reaching economic, social and environmental impacts. Public submissions should only have been invited after the State Government had conducted an education campaign on the costs and benefits of amalgamation.

EFFICACY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AMALGAMATION

There is much evidence that amalgamation of local governments is neither the most effective way of ensuring the financial viability of councils nor the most effective way of improving delivery of services to communities. A recent review of forced amalgamation of councils in other Australian States concluded:

"This evidence has demonstrated what appears to be a clear shift in opinion away from amalgamation towards alternative models of council cooperation, particularly shared service provision arrangements. While some of the documents examined are still equivocal on the merits of amalgamation in some limited cases, ... the majority has undoubtedly eschewed support for council consolidation in all but extreme circumstances. As the evolution of thought on amalgamation in the various Local Government National Reports we have considered perhaps most vividly illustrates, the erstwhile consensus that 'bigger is better' in Australian local government has vanished."¹

The untimely haste in which the Reform Commission is required to present recommendations for amalgamation is sure to exacerbate problems such as have occurred with forced amalgamations in other States.

POSSIBILITIES FOR AMALGAMATION ON THE SUNSHINE COAST

A Sunshine Coast 'Supercouncil'

Development Watch submits that amalgamating the councils of Caloundra, Maroochy and Noosa would allow land developers to increase their influence on the Sunshine Coast. This happened when the Gold Coast councils combined. Also, the costs of amalgamation of these three councils would place an unacceptable burden on the ratepayers of all three areas.

Noosa Shire has a fundamentally different approach to environmental protection, community wellbeing and tourism to the other shires. Noosa's growth

¹ "An Analysis of the New Perspective on Amalgamation in Australian Local Government", Centre of Local Government, University of New England, 2007, page16. A copy of this paper was provided by Development Watch Inc to the Local Government Reform Commission by e-mail on 2nd May 2007

management strategies, sustainable planning and community values set it completely apart from the high density, high rise, heavily developed areas of Maroochydore, Mooloolaba and Caloundra.

Development Watch submits that Noosa should not be amalgamated with the other shires because, apart from Coolum and some other small areas bordering Noosa Shire, there is absolutely no like community of interest.

Two Councils, Caloundra/Maroochy and Noosa

If Noosa remained apart from a combined Caloundra/Maroochy council, its significant points of difference could be maintained. However, its ratepayer base could be too small to ensure it maintained effective bargaining power in competing for State funds. To maintain Noosa as a viable shire, the Reform Commission should consider expanding it by including, from adjoining shires, nearby communities with like interest. The communities of Eumundi, Doonan, Verridale, Peregrine Springs and Coolum would complement the present Noosa community.

Coolum To Join With Noosa

The area known as Coolum comprises Coolum Beach, Point Arkwright, Yaroomba and Mount Coolum, which is Division 5 in Maroochy Shire Council. Division 5 adjoins Noosa Shire and is closer to the retail and commercial areas of Noosa than to those of Maroochydore. There are many commonalities between Coolum and Noosa that would justify the Reform Commission placing emphasis on one of its terms of reference that states:

“The reform commission must consider the grouping of like communities of interest to maintain the social fabric and character of communities and areas of the State,”²

Development Watch believes the following is evidence that Coolum and Noosa Shire are “like communities of interest”:

National Parks. Noosa Shire has a history of effective stewardship of national parks within its boundary. The recent nomination for the Shire to be recognized as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve³ is evidence of this. The national parks within Division 5 that surround Coolum (Noosa National Park-Coolum Section and Mount Coolum National Park) are a logical extension to this proposed Biosphere. In fact, the State Government:

“has indicated that it sees this nomination as Phase 1 of the creation of a larger Biosphere Reserve in the region. The State has proposed

² Local Government and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2007, s 4A (159U (2)), page 18

³ Biosphere Reserves are areas of terrestrial and coastal/marine ecosystems, or a combination thereof, which are internationally recognized within the framework of UNESCO's Program on Man and the Biosphere. They are established to promote and demonstrate a balanced relationship between humans and the Biosphere.

that the Noosa Biosphere Reserve be extended in future to incorporate all of the ... Noosa National Parks ,,,⁴

Community Groups. Both Noosa and Coolum have an above-average number of community groups whose primary focus is on the environment. These groups monitor, maintain and improve the health of parks, road reserves, waterways and coastal dunal systems.

Attitudes to High-rise Development. Noosa Council has a four storey height limit for building construction throughout the shire. Coolum has three storey limits specified in its planning precincts. Both communities reject the desirability of high-rise buildings in their areas.

Tourism. The 'Noosa' brand is now well established, both within Australia and internationally, as a highly desirable tourist destination. In a similar way, 'Coolum' is a brand in its own right and is known all over Australia as a low key holiday destination. Coolum would provide a complementary range of tourism experiences to Noosa.

Village Atmosphere. Both Coolum and Noosa provide residents and visitors with a low key village atmosphere in their retail shopping areas. Coolum residents and community groups have worked hard to resist pressures to develop higher order services in the area. Such pressures would be less under the stewardship of Noosa Shire Council.

Commercial Ties. Because Coolum residents prefer higher order facilities to be located outside Division 5, travel to commercial centres outside the area is necessary. Noosa's commercial facilities are closer to Coolum than are Maroochydore's and are thus the preferred destination for most Coolum residents.

Development Watch submits that even if the Reform Commission recommends no amalgamation of Sunshine Coast councils, it should increase the size of Noosa Shire by moving Coolum (Division 5) from Maroochy Shire. This will ensure the grouping of communities with shared interest.

ALIGNMENT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARIES WITH CATCHMENT AREA BOUNDARIES

The Local Government Reform Commission has an historic opportunity to recommend changes that will enhance ecosystem management throughout Queensland. Aligning local council boundaries with water catchment boundaries where feasible would do this. Development Watch does understand that concerns other than the physical environment must be taken into account when determining boundaries. Variations to the principle of using catchment area boundaries may occasionally be necessary to meet social and economic

⁴ Quoted from "OVERVIEW OF NOMINATION", available for download at <http://www.noosa.qld.gov.au/ServicesFacilities/documents/EnvironmentalServices/OVERVIEW%20OF%20NOMINATION.pdf>

objectives. Nevertheless, the Reform Commission should place major emphasis on the term of reference that requires:

“consolidating, to the extent practicable, regional natural resource management areas, including for example water catchment areas, and environmental areas, including for example, coastal wetlands.”⁵

CONCLUSION

The Reform Commissions terms of reference will be best served on the Sunshine Coast if Noosa Shire is not amalgamated with other shires but is instead enhanced by including Coolum and other adjoining communities with like interests within its boundaries. Transfer of Maroochy Shire’s Division 5 to Noosa Shire will be of mutual benefit to both Coolum and Noosa. Such action would promote the tourism and environmental values of these two unique areas on the Sunshine Coast. Also, the Reform Commission should modify shire boundaries where possible to capture entire water catchment areas to help ensure effective management of ecosystems.

Yours faithfully,

B. K. Raison
President
Development Watch Inc

⁵ Local Government and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2007, s 4A (159U (3) (a)), page 18