

BURDEKIN SHIRE COUNCIL
COUNCILLOR JOHN WOODS

PRESENTATION TO LOWER BURDEKIN INITIATIVE MEETING

TUESDAY 26TH MARCH, 2002
TOWNSVILLE

Ladies and gentlemen:

I welcome the opportunity to address the Lower Burdekin Initiative Group from the Local Government perspective.

The past tends to dictate the future and unfortunately in some areas of development, past decisions of industry and Local Government in the Burdekin area have created impacts that we are having to deal with now and will have to continue to deal with in the future.

Areas of concern are:-

- Small area subdivisions affecting prime agricultural land;
- Inappropriate development in environmentally sensitive areas;
- Monocultural industry;
- Protection of the underground aquifer.

Protection of the underground aquifer:

One of the greatest challenges facing all people in the Burdekin is a greater understanding of our underground aquifer. For many years, all people in the Burdekin community have been aware of the aquifer. Most would say there is a need to maintain the aquifer, but I don't believe many would really understand how the aquifer works.

Monitoring bores that have been provided by the Department of Natural Resources have only addressed the aquifer in a general sense and at no stage has there been any significant attempt to study the seawater interface with the fresh water aquifer. This I believe is paramount and is something that is lacking at the present moment in the modelling that has been carried out. Of all of the future issues facing sustainability in the Burdekin Shire, this would have to be the greatest.

Monocultural industry:

Prior to the development of the Burdekin Dam and the BRIA, great expectations were expounded in Government reports about the opportunities for diversification with the Burdekin Dam development. Already existing in the Shire was a small but developing rice industry, and horticulture was starting to develop.

Unfortunately, Government policy, market forces and individual development decisions saw vast tracks of land open and go under one crop. While at the time this may have appeared to be the best way for the future of the Burdekin Shire, current World market indications, may prove that this Shire would have been better off developing alternative industries that were better suited to some of the soil capabilities.

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For diversification to be successful, it will require individuals to look at the big picture for the overall good of the district, and move away from the "NIMBY" attitude. Over the years considerable major development has failed to materialise because of an attitude that I don't want that particular development in my back yard without any reference to the need for diversification of the economic base for the survival of the district and security of jobs for the young people in our area.

Inappropriate development in environmentally sensitive areas:

In the mid to late 80's considerable sugar expansion occurred throughout the Burdekin area. The expansion that took place in the 80's moved in some areas on to land that had been identified in strategic planning documents as being marginal, if not environmentally sensitive. This highlighted the fact that those people in Government and advisory positions in developing the strategic plan in the late 70's had identified areas that should be developed in particular ways and not necessarily for irrigated agriculture. Unfortunately neither industry nor the Council paid any great attention to that strategic plan. Consequently farms have been developed in areas that quite possibly should have been developed in other ways, or entirely left undeveloped. The challenge now is how to manage the situation without creating major disruption to the lives of the individuals involved.

The development of the BRIA through the 90's injected significant capital into the Burdekin community. However, some of that development could have been handled far better. The wholesale clearing of blocks without thought of the impact on groundwater and marginal agricultural country was not in the best interests of the overall environment or in the best interests of sustainability into the future. Far better use should have been made of the information that was available with regard to soil qualities and with regard to cropping so as to ensure far more ecologically sustainable developments. This is one area where the legislative ability both of Local Government and State Government was null and void and this required commitment from individuals. At this stage, we talk about sustainability but in the main when it comes to applying sustainable practices, they are not always provided with anything else, but lip service.

Small area subdivisions affecting prime agricultural land:

Queensland Government Policy 1/92 "Development and the conservation of Agricultural Land", came into being in 1992. Its objective was to try and reduce the pressure of urban sprawl from impacting on existing agricultural operations. When the Integrated Planning Act came into being it gave this policy even more force in law. Burdekin Shire Council responding to pressure from the agricultural sector is still allowing family farm house subdivisions to proceed in contravention of the intent of Policy 1/92.

The Council's ability to consider these small area subdivisions will come to an end on the 15th December this year, when Council's superseded Planning Scheme ceases to have any impact on consideration of development issues.

While I have supported these family farm small area subdivisions, I question whether support for this activity is not opening the 'Pandora's Box' of conflict between

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residents on those areas and the adjoining farming property at some stage in the not too distant future.

CONCLUSION:

We rest on the cusp of some exciting developments with regard to overall agricultural management. A recently published article by Carl Binning from Greening Australia Canberra, highlights the opportunities that will soon exist utilising tradeable credits for carbon, water quality, salinity and biodiversity. We are already seeing trade in carbon credits as a counter to global warming. The article suggests a need to develop an accounting system that allows on-ground measurement of contributions in this area at a farm or catchment scale. Further information about markets for eco-systems services is available on the internet site at www.rirdc.gov.au, and Carl Binning is available on internet at cbinning@greeningaustralia.org.au.

I have been a great supporter of the Local Burdekin Initiative. I see the benefits of a day such as today and the co-operation that exists between agencies through this initiative as being the ability to utilise the precious research dollar to the best advantage.

The way forward is greater adherence to strategic and operational plans that are developed both by governing bodies and industry organisations. There is an urgent need to ensure that the seawater interface is far better understood.

JOHN WOODS