

QLGRA NEWSLETTER - MARCH 2018

Welcome to the Queensland Local Government Reform Alliance (QLGRA) Inc Newsletter for March 2018. We had a very successful Biannual meeting at Redcliffe – well attended by good and capable people. We had fantastic speakers both those very well-known and those who presented their regional and local reports. The growing depth of issues concerning the operation of Councils in Queensland clearly shows that original concerns about amalgamation and other legislative changes have bloomed into major blotches.

Thanks especially to the Moreton Bay Residents Action Group. Dennis, Arn and many others put on a fantastic spread, welcomed everyone and made the two days run extremely smoothly. In future we will be looking at other groups who may wish to host similar events. It is a great way for the local groups to showcase their experience, raise some money and ensure that the event has meaning in their community.

Four items in this newsletter:

1. Urgent: Councillor Complaints Inquiry – Submissions needed by Friday 9th March.
2. Support Southern Downs De-amalgamation Petition
3. Email from Jonathon Sri regarding the Redcliffe meeting.
4. Retired Mayor and Lieutenant Colonel Ken Park's Speech

ITEM 1: Apologies for the late notice Members and supporters are advised that the state government is calling for submissions into the **Councillor Complaints Amendment Bill 2018**. Submissions need to be in by Friday 9th March. WE URGE ALL MEMBERS TO HAVE A SAY. Here is the information direct from the website:

Local Government (Councillor Complaints) Amendment Bill 2018

On 15 February 2018 the Hon Stirling Hinchliffe MP, Minister for Local Government, Minister for Racing and Minister for Multicultural Affairs introduced the Local Government (Councillor Complaints) Amendment Bill 2018 into the Queensland Parliament. The Bill was referred to the Economics and Governance Committee for detailed consideration.

The explanatory notes state that the policy objective of the Bill is to implement the Government's response to the Independent Councillor Complaints Review Panel's Report '*Councillor Complaints Review: A fair, effective and efficient framework*' (the Councillor Complaints Report) to provide for a simpler, more streamlined system for making, investigating and determining complaints about councillor conduct in Queensland.

It should be noted that the Local Government (Councillor Complaints) Amendment Bill 2017, which is substantially the same as the 2018 Bill, was referred to the former Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee prior to the dissolution of Parliament for the 2017 election. The former committee had not concluded its inquiry for that bill, which lapsed when the 55th Parliament was dissolved.

The committee invites submissions addressing any aspect of the Bill from all interested parties. Guidelines for making a submission to a parliamentary committee are available here: [Guide to making a submission](#).

Submissions close at **12:00pm, Friday 9 March 2018**.

Submissions should be sent to:

Email: egc@parliament.qld.gov.au

Post: Committee Secretary
Economics and Governance Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Qld 4000

For more information go to: <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/work-of-committees/committees/EGC/inquiries/current-inquiries/LGCouncillorComplaints2018>.

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ITEM 2: **Southern Downs E-Petition seeking de-amalgamation:** We draw your attention to this petition which is circulating on the e-petition site of the Queensland Parliament. We urge you and your groups to support this petition – the State Government needs to know that amalgamation is far from a dead issue.

De-Amalgamation from Southern Downs Regional Council

Eligibility - Queensland residents

Principal Petitioner:

Rev'd Alan Colyer
9 Maria Court
STANTHORPE QLD 4380

Sponsoring Member: The Clerk of the Parliament

Posting Date: 27/02/2018

Closing Date: 1/05/2018

TO: The Honourable the Speaker and Members of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland

Queensland residents draws to the attention of the House that the community of the Granite Belt fully support de-amalgamation from the Southern Downs Regional Council. The previous Stanthorpe Shire Council was strongly opposed to amalgamation and in the report of the Local Government Reform Commission, the reasons listed were: detrimental impact on the development of the community/ loss of local representation loss of services which met the needs of the community/loss of employment opportunities/reduced local government support of local businesses/loss of important community assets/reduced allocation of local government funds towards local projects/loss or downgrading of local services and potential to lose some or all of the local identity and sense of community.

It is the opinion of the Granite Belt community that the above reasons for not amalgamating have become a reality and that this community will not recover unless de-amalgamation happens. We request that parliament acknowledge that amalgamation has been to the detriment of the Granite Belt community and that a special committee be formed to investigate boundaries for new council areas and to formulate a workable, sustainable plan for de-amalgamation to occur.

Your petitions, therefore, request the House to ensure that de-amalgamation occurs prior to the next statutory council elections.

TO SIGN PLEASE GO TO THIS WEBSITE:

<http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/work-of-assembly/petitions/petition-details?id=2880>

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Item 3: QLGRA received the following **email from Jonathan Sri** after his speech at our Forum.

“Dear Colin and fellow QLGRA members,

Thank you so much. It was a pleasure and a privilege to address the group and I look forward to attending future events and lending my support where I can. I think the alliance has a lot of potential to push for broader change across the State, and whenever I'm contacted by residents outside of Brisbane who have concerns about council corruption, I will encourage them to make contact with you.

If anyone's interested, here's a link to the community voting website that one of our volunteers designed. <https://gabba.freewill.vision/> It's not currently live so some of the functions won't work, but you'll be able to browse it and get a feel for how we used it to improve local democracy (you'll also see how ridiculously overpriced some basic pieces of park infrastructure are, which is of course a problem of over-bureaucratisation, piecemeal privatisation and flawed BCC contract and tendering processes).

And here's a link to a write-up about infrastructure charges and infrastructure shortfalls, which I think more people need to understand and be aware of. www.jonathansri.com/infrastructure-shortfalls It's a bit Brisbane-specific, but I think some of the broader themes are relevant to other council areas. When developers and big businesses put so little money into the community (despite reaping huge profits) it's little wonder that councils start penny-pinching or raising rates because they don't have enough revenue to cater for growing populations.

Thank you again for having me along. The text of my poem is attached.

Warm regards,
Jonno

Jonathan Sri
Councillor for the Gabba Ward
P: 3403 2165 | A: 2/63 Annerley Road, Woolloongabba
W: jonathansri.com | E: thegabba.ward@bcc.qld.gov.au “

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Item 4: Yet again, former **Mayor and Retired Lieutenant Colonel Ken Park** delivered an informative speech comparing his time as Mayor with the current operation of councils. He then spoke about the Your Community First Model for running candidates in council elections. This group in the Moreton Bay Regional Council area, on their first go achieved over 30% of the vote. Here is Ken's speech with minor editing:

Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen

My local government experience is based on large area rural shires with small populations. Shires that ran their own water and sewerage schemes in their major towns, shires that contracted successfully for all of the Main Road construction and maintenance in their area.

I served 5 years as a shire engineer and after a break, two years as a councillor, one year as deputy and two years as mayor. The mayor was elected annually by the councillors from among their number and that promotion entailed a 100% pay rise [\$5000 to \$10000]; so clearly all councillors needed to have real jobs where they interacted with ratepayers and got a real feel for the district's needs. Needless to say all of my colleagues were hard working, dedicated, honest people, already community leaders, performing their virtually unpaid civic duties as a councillor without any thought of reward.

The mayor chaired meetings of council and as required, citizen's public meetings, he or she performed the traditional ceremonial duties. The mayor had no additional powers and no separate mandate. For example the whole council appointed the CEO and made his annual performance review, and the budget belonged to the whole council.

While mayor I also served one year as chairman of our ROC. The voluntary Regional Organisation of Councils consisted, in our case, of three cities and eight shires; encouraging cooperation and sharing and enabling us to have a stronger political voice. There IS an alternative to regional councils.

Elections were simple and cheap and were run by the Shire Clerk. All a candidate needed to do was to print off a double-sided roneoed sheet and to personally deliver them to every voter in their division AT THEIR OWN EXPENSE OF COURSE, with no sponsors or trust funds paying the costs. All Councillors were genuinely and fiercely independent. Councillors had a simple agenda. Expenditure on roads or bush fire control passed unanimously, every other cent of expenditure required a full-blown debate and critical examination of all non-essential expenditure. Borrowing was zero.

The staff also had a simple agenda: they were all ratepayers themselves and part of the community.

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The council gave leadership to the district and was the focal point of all community activities. For example, in my time, we coordinated many organisations to establish an integrated regional health service and also a catchment management committee for our major river. As many as possible of the community facilities were managed by citizen committees combining council resources and volunteer workers and fund raising.

THE COUNCIL WAS FROM THE LOCAL COMMUNITY, SERVED THE LOCAL COMMUNITY, AND NOBODY ELSE.

So how did I move from being mayor of this local government Utopia to being one of the founding fathers of Your Community First? By the way, if you don't know about Your Community First, or YCF as we call it, then just think of it as a small, local political party for the sole purpose of contesting a local government election.

I moved to Queensland after my first wife died and I married a Queenslander(When in) 2008 the state government ordered the widespread and undemocratic amalgamations of councils right across the state. Noosa, now a part of Sunshine Coast Region went backwards until the next state government was shamed into giving Noosa a referendum and their freedom back. Redcliffe City, Caboolture Shire and Pine Rivers Shire were each assessed as very viable and sustainable but these already big councils had to be amalgamated to form a huge mega-council, the third biggest in Australia. Moreton Bay Regional Council has gone backwards from day one with rates and charges, plus new ones too, all increasing by more than the CPI every single year, where the quality of services [except perhaps here in Redcliffe] has gone backwards, where councillors and staff have developed an embarrassing lack of consultation, a lack of openness, a lack of accountability and a lack of transparency. They have developed delusions of grandeur believing that they need to dabble in railways and universities. They have also fallen under the spell of some very rich and powerful developers.

No sooner had the shotgun wedding been consummated than the water and sewerage departments were stolen away by the same misguided state government in order to form an even worse bureaucratic over-charging monster...UNITY WATER.

Two local resident and ratepayer groups, Ratepayers Action Group and Reclaim Caboolture Shire plus a few individuals who had had enough, decided that the whole council had to go. Whatever the sickness was called, it was widespread and had infected all councillors. There was no internal opposition to the Mayor and CEO. As much as independent councillors are preferred, it was further decided that a bunch of individuals, all pulling in different directions would have no chance of unseating the established, disciplined, well-oiled, well-financed Mayor's team. So a new team was needed and it had to be entirely based on service to the community. Not service to the ambitions and egos of councillors, not service to developers, not grovelling to a state government but service which puts the community first...YOUR COMMUNITY FIRST.

So what does YCF stand for, what does it want to achieve. Have a look at our policies

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- The question of integrity is first and is foremost. The offences against the Local Government Electoral Act by the incumbent team were so numerous that the CCC doesn't have the will or the manpower to prosecute. The more serious corruption charges are subject to many complaints and have not yet been dealt with by the CCC. Suffice to say that there is an alleged culture of failing to declare an interest in matters before the council concerning the people who have funded the election campaigns of certain councillors. I am assured that there is no time limit on prosecuting these alleged offences.
- I will be mentioning the \$110M given to the state government for the Kippa-Ring railway, and the now almost \$100M of ratepayers money already invested in the Petrie University. In a good council, needs are identified and prioritised, proposals and alternatives are costed, there is consultation and a mandate is given at an election. That is not what happens now.
- In this council area rates and charges have increased by more than the CPI every year, there is a new charge for regional infrastructure [but the money raised is not spent on regional infrastructure] and there are new canal levies [which do not appear to be spent on the canals]. A new council must give the ratepayers a break.
- Borrowings are now out of control. A half billion now borrowed by this council from a very low start point. True, interest rates are low, but the day of reckoning will come. There is good reason why such a huge council should have no borrowings and should have healthy reserves.
- The equitable spread of expenditure is essentially a Caboolture thing. Caboolture's CBD is now a ghost town, its amenities are aged and insufficient and the two major thoroughfares are gridlocked with no plans for improvement. The priorities are elsewhere. People from Maryborough can say the same.
- The secrecy of this council is astounding. You would not believe the things we are not permitted to know. Furthermore, every contentious item is "workshopped" where there is no publicly available agenda, where the public is excluded, where no minutes are kept, where the Local Government Act and declarations of interest do not apply and where the less enthusiastic councillors get to see, by coercion, the "true benefits" of the latest proposal. All of that must stop.
- Responsiveness. I do recall when questions without notice was a lively affair at every meeting and the staff were kept very much on their toes, I recall when complaints were regarded so seriously that the council was kept informed of every one, right to information applications were never required because there were no secrets, I recall as a shire engineer when ratepayers would walk into my office unannounced to tell me about a pot hole and have a chat. It is called "being responsive".
- Today's councillor represents up to 30,000 ratepayers. They have to be kidding! Is this the model of local government we really want? YCF councillors will consult as well as humanly possible while seeking more manageable divisions.
- The relationship between property developers and councillors has been well aired at the Belcarra Inquiry. New rules will emerge but blind Freddie knows that such rules will just make the donor and the recipient more cunning. The councillor we seek in YCF doesn't need rules or laws. He or she is 100% honest, so much so that they will dob in any fellow councillor that strays.
- The environmental credentials of this and most councils [except perhaps Noosa] are tarnished. The influence of developers is the obvious cause, so if that influence, through

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political donations can be stopped then the environment benefits. YCF candidates will seek this.

- Time does not permit an analysis of what is wrong with UNITYWATER. The councils that own Unity Water obtain huge dividends and huge interest payments from Unity with no effort and no risk-either business or political. The Board is basically appointed by the council with the majority shareholding and that council has delegated the appointments to the mayor. So one man controls Unity Water, by controlling the board. An immediate change in governance, and a subsequent divestment of the responsibility back to councils will be a great saving to all consumers and YCF will continue to press for this to happen.

That is the current YCF policy statement and when elected that is what our candidate are required to press for. In other council areas other issues are more urgent and that is good so long as the principle holds...putting your community first.

Let us think for a few minutes about getting an organisation like YCF on the road.

If you decide to go down the path of running a group of like-minded candidates, then you need to study the Local Government Electoral Act. It specifies the rules for a group of candidates; for example the need to register as a group and all of the requirements for How to Vote cards, accounting for political donations etc etc. Needless to say many unregistered groups were heavily criticised by the CCC for not complying at the 2016 elections, but none was prosecuted. YCF was in fact singled out as the only complying group in the whole state. In addition to complying with the law, you need to have a structure, an organisation and procedural guidelines. In the case of YCF we decided that there is a need to have a Management Committee. I detest the image of the faceless men in a smoke-filled back room making all the decisions and pulling the strings; so it is necessary to embrace openness, accountability and transparency. The management committee needs to be a group of dedicated, experienced and respected people all committed to getting the best council possible.

The roles of the Management Committee are: The establishment and publicity of policies that will bind the organisation together, will become the group's election manifesto and will be the guidelines for a new effective council.

- Recruitment of membership. If the area has existing Ratepayer Associations or protest groups then it will be necessary to embrace those existing organisations with a special class of group membership and a seat at the management table. In addition, there will be other supporters not affiliated with existing organisations who can be offered a personal membership and an opportunity to be elected to the Management Committee. Council elections need lots of workers so all existing like-minded organisations need to be recruited.
- Recruiting and selection of candidates. Prospective candidates need to agree to all of the group policies, they must be of suitable character and need to be able to fund part of their campaign. Unfortunately politics and religion always attract a few nutters and those with axes to grind or old scores to settle. Some impressive show ponies are soon found to be liabilities. In-depth interviews, reference checks, police checks and bankruptcy checks are essential.

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- Fund Raising. Each candidate will need to do personal fund raising but the Management Committee is probably more suited to approaching businesses, unions and community organisations. We have seen the influence that developers, unions and others have been able to exercise over many councillors and councils. It is a fine line, indeed it is a tightrope, to accept donations with no strings attached. Largely it is a question of the integrity of the organisation and its management. YCF, in an endeavour to be completely open and transparent, and to keep candidates at arm's length from donors, decided that a trust would achieve that aim. Meanwhile the Mayor's group, in an endeavour to conceal the sources of its funds also chose to cycle their funds through a trust! How curious. Recent changes to disclosure rules have probably negated the benefits of a trust whether it is being used for transparency or for secrecy.
- Election assistance. There are economies of scale possible if certain election materials, such as how to vote cards, corn flutes, tee shirts etc are managed centrally. Most of the media will mainly want to interview the mayoral candidate, so it is desirable that he or she be provided with a campaign manager with access to the management committee, in order to manage the candidate's time and effort. Some coordination of media releases and personal appearances is desirable. Letter box drops and polling booth manning need to be centralised so that the resources available from member organisations are best managed.
- Discipline. If a candidate proves to be a liability then a rapid response is essential. After the election, a successful candidate's burning desires can sometimes give way to complacency. We have all seen it happen. It is so much easier to sit back and vote as the mayor and staff recommend, than to do research, to lobby and to debate the proposal. Successful candidates need to be given a periodic performance assessment by the Management Committee to keep them on the straight and narrow path.

In the event, in 2016, YCF endorsed only five councillor candidates out of 12 divisions, and no mayoral candidate. It was decided that only quality candidates with a real chance would be accepted as YCF candidates. None however was successful. Considering the disparity in funding, the advantages of incumbency and the media bias; all did very well in securing the second highest vote in their divisions. It tested out the concept of a group representing the community standing as an alternative council. As a result, we remain firmly of the opinion that the next election is winnable and that the YCF model is the only way that the entrenched power of the establishment can be broken and replaced by those who wish to serve only the community.

Above all, it is essential to constantly remind ourselves about what we want to achieve...what are our principles. Our principles are the principles that are embodied in the Local Government Act. Transparent? In the public interest? Have our councils not read section 4[2]? Democratic representation? Meaningful community engagement? Yes, that would be nice, wouldn't it? Good governance ...does that mean behind closed doors? Ethical behaviour? Failures were so widespread that the CCC has been overwhelmed.

It is a belief in these principles that distinguishes Your Community First from the current councillors. And the one over-arching principle that defines a good council and condemns a bad one: A good council serves its community, it is not self-serving, and it is not beholden its financial backers, or to the state government; it represents your community, it serves only your community and it always puts YOUR COMMUNITY FIRST.