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Date: 6th May 2022

Submission to the Clarence Valley Community Strategic Plan

The Clarence Environment Centre has a proud 32-year record of environmental advocacy, with conservation of the natural environment an absolute priority. As such, we view planning as the key to an ecologically sustainable future.

Having been alerted to the above document privately at the last minute, this submission will be far from comprehensive. However, we would like to make the following observations in relation to the salient points of the Draft.

At first glance, this strategy brought back memories of Council's Sustainability Initiative, the 2008 "2020 Summit" seminars, and various regional strategies over the years, which begs the question, are we reinventing the wheel here? What happened to those earlier, largely ignored plans, and will this one end up gathering dust on some shelf the same way? As a result, this submission focusses on past failures in the hope of prompting better results in the future.

Scrolling down the Draft, we arrive at an alluring image of three young ladies with surf boards heading towards the ocean, with a caption, "POLLUTION-FREE CREEKS, BEACHES AND RIVERS." What is that? Clearly, the consultants commissioned to put this strategy together, are from outside the region, and not aware of the reality.

We need to stop deluding ourselves, and acknowledge that, for years, our rivers have been a polluted disgrace, and that right now we have a regional water supply reservoir, full of water that cannot be used, and likely to remain that way for the foreseeable future.



Muddy water in the Shannon Creek dam will be unusable for an extended period

Rivers like the Orara, lauded in verse by Henry Kendall over 150 years ago as a “*radiant brook*”, is today nothing more than a river of mud. It has been that way for decades, except during drought, when irrigators illegally pump the river dry. Council is not responsible for regulating water, so has done absolutely nothing to address the problem.

We know what is causing this disgraceful situation: Cattle trampling unfenced creek banks; along with agriculture, and intensive horticulture, where erosion control is non-existent. Urban construction and infrastructure sites where no compliance monitoring of erosion control measures takes place, also contribute. And then there is forestry, with clear-felling of plantations and minimal buffers along streams, where again regulatory oversight is non-existent, all combining to allow precious top soils to be flushed away.



The Orara River, as it has looked for decades.

If Council wants to claim to have the lofty ambition of achieving pollution free waterways, then it must get serious about actually doing something, even if it’s only forcing those responsible bodies to do their job.

On page 13 there is a claim that: “CALLS ANSWERED 72,506”. Answered by whom? I suggest, that is the number of calls answered by the switchboard operator. Our personal experience in recent times has been that the person we want to talk to is busy, and a message left on an answering machine asking for a return call is ignored at least 4 times out of 5! Those are business calls, imagine if we were calling to complain! Complain more than twice and Council now black lists you as vexatious! If council wants any credibility over its claim to “be listening”, then things must change dramatically for the better. Council knows what we want, “*a high standard of customer service to the community*”, clearly stated on page 46, and it’s time to deliver!

Page 14 sports the message that “*In looking at the community we want to build, it’s important to also consider the risks and challenges faced by our community*”, going on to state under the section: “*Climatic*”, that, “*We need to see the future and act now*”. However, council continues to ignore climate change, the greatest risk of all, and its associated sea-level rise, and regularly approves large urban developments on land in areas like West Yamba and Iluka, that we know will ultimately be inundated. This strategy is an opportunity to bring common sense to the table?

The above statements are followed by the obvious assertion that: “*Safe and well-maintained community assets are critical to supporting the fabric of society*”. Does this mean that roads and bridges that are damaged by flooding, might be fixed before council receives the emergency funding from state government?

For example, the edge of the bitumen along Geregarrow Road, near Coutts Crossing, was badly eroded in the February-March flooding in 2020, causing a sheer drop of over 300mm. Warning signs were erected which, over time, were blown over and became overgrown by weeds and grass. Those wash-outs were not fixed for well over a year.



On page 21, there's an observation that, *“natural disasters of bushfire and flood, and the COVID pandemic, have also impacted profoundly on our community”*. It is now 30 months since the valley burned, and we know that the environment cannot survive more of the same. However, no long-term fire management plan has been developed by federal, state or local governments. Why is that?

There is an admission that: *“This presents a significant challenge in ensuring our community is robust and resilient in the face of environmental change”*. Then finally, page 41, the supposed answer: *“Prepare and plan for fire”*. Why, after 30 months, hasn't a plan even been started?

At best, a plan for fire won't be in place for at least another 12 months, and it's our fervent hope that when a plan is finalised, that it will not be all about adaptation, and that it includes a serious attempt to **prevent** catastrophic fires. The reality is that with a heating planet, the fire threat can only worsen, we desperately need a highly mobile, professional, fully equipped fire-fighting force, with rapid response capabilities to deal with it. Surveillance is the key, so that during catastrophic fire conditions, within 30 minutes of smoke being detected, there are aircraft dropping water on it and ground crews on their way. We cannot allow fires to get out of control as they did in 2019. Perhaps this strategy can prompt a more proactive approach,

Page 28 starts the conversation about safe roads (*a safely maintained transport (road and bridge) network*). During recent floods, most Grafton residents would have been dumbfounded by a message that the brand-new Grafton Bridge couldn't be used due to flooding, with advice to use the historic 90-year-old structure. The new bridge was a state funded project, but was there no engineer in the local council that could have pointed out the obvious, that the planned approach was subject to flooding?



Again. When Leighton Contractors decided to use sand as the road-base when upgrading Geregarrow Road, why wasn't that questioned by one of councils many engineers? That could have prevented the bitumen from 'floating' off the sand with every flood. Where the most recent flood, February 2022, washed the bitumen off yet again, no warning signs have been erected, and 3 months on, nothing has been done to fix it.

Again, council needs to be more proactive because, if council intends to maintain safe roads and bridges by way of this latest plan, there will need to be some dramatic changes.

Under the heading “Economy”, and “*Where we are now*”, page 33 contains the statement that: “*The upgraded Pacific Highway links the region's towns and industries with the Far North Coast and the substantial population base of South East Queensland. The standard gauge rail link between Brisbane and Sydney passes through Grafton, while the Clarence Valley Regional Airport provides direct flights to Sydney and beyond*”.

Again, this comment highlights the probability that the consultants used to compile this strategy are not locals. The construction of the new Pacific Highway far to the east of Grafton, completely bypassing the former “City”, has allowed our regional centre to slip further into insignificance. With travellers now required to detour close to 50km to access Grafton, many will choose to drive straight past. With a former mayor as Chair of the the Pacific Highway Taskforce during the planning and construction phase of the upgrade, why was this allowed to happen.

Also, with soaring fuel costs, wouldn't it be great to be able to take advantage of that rail link, and hop on a train to Brisbane? Perhaps the new strategy can do something about that!

By and large however, we feel the draft strategy has done a good job of detailing the needs and aspirations of the residents of the Clarence Valley. It contains no recommendations, only aspirations, the delivery of which are apparently to be found in the “*accompanying delivery program*” (I have not seen that).

In his message, Mayor Ian Tiley rightly points out that the ultimate success of the Clarence 2032 vision is dependent to a large extent on the many community groups working together. He also explains that: “*Not all the aspirations outlined here are the responsibility of Council, although many are. Some relate to other levels of government*”. Now, with a fresh new, seemingly more progressive team of Councillors, we see the potential for a much brighter future for our valley.

We thank council for the opportunity to comment, and hope our criticism of past failures may contribute to a more proactive approach in the future.

Yours sincerely

John Edwards
Honorary Secretary.