

Good morning and welcome.

Today I am here to encourage you to take up our challenge to enable this community to stand on equal terms with every other Qld community.

We know that in this great state and indeed the nation it is often the smaller communities that make the greatest contribution to our nation. Be it with agriculture, mining, livestock production and so forth.

Weipa is already firmly entrenched as the regional capital for Cape York. Govt departments, both state and federal now realise the cape and its many communities can no longer be run exclusively from offices based in Cairns, Brisbane or dare I say, the shores of far off Lake Burley Griffin. Hence an ever increasing presence of state and federal departments and their personnel within the town has now made govt our largest employer outside of the mine. This is a bitter sweet situation as these govt buildings often just “appear” with little or no consultation or indeed permission of the town authority. This aggravates the issues surrounding the town’s already very limited available land. Weipa township is in the ludicrous situation of being a very remote community located smack in the middle of nowhere with no available land for future development. The future of an ever expanding Weipa is intrinsically linked to the availability of freehold land.

Weipa has been taking giant steps in relation to the challenges it faces as a major player in the vital areas of defence, health and education to name a few. Weipa punches far above its weight, pouring millions upon millions of dollars into the government’s coffers. So it is very clear to even the casual observer, the town is rapidly marching towards a future that now demands a governments undivided attention.

The biggest step of all, as in any journey.....is the first .....REAL.... step. That step MUST begin here today with you.

It is time for the Weipa community to be treated equally with all other Queenslanders and for past discriminations to cease. RTA can no longer have it both ways. If RTA wishes to continue its sole domination of the area then that exclusive privilege must come at a cost that cannot be fluctuated at the whim of a far away private enterprise in London.

No longer can this community continue to be burdened with an Act that was written in the middle of the last century when the town was no more than a single mans mining camp. When freehold was not an option. So very very much has changed over the years leading up to the present. Everything except the Commonwealth Aluminium Act.

So.....what are the options for Weipa’s future.

It is becoming painfully obvious to both Rio Tinto Alcan and the town in general that we cannot continue to support the huge influx of residents and tourists, not to mention large opposition mining companies poised to use the town as their headquarters. This is at the expense of Weipa’s ratepayers and RTA. Bear in mind that no rate revenue

comes from any of these giant mining leases as they all fall outside the town's tiny boundary.

A new direction must be mapped out for the future of the town to enable it to continue with the growth it has sustained over past decades.

One option may be that the town operates under a coalition agreement whereby the Weipa Town Authority is recognised to a point which would enable the WTA to access funding from both state and federal sources, bringing Weipa into line with every other town in Australia. This path, coupled with a fixed re occurring contribution from RTA that is aligned with CPI could produce a stable fiscal platform. The elephant in the room here is that it still does not solve the long term question of the town's ultimate status when the mine ceases operations. It would however be a giant step towards getting nominalisation to its final destination.

Amalgamation with neighbouring Cook Shire could also be an option. This would solve the issues of the town being landlocked by Cook Shire and open up opportunities in many directions for both communities. This arguably, would be the simplest of the options and certainly the easiest option to achieve local govt status. The elephant in the room here is called Assets. Who will compensate RTA for the infrastructure they have in place? How much will RTA seek in compensation? And for what, is a question that has yet to be answered.

Then there is the evergreen option of normalisation. This option involves the town morphing into a stand alone local govt. This does have some problematic challenges insofar as a very limited rate base that is unable to support the town on a stand alone basis and would require considerable additional funding from govt for many years to come. Again the transition of infrastructure rears its head with this option.

The status quo could be a possibility only if RTA upped their annual anti by many millions of dollars per year and have the amount indexed. This option would seem a little unfair as more and more opposition mining companies start up in the region without directly contributing to the town's rate base. The huge increase in tourists to the area is also draining the limited resources available for roads etc.

Just returning for a moment to the matter of infrastructure; many millions of dollars have been sunk into the town's infrastructure by RTA over the years - power stations, sewerage, roads, and wharfs etc. To take over these assets and many others would be a huge financial burden to any organisation be it govt or private sector. A staged take over of these assets by both govt and the private sector should be a work in progress starting in the very near future, no matter what the outcome of the town's future may be. It is an issue that is central to whichever option is chosen. The litmus test for transmission of assets should be main roads. This is one area where the govt should be stepping in and taking over at the minimum, the main arterials around the town. This would be one of the simplest assets to commence the process of infrastrutre transfer.

The way forward, no matter what option you may prefer, must have the state govt clearing the way to enable changes to occur. Understand that the wheels must begin to turn now, here today. Ponder for a moment the dire consequences if the Weipa operations of RTA folded or were sold off. This situation could well have been a

reality just a couple of months ago when massive companies from around the world crashed overnight. It was a very sobering moment for the town. If RTA had shut shop, as has just happened with another mining company in WA, leaving a devastated ghost town in financial ruin behind them when they just abandoned the area. Had this happened here I very much doubt the Qld state govt could have rallied the support required before Weipa fell by the wayside. There is far from any certainty that a new owner of the mine, if indeed there was one, would want any part of financing an entire town or shire.

Year after year we see many cases of every local govt in Qld receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars in aid and grants. The latest being the stimulus packages all of Australia received with the one exception once again being Weipa.

We all understand RTA's reluctance to let go of the reins. What we also need to understand is that it is a commercial desire that drives this and it is not necessarily for the protection or benefit of the residents and rate payers of Weipa. Time and again the residents of Weipa have been shut out of secret negotiations between the state and RTA. It is interesting to note that even the current interdepartmental committee set up to investigate the way forward to some form of nominalisation for the area has never once consulted with anyone from the town and has no town representative on the committee. If anyone has the right to a gurnsey on this committee it must surely be someone who actually is a resident. After all, they are the people all this is supposed to benefit. As you can see by our actions here today we the residents and ratepayers are desperate to be involved in the process.

The future is not only about the 3,500 residents of Weipa. This is about the thousands and thousands of residents all over the cape that rely on Weipa for all the services that city folk take for granted. The longer the status quo remains the more difficult this disentanglement of ownership will be. Let us not underestimate the challenges ahead to bring the town into line with the rest of the state but the longer we place this in the too hard basket the murkier the waters will become.

Each of you sitting here today have been specifically invited to attend because the members of the Weipa Town Authority see you as a vital cog in the future of the town and the surrounding communities. We are asking you to set the wheels in motion to enable us to join with the rest of Qld and indeed the nation on an even footing.

We have had years and years of time wasters and gunners who were going to fix this situation. For Weipa to become part of the local govt scene takes just one important step. And it can be taken at any time Rio Tinto chooses to take it. That's it in a nutshell. Never mind the smoke screens and the rhetoric. That is and always has been the criteria for local govt since day one way back in 1957. We have generation after generation of RTA general managers who are and never will be permanent ratepayers. The reality is that time spent in Weipa for a mine manager is no more than a rung on the ladder to somewhere else. Always has been. That is not to say they do not care for the town but the attention span lasts only for their tenure here in Weipa. Make all the excuses under the sun for not taking on the challenges of local govt and in every case it boils down to what RioTinto Alcan wants and the lack lustre performance of the state govt in past attempts to bring the town into line. A major factor in RTA's decision not to release land to any entity is the fear they will be held to ransom on

future rates for active mining lease areas. That may well be a valid reason for withholding land but it does not explain why the town is surrounded by kilometre after kilometre of vacant land mined out over thirty years ago and still sitting under RTAs control.

For years and years the residents have tried via the correct and lawful avenues to resolve this most vexing and totally unsatisfactory situation to absolutely no avail whatsoever. Past governments have continually failed us and RTA has fobbed off any real attempt for the town to gain local govt status. This is despite Comalco stating in the media as far back as 1996 and I quote “ Our MAJOR interest,..... our major interest, is in getting out of the role of a local government authority and concentrating on our core mining activities” To this I say thank god it is not one of their minor interests. Please do not cite the toothless WTA as an example of progress. Fifty two long years to get to the stage the WTA is at present. Very few of the present ratepayers will be alive to see local govt at this rate of progress. Bear in mind it only took 6 years to create the entire state of Qld from start to finish back in 1851. 6 years to enact an entire state from nothing. And here we are, 52 years on, over half a century and the people of Weipa are still not recognised as Queenslanders. There are people in this room that should hang their head in shame. 52 years.

The future is for RTA and the state govt to transform Weipa to what every other mining town in Qld has become without the fuss and ado that has gone on for so long. The blatant discrimination under this present state of affairs must cease.

And so in closing I say that any of the options will take time to implement. What must happen in the interim is if RTA insist on continued running of the town it must be required by whatever process to contribute a fair and equitable amount to not only maintain the towns status Quo but additional funds to enable the town to expand and improve. The town cannot have vital funds that it needs to operate, stopped or reduced to a level that would bankrupt other towns just because the RTA share price dropped. This is a mining company that pay some of their individual staff members two and three times per year what they put into the entire annual town budget. Just think about that. If RTA wish to continue to own the town then like all things in this world you must pay a fair and equitable price for the privilege of owning this magnificent part of Australia. A price not arbitrarily set by the customer depending on how the customer is feeling at the time.

For Gods sake pull the CAL act out of the cupboard, dust it off and give this town the future is so richly deserves.

Peter Graham  
WTA Elected Member