

Weipa Town Report for 2003/2004

I understand that many in the community may not be aware of what has been achieved in Weipa over the last year, and what is in store for this year. Through this report I hope to make you more aware of some of those achievements and to dispel some of the myths that tend to circulate around our Town.

In order to fully understand some of the issues it is important that you understand Weipa's Budget. You may recall in an earlier edition of the "Weipa Bulletin" that the Weipa Town Committee (WTC) manage the Town on behalf of Comalco, and Town Office is responsible to implement the WTC's decisions policies and plans for the Town. You may also recall that the WTC comprises of a Chairperson and 6 Committee Members.

Rates and Funding

Like other Towns we require a budget to maintain our Town and the services that are provided. This is done in two ways; firstly, rates are collected from property owners (including Comalco), which make up for about \$2M per year, and secondly, we seek additional funds from Comalco to assist in maintaining and improving our infrastructure. This figure varies according to our strategic plans, but for this year we will receive about \$2.5M from Comalco to upgrade our water, sewerage and road assets.

Over the last year many people have raised concerns that their rates are too high. One of the reasons that may lead you to believe that your rates are expensive is that the general rate was not increased for about 7 years. Our rates desperately needed reviewing and increases were inevitable in the process if we were to continue to provide you with the services you depend upon. And, in addition to those adjustments I must remind you that rates increase in accordance with the Consumer Price Index (CPI) of around 3% per annum. To give you a clearer understanding, this is what happened to your rates last year:

- Garbage – the costs were reduced without loss of services due to a new contract;
- Water – the costs increased because the "real" cost was applied, and for the upgrading and maintenance of the water treatment plant (lime dosing);
- Sewerage – the costs increased to cater for future requirements; and
- General Rate – the costs increased to cover rising costs in the day-to-day operations of the library, Town administration, and the Parks and Gardens contract.

Unfortunately, the \$2M we do collect in rates only covers our expenses i.e. garbage collection, the maintenance of our parks and gardens and town administration.

Because we are a mining town we do not qualify for any additional State or Federal funding that other Towns are afforded, so we have to rely on Comalco, or increase our rates if we are to do more. The challenge is, that if we had the opportunity to seek State and Federal funding we would have to compete with other communities in our region, and even then, we may not receive everything we expect. Fortunately for us, Comalco are now proving to be very supportive of the needs of the Town.

Achievements in 2003

The WTC, with the help of Comalco, have achieved and improved much in our Town over the last year. Last year we recommissioned a lime dosing plant, resealed some of the roads, constructed street calming through the school area and we managed to save about \$300K from some cost savings and a GST return. We intend to reinvest our savings into a new swimming complex in 2004/2005. Furthermore, the development of strategic plans i.e. water and sewerage, asset management and our environmental management system are all well developed, and when complete, along with an updated financial strategy will result in a total management plan for Weipa. The importance of these strategies cannot be underestimated because they support, and albeit guarantee our requests for additional funds.

You also need to be aware that the WTC, government departments (locally) and our political leaders have been lobbying Government for a new Hospital and for improvements to the Rocky Point Boat Ramp for some years now. I am convinced the hard work of these organisations was vindicated when the State Government announcement the development of a new hospital facility, the reestablishment of the Rocky Point Boat Ramp and the upgrade of the Evans Landing Boat Ramp. The QLD Government has advised that these projects will be completed inside the next 3 years.

Weipa Town has also become a member of the newly formed Regional Organisation of Councils Cape York (ROCCY). The ROCCY comprises of all Councils on the Cape and its charter is to represent the Councils and lobby government on local government issues. Some of the issues already being addressed are; roads, tourism, tourist facilities and social issues that impact on our communities.

Plans for 2004

This year the WTC are intending to replace water mains and kerb and channel in Rocky Point, repair and upgrade sewerage mains, reseal roads and modify some of the existing infrastructure and continue to develop our asset management strategy and urban design plans. In addition, we are continuing to progress projects i.e. the swimming pool complex and a combined community library for Weipa and the Western Cape.

One of the most exciting projects planned for this year is the development of an urban design plan for Weipa. We do have a Town Plan that has served us well, but we need to have a strategic model to support the development of our Town beyond 2010, particularly now that Comalco are expanding their operations. This strategic model will identify the “Heart” of the Town, and additionally it will identify the best location for the development of our major works i.e. a swimming pool complex and library.

In line with the urban design project the WTC are negotiating with Comalco and Cook Shire about the possibility of expanding the Weipa Town Boundary. If successful there could be the opportunity for further investment in rural residential developments and other industries in the future. Currently, some of the Comalco infrastructure (Lorim Point) and the majority of the mining lease lie in Cook Shire, which means Comalco pay rates to Cook Shire as opposed to us. The expansion of the Town boundary is a lengthy process and it will take some time before there is any resolution.

Recently the WTC has commissioned a “Local Laws” specialist to review our existing local laws and bring us into line with other communities by introducing new laws that are needed e.g. “Parks and Reserves”. Local Laws are there for the protection our way of life and to protect our community’s property from vandals. Each year we spend about \$70K on repairing or replacing Town infrastructure and maintaining our park areas at the ratepayer’s expense, so if you break a local law, you could face a heavy fine. The new local laws will be subjected to a lengthy local government process before being ratified by the WTC, and then published locally. Remember the laws are there to protect our community and it’s only those who break or disrespect our laws that should be concerned.

“Normalisation or Not”

If you reflect on the last decade or so you will notice that Weipa has had a constant struggle with the issue of “Normalisation”. For a start, I am not convinced that we really understand what it is to be “normalised” and what it would really mean for us if we did change. If you speak to most, however, it probably means that we would no longer be under the apron strings of Comalco. We would be a local government in our own right and free to make decisions about the future of Weipa through democratic processes. If that’s true then why hasn’t it occurred before now? After reading through the myriad of history on the subject one thing is clear, it’s not easy, and if it were we’d be there now.

The fact is we probably won’t change until we force the change by committing to some very important steps. Firstly, it has to be something that we all want, and unless a survey indicates that the majority of people in Weipa are committed to change then the QLD Government will not support that move. Secondly, we have

to be in a sustainable position to ensure that we are not a burden on the broader community. In other words, the rates that we collect and the government funding we receive would have to be sufficient enough to sustain our community. I would think the last thing we want is to gain our independence and then bear the cost of increasing rates to maintain our life style. Thirdly, people need to own this Town, and with only 35% of the Town privately owned we still have a way to go. Having said that, Comalco's strategies are encouraging and through the development of the new Nanum sub-division and the freeing up of other land in the Town this may just create the environment we need for change. There are a number of other issues to numerous to mention now, but you be the judge; If you believe we will not suffer significantly as a result of normalisation then lets do it, but if you believe more work is needed, then we need to develop a plan for the future.

Your WTC

The last issue I would like to raise is the role that WTC play in our community. We all need to remember that the WTC sacrifice their own time to represent you and make decisions on your behalf, which believe it or not, are in the best interests of all people in our community. If you have an issue there are a number of avenues available; firstly, you can approach either myself or the other WTC members in person, secondly, you can approach the WTC at their monthly meetings, or thirdly, you can write to us with your concerns or grievances. Whichever method you decide on is your choice, but if you have a good idea or if your case benefits the broader community, and its reasonable and achievable, then I would feel confident of success. But if you are looking to benefit your own cause at the expense of others, then think again.

With elections for the WTC being contested on Saturday, 27th March 2004 it is time to think about the team you want to lead you over the next four years. Nominations for a Chairperson and 3 Committee Members closed last Friday with the following results:

- I was unopposed as the Chairperson, so I am subsequently re-elected to that position.
- The following candidates will contest the remaining 3 Committee Member positions available;
 - Trevor Snodgrass;
 - Jos DeWaard;
 - Peter Miller;
 - Peter Graham (Crazy Pete);
 - Peter McCulkin;
 - Jean Little; and
 - Carrie Gay.

As a lead up to the election it may be a great opportunity for you to ask some questions of the candidates. I suggest that if you have questions then please write too, or drop your questions into Town Office during office hours. Town Office will compile the most asked questions and put them to the candidates so they can respond in the Bulletin over the next few weeks.

In closing, I hope I have answered all the questions and issues that may have been concerning you over the last year, but if I haven't please contact either me, or the WTC for further clarification. Furthermore, I would like to take this opportunity to wish all the candidates the best of luck for the Weipa Town elections on Saturday, 27th March 2004.

Michael Rowland
Chairperson
Weipa Town Committee

Weipa Town "Life on the Cape"