



*BG Urban Solutions*

**SUBMISSION  
TO THE  
PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION  
RE: NATURAL DISASTER FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS**

**Made by:**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This submission will be brief. Further information can be provided, upon request, in relation to any aspect of the commentary provided in this submission.

### **Declaration of Interests:**

The author has no clients or any particular kind of financial vested interest in the outcome of the Commission's investigations. This submission has been prepared on a voluntary basis and for the purpose of assisting the Commissioners in their deliberations as to what is a better, fairer and more efficacious approach to determining the proportional share of Commonwealth funding support to the States as a consequence of disaster events.

The following submission has had regard to the parameters of the Commission's investigations, as published on the Productivity Commission's website that:

It is understood the Commission has been asked to specifically report and make findings on:

1. The effectiveness and sustainability of current arrangements for funding natural disaster mitigation, resilience and recovery initiatives
2. Risk management measures available to and being taken by asset owners – including the purchase of insurance as well as self-insurance options
3. The interaction between Commonwealth natural disaster funding arrangements and relevant Commonwealth/State financial arrangements
4. Options to achieve an effective and sustainable balance of natural disaster recovery and mitigation to build the resilience of communities
5. Projected medium and long term impacts of identified options on the Australian economy and costs for governments.

The format of this submission has been kept simple and generally addresses most of the above points, so far as they relate directly to my professional planning expertise, first-hand experience and, particularly in relation to flood risk and management in Queensland, my direct and handed down social history from my parents and grandparents.

An attached "photo essay" is provided to further illustrate the points made in this submission. A CV and personal profile are also attached, to illustrate my qualifications and experience, as further background.



## **SUBMISSION**

As a highly qualified planner and Fellow of the Planning Institute of Australia, with extensive experience in both Victoria and Queensland, I wish to formally convey my support for the recent announcements made by the Productivity Commission in its draft report, in recommending a shift in the Commonwealth's share of disaster recovery works, from 75 to 50 percent.

From my considerable experience and observation over the last decade in Queensland, of how local councils or State Government have been issuing planning approvals, it has to be said: there would have been a whole lot less disaster (and even loss of life) if there had not been quite so many questionable rezonings of obviously flood prone land, such as beside the Nagoa River in Emerald, for example, as well as many other coastal and riverine areas I could cite in Bundaberg, Rockhampton and Livingstone Shire Council areas.

Likewise, if for any cultural or historic reason, there was a deemed need to remain or rebuild in such vulnerable areas, it would have been both prudent and more consistent with standard planning practice and, indeed, Queensland's planning legislation\* to at least ensure design details (of homes or major infrastructure) enabled property or infrastructure to at least meet the long standing local government engineering benchmark of the 1 in 100 year flood rule. As the Commission would be aware and was well documented at the time, for most of Queensland and arguably even Brisbane too, the significant flood events of 2011 (across Qld) and 2013 (Yeppoon and Bundaberg) were not record-breaking events, in most cases not even equivalent to a 1 in 20 or 1 in 40 year event.

(\*“*maintenance of the ..inter alia... social and physical well-being of people and communities*” - see Section 8 c) Sustainable Planning Act 2009; and Section 1.3.3 c) of the Integrated Planning Act 1997; *and observe the precautionary principle* – see Section 5. 1) a) iii) of the Sustainable Planning Act and Section 1.2.3 1) a) iii) of the Integrated Planning Act 1997).

Turning, then, to the question of equitable apportionment of cost recovery, ***given it is the States which have the Constitutional power to make decisions about land...and, therefore, that the land use planning (and development assessment) system is a State responsibility, therein lies the accountability mechanism for ensuring all new development and infrastructure design and construction is only allowed in appropriate locations and designed to best practice standards.***

However, as evidenced by the scale of disruption and devastation during what were by no means peak or record breaking flood event, such an accountability mechanism has clearly not been the case in Queensland over recent years. Without seeking to revisit the entire scope of the 2011 Flood Commission of Inquiry, Queensland is one of the largest States and as such, there is no shortage of space and therefore no compelling need to compromise standard planning and engineering practice to desist from allowing new urban development in flood prone areas. It is to the considerable social, economic and environmental cost of the Queensland and Australian economy, that observance of the 1 in 100year standard has, evidently, not been observed.

Likewise, even in light of lessons from earlier floods, there are various engineering and architectural variations that could have been prudently applied, that would have at least reduced the degree of



vulnerability of people and communities (and public infrastructure) to prevent further damage and danger in future. *Contrary to the argument put by some / many (non-planners) history does not need to condemn entire communities or suburbs or infrastructure to repeated inundation or destruction: the underlying principle of all planning legislation and related development assessment processes is typically to prevent such expensive repeated mistakes and travesties.*

As a result, and as even reportedly admitted by QLGA President Greg Hallam, it is understood (from an ABC News report, 25<sup>th</sup> Sept 2014\*) there has been \$16Billion worth of damage “from floods/natural disasters” just over the last three years. (\*<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-25/disaster-funding-changes-productivity-commission/5769470> )

As a close observer of the 1991 flood, a technically bigger flood than 2011 in relation to the Fitzroy River and its upstream tributaries, and as a “daughter and granddaughter of Capricornia”, who grew up hearing all about the years of big floods and where “you would never build”, when I saw and heard the significantly greater “drama” associated with the 2011 flood events (not just those confined to the Fitzroy system, I was prompted to wonder: What had been going on in Queensland over the last two decades, to create such a debacle in 2011-13?

***From subsequent events and government responses since then, I have concluded that, until Councils and (all) State governments are made to pay a larger share of the cost of (largely preventable, man-made) disaster events, there will never be an efficient and adequately powerful accountability mechanism to prevent the otherwise never-ending “crying poor”/ handout mentality from the States towards the Commonwealth, and instead, prompt a greater commitment to preventing “disasters” in the first place, by ensuring more prudent and transparent local government planning assessment processes, replete with greater scope for public scrutiny.***

As a private individual, I have been prompted to formally offer this submission now, as there has been recent talk amongst federal politicians of the now urgent need for more dams, across the eastern seaboard including Queensland. For a range of Triple Bottom Line reasons, rather than supporting the idea of large dams, I remain more an advocate of a network of weirs and ecologically sound re-made billabongs, in principle. I very much agree there is an urgent need to improve water resource management at a regional level, particularly in Capricornia.

However, this just highlights the direct economically measurable opportunity cost of what else Queensland could have, should have, done with \$16Billion over the last three financial years, if it did not “have” to be squandered on cleaning up and repairing so much infrastructure that was either poorly planned (road and rail alignments along or crossing draining contours with a greater risk than 1 in 100 years) or poorly designed (e.g. choosing the “cheaper” height or design option for a bridge).

It must also be borne in mind, there remains an as yet unacknowledged added (enormous) economic opportunity cost to agriculture, tourism and commercial fishing in Capricornia, from having lost quite so much topsoil and water in the 2011 flood (i.e. well above what could be reasonably considered a “natural” flood event) from the land, which in turn, suffocated and contaminated corals and sea grass beds in Keppel Bay and beyond. This point is illustrated further in the attached photo essay, recently compiled by me: “Central Queensland in Flood – a short history”.



## CONCLUSION

Bearing in mind the above points, I find it somewhat astonishing to note the current Queensland Minister for Planning's reported comments\* protesting the Productivity Commission's proposal to shift the cost sharing ratio to 50-50. The only reason why Queensland might well be "impacted more" is because, from my three decades of close observation, it is Queensland that has the most nefarious or incompetent track record when it comes to development approvals. ([\\*http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-25/disaster-funding-changes-productivity-commission/5769470](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-25/disaster-funding-changes-productivity-commission/5769470) )

Rather, as has been demonstrated on many occasion over the decades in other States, it ultimately proves far more economically productive (and more socially benign) to foster a more competent implementation and administration of a planning system, foster greater public scrutiny of that system and, where applicable and has been at least demonstrated in the case of the Lockyer Valley, enable land swaps ...along with modifying route alignments and / or design and construction techniques for major transport infrastructure to avoid vulnerability to major flood events.

Due to time and other limitations, I would like to just briefly note that, in relation to cyclones, the recent experience from Cyclone Yasi also exposed some similar concerns to those expressed above, in relation to floods, although overall, many new buildings did demonstrate the economic productivity gains that have been made from the new building regulations that were born out of the devastation of Cyclone Tracey in Darwin, in 1974. In that respect, and in those days, there were no such quibbles from builders and developers as to any supposed greater cost impacts of more robust design and construction standards. It must also be noted that, both in Townsville and Magnetic Island, many a magnificent or even humble "Queenslander" house managed to comfortably withstand even TC Yasi, with a little help also from appropriate siting and protection by local geomorphology.

However, in terms of lost productivity, lessons are to be learned about the merit of more localised, independent (i.e. non-grid connected) solar power systems, to avoid the Townsville – Magnetic Island experience of many householders, of having invested considerably in solar panels on the roof ...and still ending up without power for a week ...and thus losing perishables from fridge and freezer, even though rooftop panels were intact. So, the SmartGrid, proved not to be so smart afterall, especially bearing in mind expert advice that 62% of electricity generated is lost in transmission. ([\\*http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/ockhamsrazor/lathered-up-about-co2/3676970](http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/ockhamsrazor/lathered-up-about-co2/3676970) )