

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE, AND TRANSPORT

SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY INTO LOCAL GOVERNMENT COUNCIL SUSTAINABILITY

28 November 2025

SUMMARY It is clear that current local government arrangements are not sustainable financially or acceptable from a community perspective at least in this area. A key solution is to involve the energy in the community.

ANALYSIS Prior to the council amalgamation forced upon this community, the Great Lakes Council had a backlog of maintenance of 5%, Taree 90% and Gloucester 95% (Source: John Chadban, former Mayor of Great Lakes Council).

The latest information from the General Manager that I have is that financial sustainability of the merged council (Mid Coast Council) will take another five to six years. I have asked for an update and will forward it to you when I get it together with answers to the other questions attached. From the meeting below, it would appear that sustainability is a mirage.

At a Council / Community meeting on 18 November 2025, the current Mayor, Claire Pontin, explained that while Council rates are adequate to fund day-to-day expenses, that is all. Of annual rates of \$105m, \$57m goes on road maintenance; a further \$15m is required annually to keep them at their current level and \$37m to improve them to a good standard. The current backlog in total is \$130m forecast to reach \$195m in ten years. That requires external funding given the very large road network in the second largest LGA, by area, in NSW. Moreover, given the dispersed nature of our communities, we have relatively more infrastructure such as swimming pools than metropolitan councils. It is worth mentioning here that Council has recently closed the Nabic library on cost grounds even though it was all run by volunteers, and sold the building. That is a disgraceful erosion of a community, who, we were told should now travel to Taree or Bulahdelah for library services (Forster would actually be nearer).

The community here is well aware of the poor condition of its roads and its erosion as a community. A simple example: for reasons of cost, Council has now put a footpath on a busy road instead of cutting into the slope beside the road and foregoing concreting people's front grass – a clear case of ignoring

basic public safety, 101. My wife has seen small children fall off the kerb onto the roadway; just as well no vehicles were coming. It is worth noting, too, that with the large amount of development in our area alone some five at present count, the situation will only get worse. Had we had our own council, it is probable that such lack of public safety could have been avoided. But one cannot expect that a Taree based and oriented council with such extensive, dispersed responsibilities can be as responsive as a local council.

In a good democracy, power and responsibility are devolved into the community; amalgamation has reversed that process and eroded our democracy.

It is worth observing also that it is human nature to put in the extra effort for their own community, whether as employees or volunteers.

Amalgamation is only one reason for the current pass. At the outset, the merged council policy was to have common standards across all areas, some might say share the pain. On the face of it, the State government knew of the parlous financial situation in Taree and off-loaded the problem onto our neighbouring community which was solvent. Like it or not, this is the growth area especially for retirement villages – which use local services but evidently do little to contribute to them. How they are rated is an issue here.

Demographics are at play here. The Manning area had 300 dairy farms; at last count it had 60 (and at Bulahdelah, thirty is now two). Boral has been buying up local timber mills, not to keep them going but for their timber allocation. Local industry has also closed down. In Wingham, for example, there used to be a parquet factory, gone. Goninans used to overhaul diesel trains there, gone. For a period (2010-2014?) the population in Taree even declined. A special local tour boat business very popular with visitors and locals alike has been destroyed through lack of dredging that used to be done to keep the channel between the ocean and the lake open. (It must be reversed).

So, it appears that the State government opted for the cheap and easy option, for them, in offloading their responsibilities via council merger irrespective of the viability of so doing. And clearly, it is not and has not been viable with merger being a continuing sinkhole for finances.

Solutions? Use the energy of local communities acting in their own interest by demerger. (Gloucester doesn't even have a representative on council). We now have a very active and valuable family run newspaper based in Forster

(The Forster Fortnightly) and distributed throughout our local community that keeps our community spirit alive. Get the dredging done for us and tourists. Bulahdelah now has a robotic dairy, despite obstruction from council, which is of great interest and ingenuity. Require developers to fund not just the road adjacent but wider community infrastructure, and pay proper rates. Recognise the demographic change. In short, work from the bottom up.

It is worth saying here that demerger is realistic. We don't need a town hall – that is for towns, not a dispersed community. Council has recognized this in having community conversations around the LGA. But, noting that the State government at one point held cabinet meetings around the state, Council should do the same using local halls and community centres. That is democracy in action. (Our council chambers have been sold together with other community assets to prop up the merger.)

Recognising the change since covid, many now work from home, thus limiting the need for a centralized workplace. In our case, Great Lakes has a magnificent (some would say grandiloquent) new Civic Centre which with a nearby motel that council owns would provide for those functions that need a central administration. Council depots, of course, are and need to be distributed.

It is, moreover, not a question of the number of bums on seats, it is productivity, and those who are involved in their community will be more productive than those who are not.

In short, involve people.

John King

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