

Budget Address

Douglas Shire Mayor Michael Kerr

As we present Douglas Shire Council's Budget for the 2022/23 financial year, I would like to take a moment to reflect on the difficult period our region has just been through, and spare a thought for those who continue to face difficulties unlike anything we could have ever predicted.

Since the start of 2020, when this term of council began, Douglas has faced challenge after challenge outside the normal trials of day-to-day council operations.

Our community's resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic, when vital visitor markets were cut off, deserves to be commended. I personally saw how many businesses diversified their offerings and made difficult decisions in order to see through what was in front of them.

Today's budget is the first in the post-pandemic era, which I say with caution as whilst we may have made it through the lock downs, lock outs and mandatory responses, the long-term effects of Covid-19 are still all around us.

I haven't even mentioned the global issues such as the war in Ukraine, which is placing pressure on our economy.

As we sit here today, there are positives. Port Douglas is over-flowing with tourists for school holidays, houses are being built at new subdivisions and Council continues to deliver the projects and services our community deserves and requires.

But we are clearly facing many new challenges. Global supply chains are facing significant disruptions. Prices are skyrocketing, products are harder to find, housing for staff is becoming non-existent, labour shortages are hurting industries and higher costs of living are affecting all our community.

People can see this right across the economy, whether it is going to the grocery store, putting fuel in your car, or building something - costs are increasing at an elevated rate, and these are also real costs for Council to consider when budgeting to provide for our shire.

Mayor's Budget Address
Tuesday 28 June 2022

As a shire, the record low rental vacancy rates need to be a concern. However, this phenomenon is not restricted to just Douglas. In Canberra last week, it was the predominant discussion at the Australian Local Government Association conference. Over 95% of attendees agreed the country was experiencing a housing crisis. We will continue to lobby the other levels of government to assist in finding realistic solutions to address the housing crisis.

I believe this team of Councillors has managed to get the best result we can to keep the broader general rate rise for residents as low as possible and below CPI, while keeping this Council in a good financial position.

This \$53.6 million-dollar budget includes a \$13.7 million dollar capital works program featuring 57 projects.

Our community will see a \$4.7 million investment in roads and transport infrastructure, \$3.27 million pumped into continuing improvements of our water supply and \$1.83 million into community facilities, including parks and gardens.

We will be spending \$1.1 million on expanding the Smart Water Meter Program to all properties with reticulated water supply in the Douglas Shire. Council is already saving 200 kilolitres, or five backyard swimming pools every day after installing 900 meters during the first stage in Port Douglas earlier this year.

With the Mossman-to-Cooya Beach cycleway nearing completion, another \$190,000 will be spent on a design the final stretch of the pathway from Cooya Beach back to the Captain Cook Highway, and the design of a section from Captain Cook Highway to Lakeland Avenue in Port Douglas.

The cycleways are part a package of projects such as streetscape improvements, sports masterplan upgrades and parks refresh aimed at giving Douglas Shire residents greater experiences and an even better place to live.

In the next 12 months, Council will spend more than \$21 million on material and services providing potential opportunity for local businesses to work with us.

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This is a solid budget which keeps the broader general rate rises below the current CPI of 6%, maintains service levels and ensures we continue to track to financial sustainability considerably earlier than first predicted at the height of the COVID pandemic.

We did this while continuing to address the inequities in the rating structure through stage 2 of an independent review into our rating categories.

During this review, a 3.9% general rate increase was applied across the board with variations to different categories. To put that in perspective, for a category one property, where a ratepayer lives at the address, the median rate increase is \$43 per year, or 82 cents per week.

For a property in residential rating category five, where a ratepayer does not live at the address, the median rate increase is \$93 per year, or \$1.78 per week. This is the same median rate increase for building units where the ratepayer does not live at the address.

This was done by considering feedback from organisations and ratepayers when undertaking the review, as well as recent land valuations completed by the Department of Resources.

Compared to other similar-sized regions across the state, Douglas is in a strong position and despite our small population, we are able to offer a wide, varied and high level of service to our rate base.

I believe that this is a sensible budget which is designed to set this Council up to weather the increasing challenges facing all governments and businesses in coming years.