

GOONELLABAH, NSW, 2480

Sunday, April 24, 2022

INDEPENDENT FLOOD INQUIRY

Professor Mary O’Kane and Michael Fuller

Dear Mary and Michael

I am submitting my thoughts towards the review of the preparation for, causes of, response to and recovery from the 2022 catastrophic flood event in the Northern Rivers in February and March, 2022.

I first came to Lismore on Palm Sunday, 1970, to take up an appointment as a Lecturer in Education at the Teachers’ College, Lismore. My office was on the top floor of the building on _____ Street at the college site which had been renovated after Lismore High School moved out to its flood-free site in East Lismore. It must have been assumed that the young student teachers were better able to cope with recurring floods, compared to the former high school students. For the next few years, there were floods in Lismore and the start of classes was delayed for The Teachers’ College, Lismore and later, Northern Rivers College of Advanced Education. Students would actually enjoy the challenge of about a week with no lectures. Some of their ‘flood parties’ were indeed ‘infamous.’ During my early time as an academic, I researched the local situation and was told on a number of occasions, that in the early days of European settlement along the banks of what is now, Wilson’s River, the settlers were informed by the local indigenous people, NOT to settle in the basin of what became Lismore, as two rivers joined and flooded regularly, nearly every year. However, the early settlers were dependent on the river for their small cargo boats to carry timber to the coast for ultimate delivery in Great Britain.

WERE THE HEARER’S, LISTENING?

Recently, The Northern Rivers Times published an article titled: ‘Multiple floods not an unusual occurrent for Lismore.’ [April 7, 2022, page 15]

WERE THE RESIDENTS, LISTENING?

Clearly, the repetitive cost, both financial and human, and more, should have stopped BUT it hasn’t!

WERE THE DECISION-MAKERS, LISTENING?

There have been multiple Inquiries and various outcomes, such as, building the levee bank around the Lismore CBD; lifting homes in flood-prone areas of North and South Lismore; building higher floors at local schools such as, South Lismore Primary School and Richmond River High School. Just to mention a few recent examples. Also, consider the many Catholic school sites in flood-prone areas. The planners for the future institution, now, Southern Cross University, had LISTENED and the institution was established on higher ground in East Lismore/Lismore Heights. It is confusing as to why Richmond River High School site has had continuous occupation since it was built and expanded by the NSW Dept of Education.

WERE THE EDUCATION PLANNERS, LISTENING?

About twenty years ago, the Lismore City Council moved its Headquarters to higher ground at Goonellabah and the Simeoni land was established as a Shopping Centre.

HEY, SOME FOLK WERE LISTENING!

The 2022 catastrophe led to the Goonellabah Shopping Centre, the nearby the Goonellabah Medical Centre and the City Council offices, becoming the vital regional hub for services and food.

Similarly, the 'out-of-flood' Evacuation Centres at Southern Cross University and Goonellabah Sports Centre were essential for folk affected by the floods, as are the ongoing Recovery Centre provisions at the Southern Cross University site. However, such has meant that the study and learning arrangements for Higher Education students have needed to be changed to 'on-line learning' as a consequence. Is that fair for the Higher Education students?

I was involved as an Anglicare volunteer on Monday, February 28, 2022 at the Evacuation Centre based at P Block, Southern Cross University. The situation was chaotic. From my standpoint, there seemed to be no-one 'in charge' to co-ordinate the demand. The rain poured down, hundreds of folk with pets – dogs, cats, birds in cages – many folk with multiple pets, were left outside in the rain, as there was no arrangements for a 'zoo' inside the Sports Hall. Eventually, a 'pet friendly' site was opened and the bedraggled pet owners moved into shelter. There was a clog-up of folk arriving via helicopter, bus and motor vehicles. The Registration area was at the Front Door, confused with lines of upset and even angry, folk wearing wet and muddy clothes. The initial need was for dry towels, clean underwear, generally larger sized clothing and warm rugs. Later socks, for cold feet, were desperately needed.

A REVIEW OF SUCH FUTURE ARRANGEMENTS IS ESSENTIAL.

WHO WILL BE LISTENING?

Like many people, I became an avid LISTENER of the local ABC Radio 94.5 FM. We must be grateful for their communication system. Jo Shoebridge and her fellow broadcasters and back-up team were amazing and essential.

Two matters that were evident as critical challenges were: Housing and Telephone connections. Related to these were electric power, fresh water supplies, and transport.

On the afternoon of Tuesday, March 8, 2022 I sent an email message to the Premier, Dominic Perrotet and the Mayor of Lismore. Subsequently, I received replies and now, nearly two months later, pod cabin-type housing villages are being established at Wollongbar Sports Field.

A copy of my email is included below:

Tuesday, 8 March 2022 3:59 PM

Hello from Goonellabah

I have some thoughts explained below. I recommend that they receive serious consideration.

Blessings

I have just returned from the Evacuation Centre at Southern Cross University campus. I was helping distribute delicious lunch meals for all involved + 'listening' to folks' stories and providing a guided response. There are still hundreds of homeless folk, using airbeds and a chair for their 'space.' Many supplementary services are available on-site: medical, SES, Red Cross, Telstra, Chaplaincy [where I was based], police, food services, two trucks fitted out with stacks of clothes washing machines and driers – all running on their own generators, and more!! There is a Business Hub which has laptops and internet connection for local businesses to use as much of the CBD is still without power reconnected after more than a week.

My thinking is there is a need to set up in strategic and difficult to access places with satellite phone systems that are solar powered. Maybe, such

equipment could be prepacked and dropped in by helicopter when required – whether, bush fires or floods.

Also, this country needs to plan how to set up and house -comfortably – about two thousand folk whose homes need to be replaced. Such might be four or five large tent-‘cities’ with all services connected [water, sewage, waste disposal, power, telephone, internet] including access to a special shopping centre [large-type supermarket] with fuel, food, medical/dental, banking, telecommunications, entertainment, school, bottle shop outlet, café, coffee shop, ice-cream, laundry, transport, car park, repair and servicing staff, and more. My guess is such sites will be required for 2 – 3 years. Such would require Community Justice and Police. Especially needed would be a benevolent somewhat autocratic control system.

Your thoughts?

GOONELLABAH, NSW, 2480

M:

E:

AHAH! SOMEBODY IS LISTENING!

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. A single co-ordinating body be instituted that has responsibility for the whole of the Northern Rivers region – Tweed, Richmond, Clarence.
2. A Benevolent Autocrat be appointed as Head. A LISTENER WHO ACTS WISELY WITH VIEW TO THE LONG-TERM OUTCOMES.
3. If an Advisory Body is included involving, local State and Federal politicians, Mayors and non-political local folk with creative ideas.
WILL THEY LISTEN?
4. Really make an emphasis on solving problems with consideration of creative and different ideas – think ‘outside the box!’
5. Ensure that Mental Health issues are always considered in making and announcing decisions.
6. Somehow, try to avoid the foundation principle of having folk appointed with ‘vested interests.’ Hence, avoid creating a ‘camel’ when a ‘horse’ was required!
7. A comprehensive, flexible PROCEDURES GUIDE/HANDBOOK be produced. Whether the situation is flood, fire, drought, earthquake, riot, should produce varying guidance criteria. Such would need to contain items based on what has been learnt from LISTENING.
8. Subsets of the PROCEDURES GUIDE/HANDBOOK be developed for the many organisations involved. For example: BOM; SES; RFS; Red Cross; Anglicare, Salvation Army, Washing machine trucks, op-shop and community clothing donations, to name a few.
9. A further subset of the PROCEDURES GUIDE/HANDBOOK would be needed for casual users and volunteers, compared to institutionalised staff representing key agencies. A Users’ Guide/Helper.

10. Storage of equipment and supplies when the need is not required.
11. Insurance arrangements for all levels of need whether corporate, volunteer or private.
12. Consider the needs of the thousands of residents who are Welfare recipients. There is overwhelming evidence, that such folk had the greatest needs during evacuation and recovery, as separate from business owners who lost everything related to their business, for example, buildings, equipment, perishable goods, computer equipment, household furniture, personal possessions, to name a few.
13. Move the bulk of the usual occupiers of the Lismore and low areas of North, South and East Lismore to a new city situated in the area of Lindendale, Tregagle, Wollongbar.
14. Never again, permit domestic housing, trades or businesses to be established in the vacated area.
15. One suggestion made to me, by a colleague, was to build a large DAM wall, somewhere south of Lismore. Hence, store the water that causes the flooding, for future generations to use. The former Lismore replaced by a vast water storage system!
16. Notwithstanding the above, seriously devise standards that are as fire and flood proof as possible for: building, road [foundations and surfaces], telephone towers, electric power, water, drainage and sewer provisions.
17. Create a State or National supply for ready to move portable housing pods, and motor homes, that can be transported within hours of the occurrence of a future catastrophe. BE PREPARED – IN ADVANCE!
18. Develop a system of satellite, solar powered telephones/ videophones, with simple instructions, that can be dropped from a helicopter to stranded people whether affected from fire, flood, landslide, bomb, whatever the critical need might be, when the normal electric powered system fails.
19. Ensure that there are adequate 'back-up' staff for immediate response to a '000' call, no matter what the circumstances.
20. Such comments and suggestions would be appropriate to consider for the relevant context of Woodburn, Broadwater, Coraki, Cabbage Tree Island and Ballina.

There, you have some thoughts from me.

Now!

WHO IS LISTENING?

:24/04/2022