

SUBMISSION TO FLOOD INQUIRY

April 2022

East Lismore NSW

Please allow me to offer a very personal perspective to the Flood Inquiry.

Background

I was born in Lismore in 1959. I grew up here. We raised our children here. We bought a family home here in East Lismore in 1984 which we still own and “occupy” to this day. The part of our home where I live was inundated and damaged in the 2022 February/March flood.

The first 18 years of my life were spent living in houses that were constantly flood affected. In 1974, we lost everything we owned when our house in Brunswick Street () had water up to the windowsills. I was 14 at the time. There were many floods after that one but that was the worst for me (until recently).

In the 1980s, when my husband and I were looking for a home to buy for our family of five. I only had one deal breaker request: it had to be out of flood. We settled in Hudson Avenue East Lismore and own that house to this day. To my knowledge, it had never in the history of settlement of the East Lismore area been affected by floods. The worst that happened was the occasional spillover of stormwater from the drains in sudden heavy downpours.

The experience of living in a flood zone had such an impact on me that in the 1990s while studying at university here in Lismore I researched and wrote a comprehensive history of floods in Lismore from settlement in 1855 to 1993. The 15-page report is not just a list of dates and flood heights, it records the impact of flooding on the lives of the inhabitants and their calls for action. I would be happy to share the document with you if you would like. (Ironically, along with almost everything I own, the original research document was ruined in the 2022 flood, but I carefully photographed the sodden pages before they went onto the rubbish pile that grew in front of our house.)

I am moved to make this submission not just because I have once again experienced the devastating loss property in a flood (a flood that should never have affected my dwelling) but because the greatest takeaway I have from that 1993 research project was this:

time and time again, no matter how often the “worst flood” in history came and went, the outrage and talk of fixing things died down and it was forgotten – until the next time.

So here we are again...

The 2022 flood impact: a personal perspective

As I outlined previously, we bought a family home in East Lismore in 1984. We chose that area because it was most definitely not a flood zone. My family was not going to be subjected to packing up for and cleaning up after floods. We were not going to lose precious, irreplaceable possessions – not going to happen, I made sure of that.

Then suddenly, a few years ago, we were informed that our home was now on a flood plain. How did that happen? How could property that has not changed in any way now be flood-prone land? Well, this is how...

After decades of inaction (and the ebb and flow of outcry) on flood impacts the local council built a levee. A band aid. Expensive and ineffective, the levee protected the CBD from so called “nuisance” flooding, but it did nothing else for the CBD. Big floods, which are becoming ever more frequent, overtop it and then cannot easily drain away **because** of the levee. The levee works by not allowing the river on the city-side to break the banks in run into the CBD. But (and this is a big “BUT”) the levee does not make the water magically disappear; it is still there, and it has to go *somewhere*.

Firstly, the levee ensures that more water than would have otherwise done flows into North and South Lismore. Thereby making an already flood-prone area more severely impacted. **Secondly**, the levee forces the fast running, rising floodwater downstream because it can’t get over the bank by the CBD. So downstream it rushes until it gets past the levee (which ends just past the CBD) at which point the floodwater breaks the banks and inundates the area with more water than it normally would. What this means to people in East Lismore is that the additional water is forced up into Gundurimba Creek and all the other little creeks and waterways, that **usually** run into the Wilson River, in and around Monaltire (immediately behind East Lismore). This not only adds to the water in that area, but it pushes back rainwater from East Lismore (which would normally drain away into the Wilson via these little creeks).

This is the water that filled up my home to the windowsills in February 2022.

I watched it enter my yard from the opposite direction to that which excess water usually flows away from our property. I have never in 38 years seen water come onto our property from that direction.

An extension to our house, built on the lower level and which had council approval in 1995 because it was not flood-prone land, was newly renovated inside in 2021 to become my living quarters. The chest-deep water of 28 February 2022 destroyed newly painted walls, new floor coverings, all my furniture (including a new fridge, new lounge), and almost everything I own. The walls and floor sheeting have to be torn up and replaced. Books, photos, important documents, irreplaceable keepsakes, clothes, linen everything piled up on street outside along with everyone else's in our street and those around us. Never in living memory had this happened in East Lismore. I do not discount the monstrous amount of rain around this flood, but it cannot be ignored that the impact, at least on my property, was directly and indirectly brought about the levee.

So now here we are again - I am still in stunned disbelief. After doing everything I could to never again be in the situation my family was in in 1974, I am going through it again. And let me tell you losing everything when you are 14 is nothing like losing everything when you are a 62 year old retired teacher living on your savings. It is heartbreaking to lose these things and demoralising to have to go on the scrounge for government money and charity donations.

The future

With this history and perspective in mind, I earnestly submit the following insights, suggestions, and entreaties to save Lismore.

What is clear to me from my personal experience, and what came out time and again in the history of floods in Lismore that I compiled in 1993, is that we can't allow the passage of time to diminish the pain of loss and devastation and fall back to practices of the past. Inaction will not save us, and band aids will not save us. We have to do something different. You know what they say about doing the same things over and over and expecting a different outcome.

The consistent and persistent failure of local government to bite the bullet and face facts around what really needs to be done cannot continue. They get away with it because of the tendency for people to forget over time.

They can't rely on the "time heals all" strategy anymore because with climate change there isn't sufficient time between disastrous flood events to forget. You only have to look at the CBD itself – in every one of the four main streets around it there are shops that have been empty since the 2017 flood. I guarantee that there will be even more this time.

The levee is useless and a higher one will only mean more of East Lismore and other, previously unaffected, areas will become flood zones. The lives and property of Lismore citizens must not be sacrificed in a vain attempt to protect the CBD.

The only thing I can see that will make a real and lasting difference is something that should have been started decades ago. It should have been started after the 1974 flood, but it will take a long time to complete – which is why it has never been started. The council that begins this project will not be the council that oversees the completion, and no local council wants to start a project they can't get credit for completing.

What has to be done is that the CBD needs to be moved incrementally to higher ground, the levee needs to be removed and the basin which once held the CBD has to be returned to community lands. The basin should become picnic grounds, sporting fields, bike paths and restored areas of bush land.

Every time discussion on relocation of the CBD is raised it is shot down because it can't be done in one great movement. But it can be done. It can be done incrementally, if just one council has the courage and the will to start. Acquire a large amount flood-free land in Lismore Heights or Goonellabah, provide infrastructure for a small section of it. Make it ready for a developer who will come and build, perhaps, ten shops and some office spaces. I guarantee that when they become available to buy or rent businesses from the CBD will fighting to move up there. Then do the same with adjoining land and so on until all the businesses are up there. This will not happen quickly but imagine where we would be right now if this had been started 50 years ago!

I don't pretend that this is an easy solution but is it nonetheless the only viable solution. I don't claim to know how to do this or how to fund it, but I know it has to be done to save Lismore. I am not being overly dramatic in this notion – the whole of Lismore is at stake because the CBD will eventually die if things stay the way they are, and you only have look at how we are currently struggling with handful of shops at Goonellabah trying to service the whole city and surrounds. **When the CBD fails, Lismore fails.**

We might even have to tear down some natural bushland on the hills to accomplish this and I don't relish the prospect, but bushland can be restored to the basin. Maybe even some large established trees could be transplanted to the basin from the hills to provide a canopy of shelter for newly planted saplings. What an accomplishment that would be!

I have ideas for flood-managing the infrastructure of the recreational areas in the basin that was once the CBD but those are not for now. Ask me later and I will happily share them. We also need to talk about securing power supplies during flood events; but greater minds than I can look at that.

There is one more important thing I would like to address: funding.

I would earnestly request that consideration for funding from state and federal governments to local council for flood recovery and restoration of the CBD be tied to relocation rather than more band aid fixes like pumping stations and higher levees.

And that such funding should come with a commitment from the source to continue to provide it for as long as it takes to make the relocation a reality. It can't be a quarter done or half done, we have to be guaranteed that funds will not dry up before the project is complete. If a future council starts dragging its feet around continuing the relocation the funding should be withheld; it should not be allowed to be diverted to other things. The relocation funding should only be spent on the incremental development of a CBD out of flood and the redevelopment of the old CBD basin into public spaces sports grounds, picnic areas, bike paths etc., and restoring/recreating some stands of bushland in the basin.

I probably won't be around to see such a grand scheme come to fruition, but I would desperately like to see it started so that at 14 year old who lost everything in 2022 – as I did in 1974 – will get to see a better Lismore, thriving and flourishing, in their lifetime.

Thank you for allowing me to have my say on this – if nothing else, it has been somewhat therapeutic (even though I am struggling to type just now because my eyes have filled with tears, again)

For more information, including my flood research document, I can be contacted via the email address below: