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MEDIA RELEASE

Facts v Fiction in rates debate

It is no secret that the four Bundaberg region farmer groups – Agforce, Bundaberg Canegrowers, Canegrowers Isis and Bundaberg Fruit & Vegetable Growers (BFVG), which together represent 1,976 farmland-holders in the area, have come together to try to get Jack Dempsey and his Councillors to listen to reason in relation to the extreme rises to rural rates.

But instead of sitting down with Bundaberg farmers and having an informed discussion, Council have chosen the path of self-serving opinion pieces.

Bundaberg farmers don't want a war with their elected local council, but Jack Dempsey's recent opinion piece in the Queensland Country Life only throws petrol on an already raging cane fire.

Mr Dempsey sought to "debunk" the apparent "myths" being perpetrated by farmers who seemingly have nothing better to do than complain about imaginary rate increases.

The Mayor started with a comment that "no one likes paying rates". The issue is not about paying rates – it is about farmers rates being doubled and, in some cases, tripled overnight without any justification.

FACT: Farmers are being treated unfairly.

The Mayor states that valuations increased "by an average of 46%" which is the same as the rates increases. Mark Twain once said: "there are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies and statistics." While the average valuation increase across the Bundaberg region might be 46%, for the farmer coping a 100%, 150% or in some cases 235% increase, averages are hardly comforting.

FACT: Rate hikes for farmers have gone up by as much as 235%

The Mayor argues that only one farmer had an increase of 235%. The Mayor failed to mention that over 200 farmers have had their rates more than double, 64 with a 90% increase, 125 with a 80% increase, 167 with a 70% increase, 252 with a 60% increase and 318 with a 50% increase.

FACT: Rates from farmers went from \$5m in 2019 to \$10m in 2020.

The Mayor claims that there was \$7.6 million in rural rates in 2019 and so the current increase of \$2.4 million is much ado about nothing.

The issue is that this figure directly contradicts figures provided by the Bundaberg Regional Council for the 2019/2020 financial year. However, whether it is \$5 million or \$2.4 million, there are still 1800 farmers whose rates have been increased above CPI.

While we acknowledge that \$2.4 million is better than \$5 million - it is still \$2.4 million coming out of farmers and our members pockets at a time when they can least afford it. This money is also being taken out of areas of the region that need all the financial support they can get. Further, this \$2.4 million is not a one off. The same might happen next year and the year after that until the next local government election. That's \$7.2 million stripped out of rural areas of the Bundaberg region over the next three years – plus CPI.

FACT: Council can avoid these extreme rate rises.

BRC have blamed the increase in land values in the region for the rate rise despite other rural based regional councils in the state having similar increases. The only difference is every other local council in the state adjusted their cents in the dollar to CPI.

North Burnett - reduced their cents in the dollar to directly match UCV increases.

Fraser Coast - already have a cap on rural rate rises.

Gladstone passed a special Covid-virus motion to cap rate rises for all rate payers.

FACT: Council has not spoken with farmers about the rate increases.

The Mayor did meet with farming organisations prior to the March local government elections. The Mayor made the following commitment "if I am re-elected, I will use all the tools available to Council to ensure that rural rates are capped at CPI". And he wonders why farming groups are now angry when their rates are doubled in the new Councils first budget, three months after the election.

FACT: Council doesn't provide services to agricultural ratepayers.

The Mayor provides a long list of projects which assists farmers. Farmers are not arguing that they receive no services from Council although many do not receive waste, water or sewerage connections. The issue is that Council have doubled those rates of which very limited services are provided. Farmers are willing to pay their fair share but having that share doubled overnight is hardly fair.

FACT: Council is forcing farmers off the land and should grant a collective hardship concession.

The mayor scoffs at the suggestion that farmers are being forced from their land because of rate rises. He cites an apparent "80% of farmers who have already paid their rates". This is like saying that when a farmer pays his electricity or water bill, he must also be happy with it. Using the fact that farmers are genuine, honest and hard-working people and have paid their rates bills on time despite the unjustified increases is unacceptable. There is also no mention of the other 20% who are most likely the ones faced with the 100% increases or more.

He also refers to “multinational corporations” who have invested heavily in the region and are happy to pay their rate. He fails to consider that the reason why land values have gone up is mainly due to the huge influx of large multinationals and corporates buying up family farms in the region.

He claims that individuals can already apply for support under Council's hardship policy but fails to mention that the same policy does not apply to farmers. Even if they were eligible, the only hardship options are payment terms not a reduction in the exorbitant amounts being forced onto family farms.

The Mayor states that the reason for the increases in land values is due to growers shifting from low value crops and grazing into high value crops such as macadamias and avocados. However, there are many farmers and graziers who have not converted to higher value crops and yet are being stung with a rate rise with no increase in the capacity to pay the extra costs.

Further, many macadamia and avocado growers have also invested hundreds of millions of dollars into the Bundaberg region which has supported jobs, economic opportunity and wealth for the whole community. To be punished by a Council that has had the benefit from this hard work, risk and investment is unconscionable.

The whole point of local government is to preserve and protect local communities. The current rates grab is an unjustified attack on the very fabric of our local farming community. Budgets, averages and self-serving statements do nothing to preserve an already underrepresented segment of the Bundaberg community who work hard everyday to underpin the entire Bundaberg economy.

Bundaberg farmers don't want to have a fight with Mayor Dempsey or his Council – they have enough battles on their plate.

They just want some common sense and due process.

The farmer consortium is running a petition at <https://www.gopetition.com/petitions/dont-treat-bundy-farmers-like-rubbish-reverse-the-235-rates-hike.html>



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