
Media Release | Mayor: “Federal system is failing Torres Strait Islanders”

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On the eve of a visit to the Torres Strait by Queensland Premier, Anastacia Palaszczuk, the Mayor of the Torres Strait Island Regional Council has warned that the relationship between the federal and Queensland Governments is jeopardising the safety and wellbeing of the region’s people.

Mayor Fred Gela says that while he is generally pleased with the Palaszczuk Government’s funding commitments to the Torres Strait there remain serious concerns about the fact that these commitments appear to be dependent on matching Federal Government funds.

“In the critical area of climate change adaptation, for example, Council will be seeking to cement the Palaszczuk Government’s \$20 million commitment with or without Federal matching funds,” said Mayor Gela. “The safety and security of our people increasingly depends on urgent engineering works and even without Federal dollars we can deliver the necessary works on at least two islands and make a start on others.

“We strongly believe it’s better to start the job with the state government funds committed and use this to leverage the Federal Government to contribute its share,” he said. “Once we start highlighting that the Federal Government is leaving Torres Strait islanders to ‘Sink or Swim’, I think their share will be forthcoming.”

Mayor Gela said his Council was in a similar predicament with the breakdown of negotiations between the Queensland and Federal Government over the National Partnership on Remote Housing.

He said that while the Palaszczuk Government has committed a significant sum to housing maintenance and upgrades, Council desperately needs money to build new housing stock to reduce the current huge overcrowding problem and is looking to the Premier to help increase pressure on the Federal Government to make this investment.

The Mayor said TSIRC’s efforts to improve insufficient, outdated communications infrastructure was also stalled. “Council has secured over three-quarters of the funds but we need the Federal Government to commit the additional \$6.39 million through the Building Better Regions Fund to bring communications in our region into the 21st century.

“It’s shameful that in 2018 the climate safety and urgent communications and housing needs of our people are denied because of arcane political battles between state and Federal Governments,” said Mayor Gela. “Australia’s federal system has let us down and I’ll be seeking the Premier’s support in putting further pressure on the Turnbull Government to come to the party.”

The Mayor said funding for waste management and rocketing insurance costs were also a serious problem. “We have a massive funding shortfall in waste management between what we need and what the Queensland Government allocated to us at the last state budget and I’ll be direct with telling the Premier that the allocation of \$5.5 million, shared between us and two other remote councils, is not a realistic solution.

“Our insurance costs have risen by \$400,000 consecutively over the last two years to a current figure of \$3.5 million. This has gone up due to the fact there are fewer insurance companies willing to insure in our remote region due to an increasing number of adverse weather events. I’ll be speaking to the Premier about these pressing issues as well.

“The current system holds local government hostage to political battles between the bigger tiers of government is failing remote First Nations people, who are Australia’s most disadvantaged. This is unfair and untenable,” said Mayor Gela.

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