

Tablelands Regional Council



1. Recommendation

The Commission recommends:

- (i) the existing local governments of Atherton Shire, Eacham Shire, Herberton Shire and Mareeba Shire Councils be abolished and a new local government formed based on the combined area of the four existing local governments;
- (ii) the new local government be called Tablelands Regional Council;
- (iii) the new local government be undivided with eight councillors and a mayor; and
- (iv) the new local government be classed as a regional local government.

2. Comparison of new and previous local governments

NEW LOCAL GOVERNMENT		PREVIOUS LOCAL GOVERNMENTS			
Name	Tablelands Regional Council	Atherton Shire Council	Eacham Shire Council	Herberton Shire Council	Mareeba Shire Council
Class	Regional	Shire	Shire	Shire	Shire
Size	64,999 sq km	623 sq km	1,127 sq km	9,604 sq km	53,645 sq km
Population 2006	42,145	11,419	6,367	5,406	18,953
Population 2026	48,266	14,473	6,663	5,981	21,149
Electors 2007	26,566	7,405	4,387	3,366	11,408
Electoral arrangements	Undivided 8 councillors plus mayor	Divided 6 councillors plus mayor	Divided 6 councillors plus mayor	Divided 8 councillors plus mayor	Undivided 8 councillors plus mayor
Electors per councillor excluding mayor	3,320	1,234	731	420	1,426
Total operating revenue financial year 2006	\$62.2 million (estimated)	\$13.9 million (estimated)	\$10.2 million (estimated)	\$9.6 million (estimated)	\$27 million
Annual capital expenditure financial year 2007 - 2015	\$9.5 million	\$4.4 million	\$2.9 million	\$2.2 million	N/a
Total assets at 30 June 2006	\$575 million (estimated)	\$103 million (estimated)	\$97 million (estimated)	\$101 million (estimated)	\$274 million
Debt at 30 June 2006	\$11.9 million (estimated)	\$1.1 million (estimated)	\$1.7 million (estimated)	\$0.1 million (estimated)	\$9 million
Community equity at 30 June 2006	\$558 million (estimated)	\$104 million (estimated)	\$94 million (estimated)	\$100 million (estimated)	\$260 million

3. Rationale for new local government

3.1 Service delivery, operations and management

- Service delivery improved through realising economies of scale by bringing together:
 - planning;
 - managing water, waste and sewerage;
 - managing the road network;
 - utilising plant; and
 - undertaking core corporate activities including executive and administrative functions, finance, and information technology for a unique region.
- Increasing the capacity of the local government through a larger asset and revenue base that improves the prospects of the new council in attracting, retaining and better developing the skills base required to undertake the activities of a local government.
- Enhance the capacity of the new local government to engage with industry and State and Federal Governments in relation to tourism, environmental issues and regional development.
- Amalgamating the four local governments offers the potential for improving the quality of governance across the region and the capacity to manage risks.

3.2 Communities of interest

- The focus of the region revolves around Atherton and Mareeba with most major educational, health, commercial, retail, government and financial activities being undertaken in either or both of these towns. A number of services can also be accessed at Herberton. Almost all residents would travel to Cairns to access services not available on the Tablelands.
- Tourism is significant within the region with all local governments having a common goal of fostering the development of this sector. The lakes (Eacham, Barrine and Tinaroo) are popular destinations as are Kuranda, Malanda and Yungaburra. These localities are also frequented by residents undertaking leisure activities. The Kuranda Sky Rail and Kuranda Rail line are well known both domestically and internationally.

- The major towns and settlements are in relatively close proximity. All major towns with the exception of Malanda are on the Kennedy Highway. The majority of residents are within 30 kilometres of a service centre, with the average maximum travelling time 30 minutes.
- The Atherton Tablelands is a unique geographic area with no natural barriers between the various communities.
- All shires have similar economic interests with a heavy dependence on agricultural output. The agricultural output is more diverse than in other regions although beef cattle production is predominant in Mareeba Shire and Herberton Shire. Other agricultural production includes dairy products, vegetables, fruit and sugar cane.

3.3 Other

Not applicable.

4. Financial sustainability

Each local government is rated in the Financial Sustainability Review by Queensland Treasury Corporation as follows:

- Atherton Shire Council – moderate (neutral);
- Eacham Shire Council – moderate (developing);
- Herberton Shire Council – moderate (neutral); and
- Mareeba Shire Council – moderate (based on historical figures).

The amalgamated local government has a greater capacity to improve its financial sustainability through its ability to:

- improve economies of scale;
- attract, retain and develop skilled staff as well as build capacity of systems; and
- undertake regional planning and better coordinate the delivery of services and infrastructure.

5. Implementation issues

The Commission did not identify any specific issues relating to the formation of the new local government area.

6. Boundary issues

The Commission did not identify any major ongoing boundary issues.

7. Suggestions

The Commission gave consideration to the 168 suggestions it received in relation to local government administration on the Tablelands.

7.1 Details of suggestions

- Mareeba Shire Council is strongly opposed to amalgamation as the Council suggests that amalgamation would not deliver any financial, economic or social benefits to local residents. In addition, the suggestion proposes that there is no commonality of interest between Mareeba Shire and adjoining shires and in particular the Tablelands shires.

The following points are also made:

- There is no value to be gained from changing the existing boundaries or by amalgamating with neighbouring shires.
- Mareeba Shire Council is in a strong financial position and is able to meet all of its long-term obligations.
- There are no major urban centres which are divided by the shire boundaries so there is no opportunity for different planning schemes to apply in the same community.
- There are no benefits in terms of planning to be gained from amalgamating Mareeba Shire Council with any of its neighbours.
- Amalgamating Mareeba Shire Council would not deliver any financial or economic benefits to local residents and there are no social benefits generated from amalgamation.

- The shires of Herberton Shire, Eacham Shire and Atherton Shire Councils prepared a joint suggestion which recommends against amalgamation, as they prefer an integrated services model which they suggest will lead to sweeping structural reform. This integrated services model is currently being developed for records management, financial management and communication although implementation has not commenced. This is to be extended to other areas such as roads and water. The main reasons given for not pursuing amalgamation were the loss of community identity, the loss of representation and the maintenance of the employment profile in each local authority.

7.2 Commission's comments on suggestions

The Commission considered the suggestions and it concludes:

- While Mareeba is a very large shire, most of its population resides in the far eastern part. The Commission considers that the residents of Mareeba have very strong links with the other communities of the Atherton Tablelands. These links extend to utilising the various recreational facilities, the importance of agriculture and tourism to the region, the movement that occurs between towns in the region for employment and to access services, the common geographic area and the shared interest in the development of the Kuranda Range Road and the upgrade of the main Tablelands highway (Kennedy Highway). In addition, the benefits claimed for the integrated services model are not achievable while Mareeba Shire Council is committed to remaining a separate local government.

The Commission considers the exclusion of Mareeba Shire Council from any amalgamation is likely to have the long-term result of Mareeba Shire Council being unable to provide the same service and governance levels that could be provided if all four local governments are amalgamated. Given the considerable degree to which infrastructure and services planning for the region could not be undertaken without Mareeba's participation, its exclusion from the Regional Council would simply lead to the

need for some co-ordinating mechanism to be established between the two. This would reduce efficiency in decision making, imposing unnecessary costs on ratepayers.

- While Herberton, Eacham and Atherton Shire Councils advocated an integrated services model, the Commission recommends amalgamation as this approach will ensure value will be delivered through obtaining economies of scale. The Commission's view is the model which involves council staff managing certain functions at a region level while also administering the responsibilities of their particular local government, creates a complexity that is unnecessary, and remains viable as a model only to the extent the councils agree to co-operate. This cannot be guaranteed in perpetuity. An amalgamated council provides all the efficiencies without the complexities and associated risk. The Commission's more detailed assessment of shared services and integrated services models can be found at Part 4.5 of its report.
- The Commission also believes that the continuation of separate local governments will not facilitate optimum service delivery for the region and will ultimately impair each local government's ability to develop capacity to address social, environmental and economic development issues facing the region.

The benefits arising from improved economies of scale, capacity to develop the skills base, and undertake broader regional planning are considered sufficient to outweigh any negatives put forward by the local governments in the suggestions outlined above.

8. Other Commission considerations

There were no other considerations.

9. Objectives set for Commission

OBJECTIVES	OBJECTIVES ACHIEVED
Facilitates optimum service delivery to Queensland communities.	Yes.
Ensure local government effectively contributes to and participates in Queensland's regional economies.	Yes.
Manages economic, environmental and social planning consistently with regional communities of interest.	Yes.
Effectively partners local government with other levels of government to ensure sustainable and viable communities.	Yes.