

Mayor's Budget Address – 2024/25

19 June 2024



Seventy days ago, when myself and my fellow Councillors were sworn in to represent the people of Cairns, I was asked to present a plaque of recognition to Antonije Dimitrijevic – the Mayor of our Youth Council – and the voice of young people in our city.

Now, you'd think my memory would centre on my own swearing in and the official commencement of my service; but to be honest with you, instead, it keeps going back to that moment on the stage with Antonije, and to the youth of our city, who, like everyone else in Cairns, are relying on us to make decisions that will help secure a bright future for them.

And that's exactly what we plan to do. It's what we promised, and it's what we will invest every second of our time in for the duration of our term.

But, sometimes enabling that bright future – setting out on that journey to get to something better – starts with working together to clear a path through the obstacles that sit directly in front of us.

I love this city (I even have the t-shirt to prove it), and while today, in honesty, I'm sitting here delivering a budget largely inherited and not everything I'd have hoped for, I do still present it with a great deal of hope.

Hope that it allows us to address critical challenges this year, and in doing so, empowers us to build from that platform next year, with the new initiatives and fulfilled promises that will make Cairns the city we all want it to be.

This is not the budget of my dreams, it is a *business as usual* budget, and a budget that was 90% developed and locked in by the previous council by the time we were elected.

It is business as usual in that our first budget workshop, just two days after being sworn in, we were presented with a budget rate rise of 7.9%

Business as usual in that spending has exceeded income for 6 of the last 12 years.

Business as usual in that our operational base has ballooned over the last three years.

Business as usual in that we are left with high debt and depleted cash reserves.

Finally, it is business as usual in that all these circumstances combined, in addition to the unexpected \$30 million cost Council incurred as a result of Cyclone Jasper, has left little room for immediately implementing new initiatives, for now.

Positively, on the 16th of March, Cairns voted for change.

Our community chose to do things differently – not for business as usual.

That change started with reviewing the budget we inherited, and working within the limited boundaries available to us, to make adjustments that will address the fundamental needs of the people of Cairns, while also delivering improvements to lifestyle.

It centred first on minimising any additional pressures on cost of living, by making intricate and carefully calculated revisions to decrease the planned rate rise from 7.9% to 6.7% – no small feat in the face of escalating costs on so many fronts.

The next 12 months will see Councillors and the Executive continuing to work hard to bring our costs under control by doing things differently. Because you voted for different.

Despite these challenges we face together, there are some small wins and big projects I'd like to highlight.

There is significant investment through a \$383 million capital works program, that includes \$217.7 million for the Cairns Water Security Stage 1.

This is Council's largest ever project and is vitally important to safeguard the city's drinking water into the next decade and ensure our future prosperity.

I would like to thank the State Government for announcing \$195 million in the budget last week, but additional funding from the Federal Government is still needed to fully realise this project without hitting the back pockets of our community.

In redeveloping what we could of this budget, we also focused on the 'little big things' that will make a difference to our community's most vulnerable and get us back to the basics our people most urgently need.

The pensioner rate subsidies have been expanded under the updated policy. The subsidy offered to pensioner ratepayers will be increased to \$320 per year, with eligibility criteria widened to provide cost-of-living relief to 1200 more households than last year, through pro-rating of part eligible households.

Previously, the subsidy amount did not increase in line with rate rises and the eligibility criteria required all ratepayers on the title to be pension card holders.

There is also \$3 million allocated to new footpaths, up from \$1 million in last year's budget, and a significant increase in funding to ensure our parks and open spaces live up to community expectations.

We've also earmarked \$355,000 for bus stop improvements and will invest more than \$475,000 to upgrade lighting along roads and footpaths to improve safety.

It's the little things that are big things.

The \$669 million budget includes a capital works program of \$383 million with allocations of:

- \$217.7 million to Cairns Water Security Stage 1
- \$52 million for roads, bridges, street lighting, drainage, kerb and channel, shoulder sealing, and bus stops
- \$43.1 million to enhance our water network
- \$32.7 million for improving our wastewater network
- \$20.4 million dedicated to community, sport, and cultural projects.

Residential water usage charges will increase by 13 cents per kilolitre and commercial water usage charges by 14 cents per kilolitre.

To address the challenges with city parking, and encourage use of off-street parking, and free up on street parking, Council will reduce the hourly fee at the Lake Street carpark to \$1.50 an hour (down from \$2.10 an hour), capped at \$10 per day.

A daily rate of \$6 will also be introduced at the Grafton Street carpark.

Like I said, it's the little big things.

I would like to thank my fellow Councillors for their time and input in preparing the budget and acknowledge the efforts of Chief Financial Officer Lisa Whitton and her team, and the Executive Leadership Team, for their guidance and assistance in preparing the budget.

I present the 2024/25 Cairns Regional Council budget to you for its adoption and before dealing with the respective resolutions, I would like to offer Councillors an opportunity to speak to the budget and ask Councillors to limit your comments to three (3) minutes or less each. The order of divisional Councillor addresses will be 'luck of the draw' with names drawn out of a bowl.

In closing, I think the reason my mind keeps drifting back to that moment on the stage, standing next to a smiling and rightfully proud Antonije, is simple. As leaders, we have a responsibility to think about how we can create positive change that makes for better lives for our people, right now; but we also have an added accountability for the future we are delivering for our young people.

The decisions we have before us, the budget we are presenting – though maybe not exactly what we had hoped for, this time – is designed to offer some relief now: some improvements to lifestyle, services, and amenities. Perhaps equally important, though, it is designed to clear a path for a stronger future in Cairns, with more abundant safe drinking water, robust infrastructure and happier, healthier living.

As part of this Council, I'm pleased to roll up my sleeves, to clear the path to that future.

Thank you.