

Toowoomba recycled water poll

By Dianne Thorley

It is now history that on 29 July 2006, Toowoomba residents rejected the notion of indirect potable reuse to supplement the City's drinking water supplies.

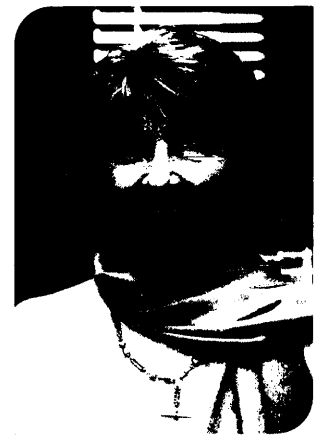
In the lead up to the poll there was significant national and even international media interest in the Toowoomba poll. In fact, articles in the print media, television current affairs programs and talkback radio regarding Toowoomba's water shortage played a large part in igniting the current water crisis debate now raging across the country. Since the 29 July result, we are constantly being asked by many outside Toowoomba about why Toowoomba rejected what appeared to be a sound economic and environmentally sustainable solution to its future water needs. The answer is simple; people voted on what was presented in the latter part of a three-month campaign leading up to the poll. The 'no' side mounted an aggressive negative campaign based on fear and cleverly argued that there was a range of alternatives available. These alternatives were not backed up by any economic, social, environmental or sustainability analysis. Voters were encouraged to vote 'no' so that all alternatives—including recycling—were on the table. Those watching outside Toowoomba were not subjected to this Toowoomba-based negative media campaign and were only exposed to the generally positive reporting on the national stage.

The facts

Let's look at some facts. Australia is the driest inhabited continent on the planet. Australia's growing population coupled with uncertain rainfall has focused the attention of city after city on the need for innovation and integration of its increasingly scarce water resources. Nowhere is the need felt more acutely than

in the City of Toowoomba, which is currently running out of water. Toowoomba is under enormous pressure to satisfy the thirst of a growing population through sustainable water management strategies. In December 2004, following a yet to be published review of all south-east Queensland water storages by the Department of Natural Resources and Mines (DNR&M), the yield from current water sources was reduced from 19,000ML/annum to 13,600ML/annum. Previously, timings for an additional water source to cater for the predicted population growth in Toowoomba and the surrounding shires were 2010–12. The review of yields effectively meant that safe yields were exceeded in 1998 and growth since then has proceeded ahead of a sustainable water supply. In the immediate to short term, the city needs to find an additional 7,000ML/annum, and in the medium to long term needs to find a total of 12,500ML/annum.

Toowoomba sits on top of the Great Dividing Range which means that unlike most communities, who receive water from sources higher up in their catchments, we have to pump every litre of water coming into the city. We believe we have one of the highest, if not the highest, permanent lift in the country with 457m lift from Cressbrook—our largest dam. The Water Futures Toowoomba project considered a range of sources including increased extraction from bores in the Toowoomba Basalt Aquifers (2000ML/annum), extraction from bores into the Artesian Basin (3000 to 5000ML/annum), indirect potable reuse via surface water augmentation at Cooby Dam (5000ML/annum), potable water substitution via delivery of recycled water to horticulture (1000ML/annum) and a purple pipe system in new residential development (500 ML/annum). The indirect potable reuse and the potable water substitution amounts to 6500 ML/annum, which equates to 25% of the city's projected demand



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at 2025. The Water Futures Toowoomba project was designed to deliver long-term economic and environmental advantages founded on sufficient water to cater for growth until around 2030.

The poll

Why did Toowoomba go down the referendum/poll path? It was not our choice—on 24 March 2006, the Commonwealth Government approved funding under the Australian Government Water Fund, subject to a vote of the people. At stake was \$23 million in Commonwealth funds and a matching \$23 million in Queensland Government subsidy.

Our Australian Government Water Fund submission was lodged with the National Water Commission on 30 June 2005. The submission was unanimously supported by all nine Councillors and was endorsed by all local members of state and Commonwealth Parliaments. The submission had letters of support from the Queensland Premier and the Mayors of Brisbane and Gold Coast. In early July 2005 the project was launched by the Federal Member for Groom, Mr Ian Macfarlane, and funding was expected to be approved in September or October 2005.

However, soon after, pressure was brought to bear on politicians by a number individuals and groups. A group opposed to potable reuse of recycled water, Citizens Against Drinking Sewage (CADS) formed. Armed with 'facts', 'figures' and 'reports'—all sourced from the internet—CADS sought and obtained media coverage to scare the populace and to promote conspiracy theories. CADS was backed by a prominent ex-Mayor and wealthy developer who, while accepting the science behind the project, opposed the project based on not wanting to be the first community to introduce indirect potable reuse and a perceived negative impact on the image of the Garden City. Irrigators downstream of the city, who had taken advantage of decades of free use of effluent discharged to Gowrie Creek and who had previously worked against a scheme to pipe effluent to their properties, saw that their free water may dry up. Would be Mayors and Councillors saw opportunities to get a profile. The state National Party saw an election issue for the state election in 2006. It was no longer about water and was all about politics and vested interests. The political football was well and truly inflated, leading to political back-flips and withdrawal of support by Mr Macfarlane,

three of the nine Councillors and local National Party state members.

A political impasse existed from October 2005 until late March 2006 when the then Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, Mr Malcolm Turnbull, announced the approval of the project subject to a referendum. We were aware that the National Water Commission fully supported our application and had recommended its approval to the Prime Minister before Christmas 2005. Our submission included a three-year public engagement program and an extensive testing and monitoring program under the guidance of the CSIRO before water was to enter the mains in 2011. Mr Turnbull, in our many meetings and telephone discussions, had suggested that a referendum could have been the way forward. Knowing the poor records of referendums without bipartisan political support and cognisant of the fear campaigns that tend to dominate political debate we worked hard against the referendum option. 'Kids overboard', 'weapons of mass destruction', 'the GST Cake', and 'Your rights at work' are just a few of the fear campaigns in recent years. However, our efforts were not to prevail and Mr Turnbull announced the Commonwealth's decision on 24 March 2006. It was interesting to note that at the same time the Commonwealth approved Goulburn's application for a similar indirect potable reuse project, subject to a six-month public consultation program.

The Commonwealth Government's decision to approve funding subject to a vote of the people set a dangerous precedent. It was the first time since federation that a local government—or for that matter a state government—initiative requiring Commonwealth funding has been subject to a vote of the people. The Queensland Government had to make a special regulation to allow the vote to proceed. It was first time anywhere in the world that a community actually voted on indirect potable reuse. The decision was an abrogation of political leadership and usurped the democratically elected Council's mandate for making decisions relating to its community. Can we expect that any future contentious issues will be sent to a referendum? Not likely, as the community had no say in issues such as sending our sons and daughters to Iraq or to selling Telstra, for example.

Campaign strategies

Being forced to a vote changed our community engagement strategy from 'what was proposed'

△ It was no longer about water and was all about politics and vested interests. △

to 'what was imposed'. In essence, our proposed three-year community engagement program was condensed into a three-month local political campaign. During the campaign we got the sense that we were left generally on our lonesome to run the campaign as those politicians (from all political persuasions) who were right behind us in private conversations were conspicuous in their absence in any debate and were so far behind us that we needed a telescope to see them.

The 'yes' campaign attempted to engage the community in ways that were technically accurate with all material backed by technical assessments, reports and expert endorsements. As local government, we are bound by Codes of Conduct and we had to ensure that campaign content was at all times above board. Our opponents in the 'no' campaign had no such constraints. They said what they liked and maligned anyone who had an opposing view. It is relatively easy to run a negative scare campaign when there is no compulsion to back up claims with facts. The 'no' case had three basic themes—fear, doubt and hope—that were repeated over and again in an intensive Toowoomba-based media campaign. References to birth defects, the feminising of fish, hormones, undetected chemicals, equipment failures, and multi-national water companies wanting to take over our water assets so they could charge high prices for our water were used to put fear into the community. Statements such as 'there are reports that say they can't take hormones, chemotherapy drugs or the AIDS virus out', 'how can we trust the scientists when they said thalidomide and asbestos were safe' and the 'Council was lying and Councillors and staff were getting kickbacks' put doubt into the community. After scaring the community, the 'no' had to offer 'hope' with their so-called alternative water sources—all of which had little technical or sustainability merit and would have been at much greater financial cost to the ratepayer. All good stuff to use in a negative scare campaign and they were successful in gaining 62% 'no' vote compared to a 'yes' vote of 38%.

A matter of time...

While Toowoomba has rejected indirect potable reuse as an option, the current water crisis in Australia means that other communities will consider it in the future to supplement scarce supplies. Indirect potable reuse will happen—it

is just a matter of when. The way forward is for governments to forget referendums, plebiscites and polls—they will always be at the mercy of negative scare campaigns and will likely fail. Either politicians have to exhibit vision and leadership and decide to implement indirect potable reuse, or a means other than voting needs to be devised to measure community acceptance leading to diminished electoral risk. There needs to be a coordinated effort to educate media, politicians, the medical profession, academics and ultimately the community to understand that there are various levels of treatment of recycled water, and that the level of treatment needs to fit the intended use.

If we are to use water more than once to supplement our scarce water resources, the political football needs to be deflated. Bipartisan support is required for innovative and environmentally sound projects such as that which was proposed in Toowoomba. What needs to be realised by all involved is that many communities in Australia and overseas practice unplanned indirect potable reuse where a community's water intake is downstream of another community's sewerage treatment plant outfall. A typical example is the New South Wales city of Richmond, which takes its raw water from the Nepean River. Approximately one third of that intake is water that has its origin as treated effluent from the Penrith wastewater treatment plant 35km upstream.

Where to for Toowoomba's future water supply is in the hands of the Premier's Toowoomba Water Supply Task Force, which is chaired by the Coordinator General and has community and technical representatives. The Task Force will recommend to the government preferred options to cater for future growth. Without pre-empting the Task's Forces findings, how ironic will it be if the solution is a pipeline to Wivenhoe Dam (south-east Queensland's major water source) which, if the current drought continues will have Brisbane's recycled water returned to it via the Western Corridor Recycling Scheme by 2008. If that eventuates, Toowoomba will have indirect potable re-use—albeit Brisbane's recycled water—at a far greater cost than what would have been the case if our Water Futures project was allowed to proceed. I guess time will tell.*

* With Queensland Premier Peter Beattie's announcement on 28 January 2007 ('SEQ will have purified recycled water but no vote: Premier', *Media Release*), recycled water will be going into Wivenhoe Dam by the end of 2008.

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