

SGB residents at odds with Council over flood management

Jim Beatson

Residents from South Golden Beach have claimed that Council dropped the ball over alleviating flooding impacts which recently damaged homes and property in the area.

South Golden Beach always had a flooding problem, so Council installed two pumps, one small and the other huge.

The latter pumps 620 litres per second, or a whopping 37,000 litres per minute, into a canal that then runs into the Brunswick River and finally the ocean.

The management system relies primarily on telemetry, which is an automated communications process that gives offsite control and monitoring of the pumps.

Longtime resident Paul Tisdell says he rang Byron Shire Council's depot at around 9am on Thursday March 30 and spoke to a Council staffer and told them, 'At some point this afternoon, probably between 2 and 4pm, you will need to turn on the main flood pump at South Golden Beach. And by hand, because previously it's been the only way you can get the pump to work.'

Making calls like this became routine for Paul, he says, since the pump was installed some years ago.

Paul Tisdell says this system has never worked properly, since day one.

Other residents also rang Council throughout Thursday requesting that they turn on the pump later that day.

One resident says they rang at 10.30am on Thursday and spoke to a staff member, who is a flood and drainage engineer at Mullumbimby's Council office. They told the caller, 'I'll pass it on.'

During the strong rain on Thursday, Paul Tisdell kept an eye on water levels, but did not notice them going down.

This should have happened once the pump was turned on.

Donna Hingston, whose bedroom is very close to the pump station, was feeding her baby during that night.

She said she doesn't recall hearing the loud pump during the night. When she rose for the baby's 4am feed, she is almost certain the pump was not working and when she checked at 6am, it was off.



Image from South Golden Beach community Facebook page.

Mark Stratton, a South Golden Beach plumber and resident for the past 22 years, knew others had made calls to Council regarding the pump the previous day.

Evacuation notices

At 3:55am he started getting SES evacuation notices on his phone. Outside, water levels were rising.

'So I rushed off to help at my brother's place, on lower land. They have a one-year-old baby. Then I went to the big pump, which was not turned on.'

'We rang Council's depot at 9.55am on Friday. Council's infrastructure manager, Peter Rees answered telling us, 'The pump is turned on.' I replied 'I've just come from there, and it's not'. Peter said he wasn't sure who to call out. 'But I'll get someone there within 20 minutes.'

Mark explains that he was met by two men from Council at the pump within 35 minutes. After turning it on, one told him 'We'll come back in an hour, to turn it off. Mark told them it would take many, many hours of pumping to reduce the flood level.

Byron Shire Council's infrastructure services director Phil Holloway maintains that the flood pump was activated during Thursday and operated automatically as per design.'

He said, 'At first light, the pump was restored, which is also at odds with statements by residents who claim it was at around 10.35am.'

Phil Holloway added, 'It was switched to manual operation during Thursday night. This allowed the pump

to run longer and pump more water; however, it also caused the pump's safety mechanism to turn the pump off when it started to run dry. The motor tripping ensured that the motor did not burn out.'

Paul Tisdell says, 'I have requested many times that Council employ a local person to deal with this issue - to turn the pump on manually. If someone from Council had attended the pump between 2 and 4pm, as I suggested early Thursday morning, the rain had stopped and it would have been safe to pump the drain out. This would have prevented the flooding.'

But Phil Holloway claims, 'Owing to safety concerns, the decision was made to not send a staff member out into the evacuation area at night and re-set the pump.'

Yet Donna Hingston says, 'The pump is at the top of the levee bank, and water was still two feet below the top of the bank at 6am. So there was no danger to workers arriving in a four-wheel-drive to ensure

the pump was working.'

Mr Holloway also assured South Golden Beach residents 'that their concerns over the flood pump were being reviewed following the recent flood.' He said while the requests for two or three smaller pumps would be reviewed, they would only alleviate drainage issues but would not eliminate flooding.

Alan Dickens and Stephen Booth, who both worked as technicians for Council, ask if the real problem is inadequate staffing and processes, resulting from redundancies and staff cuts made by Council.

These cuts were to meet stringent state government requirement imposed in 2016 by the Fit For the Future strategy. Failing that, councils were threatened with forced amalgamations, an action now abandoned in regional NSW by the state government.

Mr Holloway declined to answer whether the telemetry system for the big pump is functioning properly and instead reaffirmed the system 'was upgraded over a year ago and allows for remote operation.'

He said, 'On Thursday, the pump was switched to manual operation to increase its operation. This was done to support residents' requests to have the pump run for longer periods.'

'However, in the manual mode, it tripped and stopped working during the night and as a result required a person onsite to restart the pump.'

'The tripping of the pump stops the pump from burning out and we are reviewing the pump station as a result of the floods,' he said.

■ Jim Beatson reports on BayFM's community newsroom on Fridays from 11am.



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