

The Gold Coast Bulletin
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Business leaders put pressure on Baildon over city gridlock
Top end of town warns Mayor
By Alice Jones council reporter

BUSINESS leaders want the city council to take the unprecedented step of borrowing \$24 million to finish the Surfers traffic scheme.

In a virtually unanimous vote, a forum of 60 business people yesterday urged Mayor Gary Baildon and councillor Max Christmas to pressure their colleagues into spending the money immediately.

In what was taken by many in the room to be a thinly-veiled threat to the Mayor, prominent developer Soheil Abedian - who has previously donated generously to Cr Baildon's election campaign - told him to bring his councillors into line.

The forum, convened by the Surfers Paradise Chamber of Commerce, was scathing of the council's perceived inability to make a unified decision, particularly in regard to desperately-needed infrastructure. Many people expressed frustration at the Mayor's lack of a mandate, calling for the introduction of a party-political system.

The meeting was called to discuss the trouble-prone Surfers Paradise Traffic Management Scheme.

Ever since the council's \$20 million redesign of Surfers Paradise traffic opened nearly a year ago, business people, residents and tourists have been critical.

When funds ran out the project stalled with only a third of the work completed; and that is the way it has remained.

Crs Baildon and Cr Christmas were told yesterday that the ongoing traffic woes in Surfers Paradise and throughout the city would be a key election issue for all councillors.

In a blunt speech Mr Abedian, who heads construction firm Sunland which is undertaking the Q1 and Circle on Cavill projects, was damning in his criticism.

"Our council can't make a decision," he said.

"We have 14 independent councillors. They can hide behind anything and everything, they can shit on officers.

"Council doesn't have a common vision for this time, they come before every election with new ideas.

"We can talk until tomorrow and come up with ideas but nobody can put it together unless 14 councillors say: 'This is the heart of the our city, that is what we want to do'.

"Mayor, we love you but you have to bring the other councillors in line to see your visions.

"Please have one vision and we as a soldier will follow you."

The remaining roadworks in Surfers Paradise would continue the road-widening north and south of Elkhorn Avenue and Clifford Street.

Combined Chamber president John Witheriff said the chamber executive recently agreed that the council must borrow the money to finish the project.

Councillors, he said, must realise that the Surfers Paradise traffic problems impacted on everybody in the city as many residents worked in Surfers Paradise or travelled through the centre.

"Last year we regularly met with the State Government and (Transport Minister) Mr Bredhauer to discuss a range of infrastructure issues including Tugun bypass, Bundall Road, the Surfers Paradise Traffic Scheme, the Motorway at Mudgeeraba and the rail," said Mr Witheriff.

"When we got to this one he said to us that there had been a deal done between the Government and council, the council said 'You give us \$23 million and sign your obligations of the state controlled road to us'.

"We see this as a council job. The city and the ratepayers can afford to borrow for this vital piece of infrastructure and the council should do so. They should complete the job.

"The problem with the Gold Coast City Council is we have got one mayor with one vote and 14 other councillors who have just as much power as the mayor.

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"What we need to see is at least eight councillors who see the good sense in undertaking a project that is in our opinion an 'all of Gold Coast project'.

"It should happen immediately. Quite clearly the Surfers Paradise Chamber of Commerce intend to make this an election issue.

"The Mayor and Ron Clarke will make it an election issue."

A reserved Cr Baildon told the group, which included his election competitor Ron Clarke, that if it were up to him he would borrow the money and start work tomorrow.

"I appreciate the comment but as I said before a lot of people live in other areas of the city, you need to be talking to the councillors who are not here," he said.

Analyst Alan Midwood, who chaired the meeting, said: "The judgment seems very clear, we want to get on with stages two and three."

"It looks like borrowing money is the only way to do that and we'll give 100 per cent support to anyone who would promote that proposal."