

MAYOR'S BUDGET ADDRESS



25 June 2025

Good morning Councillors, Council Officers, members of the gallery, and those joining us online.

We are turning the page – from business as usual to business for the future.

That means moving beyond the habits of overextension and short-term fixes, and instead focusing on discipline, sustainability, and setting Cairns up for long-term success.

Today I present the Cairns Regional Council Budget for 2025/26 – a budget that takes a clear-eyed look at where we are, owns where we've been, and lays the foundation for where we're going next.

This isn't a flashy budget. It's a focused one – built for the times.

We know many households are feeling the pressure – whether it's at the supermarket checkout, the petrol pump, or the rates notice in the letterbox. These aren't abstract numbers. They're real-life costs influencing everyday decisions.

Council is not immune to those pressures. We're operating in a high-cost environment, with rising expenses across materials and essential services.

This is a budget that meets that reality with discipline, direction, and a quiet determination to get things back on track – and keep them there.

We are turning the page – from years of spending more than we had coming in, rising debt, and dwindling cash reserves – to a renewed focus on financial discipline. That means reducing debt, rebuilding flexibility, and investing where it matters most: in the essentials, in the basics, and in the future.

This budget begins the careful, deliberate work of restoring balance and it is grounded in purpose and people.

The State Government's recent land revaluation – with an average increase of 30% across our region – placed significant pressure on rates. To help manage that impact, we've adjusted the rate in the dollar to keep the increase as low as possible. The result is a general rate increase of 5.9% for most ratepayers.

Yes, it's an increase – but it's a measured one.

Council fees have also come under pressure, but we've held firm where we can. Parking fees remain unchanged – consistent with our regular two-year review cycle.

Essential service charges – for water, sewerage, and waste – have been kept as low as possible while ensuring continued service quality and long-term system sustainability:

- Sewerage and waste collection: up 4.5%
- Water access: increasing by \$77 per year – around \$1.50 per week
- Water usage: up by 17 cents per kilolitre for residential and 18 cents for commercial

These increases are necessary to maintain existing services and prepare for future demand – particularly as we bring our new southern water treatment plant online in just 18 months. We've also taken a fair and balanced approach to rating category changes for retirement villages – helping to ensure the cost of services is shared more equitably.

To ease the transition, the change will be phased in over four years. We are also extending our \$335 pensioner concession to eligible residents in retirement villages and relocatable home parks, with a proportional amount applied in year one.

This budget also delivers a record \$421.8 million capital works program – because financial responsibility doesn't mean retreating. It means investing where it counts.

The centrepiece is the Cairns Water Security Stage 1 project – the largest infrastructure investment in our city's history. It will secure clean, safe drinking water for generations to come. I acknowledge and thank the Australian and Queensland Governments for their combined \$390 million commitment to this critical initiative.

Other highlights in this year's capital program include:

- \$288.1 million for drinking water infrastructure, including \$260.1 million for CWSS1
- \$32.9 million for sewage collection and treatment
- \$2.9 million for waste and recycling
- \$54.7 million for roads, footpaths, and drainage
- \$21.8 million for community assets — libraries, parks, and pools
- \$3.2 million to upgrade arts and entertainment facilities

We've also focused on the little big things — the everyday infrastructure residents notice first:

- Over \$3.7 million for new footpaths in the suburbs
- Over \$2.1 million for sporting facility upgrades
- Nearly \$3 million in park upgrades
- \$1.3 million for pool improvements
- \$2.4 million to revitalise Muddy's Playground
- \$1.4 million for the Tanks Arts Centre
- \$830,000 for libraries

These are the investments that build connection, encourage activity, and bring neighbourhoods to life.

This budget also strengthens our social charter.

We've committed \$5.6 million to our CitySafe program and an additional \$475,000 for new and upgraded CCTV.

We're investing in our identity and visitor economy, with:

- \$3.5 million to Tourism Tropical North Queensland – recognising our role as Australia's Pacific gateway, with one of the nation's busiest international airports connecting us directly to Asia and the Pacific
- \$970,000 to Cairns Festival
- \$1.5 million to secure major events like Ironman, Crankworx, and Dream Aloud.

Because liveability is more than infrastructure – it's vibrancy, identity, and pride of place.

Of course, no council – no matter how well-managed – can do it alone.

This budget is built on partnership. Whether it's housing, roads, water or infrastructure – progress happens faster and stronger when all levels of government work together.

That's why we continue to advocate for the declaration of the Southern Growth Corridor as a Priority Development Area – unlocking 3,300 hectares of developable land and enabling up to 18,500 new homes.

Independent analysis shows around \$450 million in enabling infrastructure is required for Stage 1. We are seeking a shared investment approach: \$150 million from the Commonwealth, \$150 million from the State, with Council delivering the balance.

Because more homes, sooner, is what Cairns needs.

Of course, none of this is possible without the people who make it happen.

To our Chief Finance Officer Lisa Whitton and the finance team – thank you for your diligence and dedication.

To the Executive Leadership Team – thank you for your collaboration and clarity.
To my fellow Councillors – thank you for your engagement and your contributions.
And to our frontline staff – the ones who show up every day to mow parks, patch potholes, clean drains, and keep the city running – thank you.

You are the face of Council, and you make this city proud.

This is not a budget of ribbon-cuttings or big fanfare. But it is steady. It is sensible. It is forward-looking.

It protects the services people rely on, reinvests in the basics, and begins the work of rebuilding financial flexibility after years of stretching beyond our means.

Some of the wins in this budget will be seen quickly – a new footpath here, a park upgrade there.

Others, like debt reduction and long-term infrastructure, are quieter wins.

They don't make headlines. But they matter more over time.

Because they create room – the financial headroom – to do more for our city tomorrow than we could yesterday.

We are turning the page – from business as usual to business for the future.

That's the responsibility we carry. That's the work we're doing. And that's the future we're building – together.

I present the Cairns Regional Council Budget for 2025/26 to the chamber and to the community for adoption.

Thank you.