

Mayor's Budget Address

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

A Budget is more than numbers on a page.

It reflects the choices we make as a Council, the services we provide, the infrastructure we build, and the future we are working towards as a city.

The Budget before us today reflects a balance of competing priorities, perspectives and expectations.

It seeks to address immediate challenges while continuing the work of improving Council's long-term financial sustainability.

It provides for the delivery of essential services, investment in critical infrastructure, and ongoing support for the facilities and spaces our community uses every day.

Cairns is a city with enormous opportunity.

We are the capital of Far North Queensland, a gateway to the Pacific, and one of Australia's most significant regional centres.

Our economy continues to diversify and mature across tourism, health, education, marine industries, sport, defence and international engagement.

As a Council, our responsibility is to ensure we continue building a city that is resilient, liveable and prepared for the opportunities ahead.

The Budget before us has been developed against a backdrop of continuing cost-of-living pressures.

Many households are feeling the impact of rising prices, higher insurance premiums, increasing energy costs and broader inflationary pressures.

Those same pressures affect Council.

The cost of construction, materials, insurance, electricity and service delivery continues to rise.

The challenge for Council is balancing those realities while continuing to provide the services and infrastructure our community expects.

General rates will increase by 3.95 per cent.

Accounting for general rates and all increases to fees and charges, the median increase for residential ratepayers is 7.2 per cent, or approximately \$238 per year.

This includes an increase of \$51.30 to the general waste management charge, driven largely by renewed contract arrangements for kerbside collection and transfer station operations.

The Budget also reflects the introduction of the Queensland Government Waste Levy.

Council is required to collect this levy on behalf of the State Government, resulting in an additional cost of approximately \$45 this financial year.

Water charges will increase by \$45.70.

This reflects the significant investment being made in securing Cairns' long-term water future, including reservoir remediation works and the completion of the new water treatment plant, expected to come online in early 2027.

Importantly, the Budget before us continues a broader shift in the way Council manages its finances.

For a number of years, Council relied on deficit budgets and increasing levels of debt to fund infrastructure and services.

While that approach delivered important projects for the community, it also created long-term financial pressures that cannot be ignored.

Over recent years there has been a conscious effort to reset that trajectory.

To place greater emphasis on financial sustainability.

To reduce reliance on debt where appropriate.

And to ensure future councils have the capacity to respond to challenges, emergencies and opportunities as they arise.

The proposed Budget delivers an operating surplus of \$21.3 million and continues that journey.

This is not about saving for the sake of saving.

It is about ensuring Council remains financially resilient and capable of investing in community priorities both now and into the future.

The proposed Budget includes a capital works program of almost \$290 million.

That investment includes:

- \$136.6 million for water infrastructure, including Cairns Water Security Stage 1 and reservoir remediation works
- \$36.6 million for transport infrastructure
- \$33 million for sewage collection and treatment
- \$28.2 million for community infrastructure and public spaces
- \$10.8 million for waste and recycling infrastructure

Importantly, the proposed Budget includes significant investment in the facilities and services our community relies upon every day.

Including:

- \$6.8 million for sporting facility upgrades
- \$6.7 million for parks upgrades and maintenance
- \$6.2 million for the White Rock Community and Multicultural Centre
- \$4.7 million for footpaths
- \$3.4 million for the Esplanade
- \$1.4 million for aquatic facilities
- \$1 million for the Tanks Arts Centre

From Eubenangee to Ellis Beach, residents enjoy access to more than 600 parks and natural areas, 222 playgrounds, 54 dog off-leash areas, 27 outdoor fitness stations, sporting facilities, libraries, community centres and public spaces.

The proposed Budget includes \$27.9 million for the maintenance and upkeep of parks and open spaces, together with \$13.7 million for the maintenance of major community venues, gardens, public spaces and city assets.

These are the places where people walk, play, gather, exercise, celebrate and connect. They are part of what makes Cairns such a great place to live.

The proposed Budget also includes ongoing investment in community safety through \$5.8 million for the CitySafe program and an additional \$525,000 for new and upgraded CCTV infrastructure.

Support for our economy and community continues through:

- \$3.6 million to Tourism Tropical North Queensland

- \$956,000 for Cairns Festival
- \$1.6 million to support major events including Ironman, the Cairns Super Carnival and the Australian Festival of Chamber Music

Before I conclude, I want to speak directly to commitments made to the people of Cairns at the 2024 election.

Those commitments were clear.

The people of Cairns had the opportunity to consider them, and they endorsed those commitments by electing me as Mayor of our city.

The people have spoken and it is important that their wishes are respected.

As part of this Budget Address, I wish to advise Councillors that I will be pursuing three commitments for consideration in next year's Budget.

These initiatives are not new.

They are not unexpected.

They are simply commitments that were put to the people of Cairns and supported by them.

Firstly, free disposal of green waste at Council transfer stations.

The amenity of our city is something every resident enjoys. Well-maintained gardens and vegetation contribute significantly to the tropical character and liveability of Cairns.

Secondly, a one-off \$1,000 rates relief initiative for eligible first home buyers.

At a time when home ownership is becoming increasingly difficult, this would provide practical support for local residents taking their first steps into the housing market.

And thirdly, \$2 Summer Swims at Council pools.

In a tropical city, access to affordable recreation matters. This initiative would support families, encourage healthy lifestyles and ensure our pools remain vibrant community hubs throughout the hottest months of the year.

By supporting these initiatives in future budgets, we would be doing nothing more and nothing less than honouring commitments made to the people of Cairns.

In turn, the people should expect nothing less from their elected representatives.

Cairns will also play an important role in the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

The upgrades to Barlow Park will deliver lasting benefits for our community.

However, we must continue exploring opportunities to maximise the broader legacy benefits that can flow to Cairns through tourism, investment, participation, infrastructure and economic development.

That work will continue as the Games draw closer and I look forward to working with Councillors to ensure Cairns secures the greatest possible benefit from this once-in-a-generation opportunity.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the Chief Executive Officer Ken Gouldthorp, the Chief Finance Officer Lisa Whitton and the finance team for their work throughout the Budget process.

I also thank Council officers and staff across the organisation for the work they do every day in service to our community.

The Budget before us provides for the delivery of essential services, investment in important infrastructure and continued progress towards a more financially sustainable future.

Most importantly, it continues the work of building a Cairns that is confident, connected and ready for the opportunities ahead.

I commend the 2026/27 Cairns Regional Council Budget for adoption.