

Frustration over recovery speed



by Bob Dooley

Thousands of Northern Rivers residents have been waiting anxiously for 16 months to see whether or not they would receive assistance via home buy-backs, retrofitting or house-raising. Now hundreds are being told they will receive no help from Government.

Shifting the goalposts

At a media briefing on the Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation's (NRRC) Resilient Homes Program (RHP) at the end of June, NSW Reconstruction Authority CEO, Simon Draper claimed he had looked at the commitments made by the government at the time and it was 2,000 buybacks, house raisings, and retrofits combined.

This is in direct contradiction to statements given by leader of the NRRC David Witherdin at his first

meeting with the community in 2022, when he said they were "predicting that there will be around 2,000 offers to buy properties in the highest risk areas, approximately 2,000 offers to raise houses and another 2,000 offers for retrofitting."

Questioned on the re-writing of the government's commitment, Mr Draper said, "If you're going to buy back 2,000 homes, you would need about \$1.3 billion. That figure was never announced by the government."

However, in a recent letter to the NSW Premier, the seven mayors and three MPs across the Northern Rivers said, "The RHP was initially given funding of \$750 million, but when officially drawn up and presented to Cabinet the figure stood at \$1.5 billion.

"A decision was made by Cabinet to fund the first tranche and any commitment to the second tranche would follow."

A Way Forward (AWF) spokesperson, David Tomlinson said it became increasingly clear in a meeting with NRRC that the resources to return Lismore and the neighbouring towns and villages to health are woefully inadequate.

"The NRRC has received \$700 million for the first stage of the buy-back programme. This tranche of funding is easily exhausted. The NRRC received more than 6400 registrations of interest from across the Northern Rivers but only 1011 buy-backs are underway. "The target for buy-backs now stands at 1650, 150 fewer than initially estimated. The funding falls far short of our community's needs," he said.

From 1st July, the NRRC has transitioned from the Department of Regional NSW into the NSW Reconstruction Authority, with new bureaucrats.

Detrimental effects

In recent public rallies and outreach events organised by the community group Reclaim Our Recovery (ROR), community responses showed a concern for the voiceless. Responses showed that this included First Nations people, children and renters.

The NRRC requires "vacant possession" before a home-owner can settle and receive their buyback. If the property is rented, the tenants need to vacate for the NRRC to receive their payout. It is the landlords who will have to ask their tenants to leave. After that, according to one of the directors of the Resilient Homes program, the NRRC will "secure" the premises and switch off the utilities.

Meanwhile the houses, many currently habitable or easily made habitable, could sit empty, and the tenant, newly homeless, is out on

the street looking at their indefinitely boarded-up home wondering where they will go next.

AWF member Annie Kia voiced concerns regarding the detrimental impact of uncertainty on mental health. "The Flood Recovery Study showed that uncertainty has been linked to more than half of affected residents not coping," she said.

ROR member Miriam Torzillo said, "As a community we have to reckon with the disconnect between our need as a community to determine the fate of our region, and the current structures of decision-making and power-wielding, which do not allow us to meaningfully participate."

Applications refused

Flood-affected residents have received curt phone calls from Service NSW to inform them they will receive nothing. Many are still homeless,

living with family or in partly destroyed homes. Morale has dropped to a new low.

Beverly Jan Rawson of Broadwater said, "It has been the hardest day since the floods. We are totally invisible."

A spokesperson for ROR, Sally Newham said, "The NRRC is currently inviting submissions to the Resilient Lands Strategy, while at the same time releasing bewildering maps and information about the RHP that has left many feeling despair and betrayal," she said.

NRRC now has pop-up offices at 14 Carrington Street, Lismore and also in Ballina, Kyogle, Mullumbimby and Murwillumbah.

Information on locations, days, times and appointments can be found on the NRRC Facebook page.

Read Sue Higginson, p. 11



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