

TIDE TURNS

Changes in legislation will give councils the option to regain control of water services.

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UP NEXT: We wrap up emergency services for the week.

PAGE 5: Find out what the hot topics of conversation are.

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High cost of water backflip

TAPPING IN: MORETON BAY REGIONAL COUNCIL IS TAKING A CAUTIOUS APPROACH TO OVERHAULING WATER UTILITIES

MAYOR Allan Sutherland has vowed to take back water management in the region and "rein in the prices" - but only if scrapping Unitywater does not prove too costly.

Reacting to last week's State Government announcement on water reform initiatives, which will pave the way for councils to retake control of water services, Councillor Sutherland said water prices were "out of control", and local councils were best equipped to handle the delivery of water and sewerage services.

"I definitely want to take it back," he said on Friday. "The one good service council has delivered, over generations, is getting clean water into homes, and dirty water out."

On Monday, however, the Mayor said his pledge to exit Unitywater would be dependent on it being affordable and if it reduced water prices.

"I want to put water delivery back in the hands of council, but I need to be convinced it will rein in residents' water bills, not drive them up," he said.

"There's no point in taking it back if the figures don't stack up and that's why council has engaged an independent analyst to look at the costs."

Preliminary costings were to be handed down at Tuesday's council meeting.

Cr Sutherland called on the State Government to assist in the takeover, which he hoped could be done this financial year.

A State Government

spokeswoman said councils had until July 1 to state their position, before changes were made.

The Mayor has also called on the Government to tie any future increases in bulk water prices to inflation and reinstate the subsidy paid to councils for the construction of new sewerage infrastructure.

A spokeswoman for the Minister for Energy and Water Utilities Stephen Robertson said legislation

would be introduced to ensure council-owned charges could not increase by more than the consumer price index for two years.

When asked about the possibility of job losses, the spokeswoman said the State Government, councils and unions had agreed that the SEQ reforms were not about job losses or forced redundancies.

Moreton Bay Ratepayers Action Group chairman Dennis Austen said the

Premier's announcement that water utilities would no longer be compulsory was a win for ratepayers.

"Ratepayers have been strongly opposed to Unitywater and the huge increase in our bills that we received when they took over," Mr Austen said.

What do you think? Is council best equipped to manage water services?
Email letters@pineriverspress.com.au or visit questnews.com.au

Unitywater CEO Jon Black says "it's business as usual".

What now?

■ Moreton Bay Regional Council is considering taking back responsibility for water and sewerage.

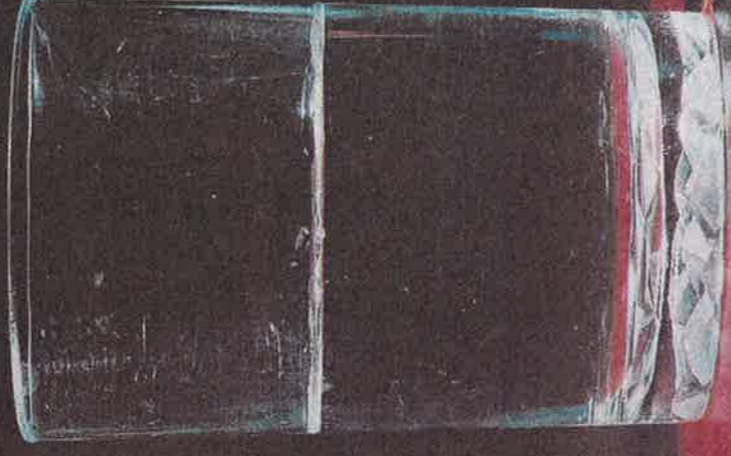
■ The council has engaged independent analysts to look at the costs.

■ Mayor Allan Sutherland wants bulk water prices tied to inflation and a subsidy that pays for councils to construct new sewerage infrastructure.

HALF FULL OR HALF EMPTY?

Customer service/billing	\$2.64m
Employee expenses	\$16.57m
Contractors	\$6.29m
Materials and services	\$6.49m
Licence or regulatory fees	\$40,000
Indirect taxes	\$390,000
Bulk water	\$75.33m
Corporate costs	\$22.98m
Other	\$3.07m
Total	\$133.81m

SNAPSHOT



Retailers expensive to set up

CREATING the state's three water retailers has not come cheap with the Queensland Competition Authority's SEQ Interim Price Monitoring for 2010-11 report showing the exercise cost \$92.13 million. That included \$13.13 million for Unitywater, \$36 million for Aliconnex and \$43 million for Queensland Urban Utilities.

A spokeswoman for the Minister for Energy and Water Utilities Stephen Robertson did not respond to a question about the cost of giving control of water back to local councils. "It will be open to SEQ councils to opt out of their utility company and operate distribution and retail as a business unit and set the price that way," she said.

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