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Ms Rachel Brophy  
Chief Executive Officer  
Douglas Shire Council

Via email: [rachel.brophy@douglas.qld.gov.au](mailto:rachel.brophy@douglas.qld.gov.au)

Dear Madam

**RE: RECENT DECISION RE DAINTREE FERRY**

Douglas Shire Sustainability Group Inc. (DSSG) is an incorporated association active in the Douglas Shire since 2005, in support of sustainability in this region.

DSSG is a community-based environmental advocacy organisation whose objects include:

- To promote and encourage the adoption of the principals of ecologically sustainable development to all sectors of the community throughout the Douglas Shire;
- To the protection and conservation of the unique environment in the Douglas Shire and its surrounds, including the Great Barrier Reef, the Wet Tropics and World Heritage areas;

We write to record our dismay at Council's decision of 9 August 2022:

*"Council resolves to replace the existing Daintree Ferry with a single ferry capable of increased loading capability and associated landside infrastructure upgrades on both riverbanks"*

The decision

In our view, Council has ignored community views by failing to pursue the two ferry option. In December 2020, Council received a report, following extensive consultation, showing 66% of respondents preferred two ferries. The consultation included surveys, submissions, workshops and targeted consultation with stakeholders. The decision was clear. The decision was based on extensive costing options and engineering information showing that:

- Only one ferry would need continual operation – built in redundancy
- Loading and unloading would be much more efficient
- No need for major works on the north side
- No need for priority lanes
- Minimal need for additional dredging (might be less dredging than one large ferry)

On 9 August 2022, Council decided, without further consultation, to dismiss the stated community preference with a statement: *"Not recommended as there are better options and large challenges/risks"*.

While it is acknowledged that some reasons for the rejection of this preferred option have been provided in the Council paper, the reasons to prefer a large single ferry are not offered. This is unsatisfactory. Further, we are concerned that Council does not have the in house expertise to assess traffic, engineering, cost, environmental impacts, and other risks raised by alternative ferry options.

### Risks

The larger ferry proposal faces numerous risks, none of which were discussed in the Council paper supporting the decision of 9 August 2022:

- The full cost of a ferry of this size and the cost of works on both banks are unknown
- Environmental costs and approvals for works on the northern bank are unknown
- It may not function as expected in speed of loading and unloading
- There is no flood management plan for a vessel of this size
- The aesthetics of works for multiple lane loading on both banks have not been assessed – an important issue as the Daintree Gateway
- The future of tourism in a post pandemic/climate vulnerable world is not clear - number may not continue to increase or may even decline
- The implications for the running/ticket cost
- No redundancy

In addition, we note that the Daintree Ferry is listed as a “Place of significance” in SC6.11 - Planning scheme policy. The purpose of this planning scheme policy is to support the local dimension of the planning scheme by ensuring that places of significance in the shire are recorded and protected from removal and from inappropriate development. The objectives of the planning scheme policy are: (a) To ensure that Places of significance in the shire are identified, recorded and recognised as important elements and features of the historical and environmental fabric of the shire; and (b) To ensure that Places of significance in the shire are protected and retained in perpetuity as community assets.

In our view, the installation of a large ferry as proposed fails to protect the cultural value of the ferry and is an ‘inappropriate development’.

### Costs and Benefits

The financial implications for a larger ferry are far from clear. An estimate of \$6.5M seems very light and our enquiries suggest \$15-20M may be closer to the mark. We note this will be “sourced from Council funds”. A decision to pursue such costs should be preceded by a comprehensive cost benefit study.

A cost benefit study should include:

- Compare one large ferry to two ferries
- Keeping the existing ferry/similar sized ferry with multiple/comprehensive queue and traffic management measures
- Council designed, supplied, owned and operated vs Contractor designed, supplied, owned and operated
- The ticketing cost under each scenario
- Ticket cost options for raising money for Daintree Coast tourism, presentation and environmental works
- Broader environmental, social and economic implication

DSSG is concerned that Council will pass the cost of this new ferry onto local resident ferry users. In our view, increasing fares for local residents will have a negative impact on the conservation economy north of the Daintree River.

### Options

We are advised that in investigating improvements to ferry services, Councillors have identified four primary objectives as follows: • Priority lane improvements: additional lane north side and realignment of lanes south side • Better tourist experience • Reduced queuing times • Redundancy

While budget has been provided for the priority lane improvements, a new large ferry may reduce queuing times (as will two ferries), redundancy is not satisfied by a new large ferry. It is assumed the 'better tourist experience' is seen too be satisfied with shorter queue times.

In our view, there are many improvements to be achieved with multiple traffic management mechanisms such as offsite booking and live queue monitoring (i.e. book first or show up and risk wait), pricing incentives to cross at different times or to stay the night (i.e. cross in afternoon, return in the morning and substantial pricing incentive for those returning in (say) one or 2 days, i.e. bigger cost for drive through vehicle on their way to Cooktown/Cape York/those who spend little on the Daintree Coast.

To improve the tourism experience an interpretive centre and food/drinks facility at the Western precinct (self-funding concession) and or a shuttle bus service on the north side combined with parking and loading facilities on the north bank and integrated with river tour schedules (i.e. river tour collection on south bank drop off on north bank or vice-versa) would be cost effective options.

#### Demand and impact

We challenge Council's view that demand for ferry services will increase by up to 90% to 2053. It is far from clear that tourism numbers will continue to increase in a post pandemic, climate vulnerable environment.

*"A replacement ferry will not remove all traffic queueing issues. Rather at its anticipated commencement (2026), queueing times in peak times will be almost non-existent, with queues times in 2053 with a four-lane ferry similar to currently experienced in 2022 with the existing three lane ferry".*

The roads are already at capacity and without a traffic impact assessment, environmental impact assessment or socio-economic impact assessment, encouraging such an increase in visitation seems reckless.

Please note it is our intention to provide this letter to our members and others for information.

Yours sincerely

Didge McDonald  
President

CC: Mayor and Councillors

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