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Tough Decisions on Policing.

*Tough decisions need to be made, but Morisset needs long term policing, writes
Greg Piper*

I recall just a couple of years ago meeting with the former Lake Macquarie Local Area Commander and Council staff to discuss logistical problems in policing Lake Macquarie. Council covers the same territory as the Local Area Command, so our staff have a good understanding of difficulties in allocating resources across this challenging geographic area.

The city houses nearly 200,000 people in 92 separate villages, spread across a large horseshoe shaped area, from Catherine Hill Bay in the east to Wyee in the west. Glendale, in the north, sits at the crest with best access to both sides of the lake and already has significant retail, manufacturing and residential development, which will accelerate over the next decades.

Following Council's advice, the police began looking for opportunities to build a Command Headquarters in the Glendale area. The Government has made a step forward, with \$250,000 in the 2008-09 budget to start planning a new building. The total cost is predicted to be over \$17,000,000.

This is a commendable first step towards solving the Command's accommodation problems, but it falls far short of the whole solution. It also draws attention to the possible down-sides of the project, such as closure of existing facilities. It was disappointing to read in The Herald that the Government may be considering selling Morisset Police Station.

The Local Area Commander, Craig Rae, is relatively new to the job and has a big responsibility in making the tough decisions on how best to deploy his workforce in a difficult geographical area. He is right to consider any option that may give the best result.

Last May I spoke in Parliament about short staffing, with police stretched to breaking point. There has been a small increase in numbers since then, but Lake Macquarie is still short on police when compared to other communities. We have approximately one officer per thousand residents, while the NSW average is approximately two officers for the same number of people. This key fact should answer all questions about keeping or closing police stations.

Just a few weeks ago, after a one-year wait, Parliament finally debated my motion on upgrading Toronto Police Station and planning a new headquarters. During the debate I described Toronto as a Third World police station in an area the Government has targeted by for the largest share of population growth under its Lower Hunter Regional Strategy. Toronto police station is substandard, consisting of a small office building and one demountable building, while police prosecutors operate out of a converted garage. There are inadequate facilities for staff and no facilities for the public. Morisset is a smaller station and the major concern here is the level of staffing.

Problems at Toronto and Morisset won't disappear with a new building at Glendale. Plans for regional growth should bring corresponding upgrades of police services and other infrastructure.

Toronto Police Station is ideally located near a courthouse, even though it is the wrong side of the main road - but that's another story. There is room for expansion and there are no doubts about its desirability as a location for police operations in western Lake Macquarie.

Morrisset will also become more important, because it will see a greater population growth. The 2006 census showed a population of 23,038 in the five postcode areas surrounding Morrisset. Developments in line with the Lower Hunter Regional Strategy will bring this figure to 42,000. This is the vitally important data that can't be overlooked when planning policing for this area.

Commander Rae has the unenviable task of deciding how best to deploy officers to meet existing demands. The concern is the number of officers he is working with and this is what really needs to be resolved. With enough staff, the Commander wouldn't need to consider closures. I don't want to see Morrisset Police Station closed and I'm strongly opposed to selling the site. If either of these things happens it will be because Lake Macquarie still doesn't have enough police.

The Government knows this police station will be needed in the near future, so there's no reason to take a backward step now. Even if Morrisset cannot be fully utilised in the short term, disposal of the site would be a very poor outcome for long term planning to service our population's needs.

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