

# Mackay splashes out

The boom town of Mackay has just opened a \$12.7 million Bluewater Lagoon on its waterfront. IAN FRAZER reports

THE thermometer dropped to seven degrees in Mackay last Friday at dawn, but by 9.30am a tangle of teenage boys were whooping down the waterside at the city's new water park.

Critics of the \$12.7 million Bluewater Lagoon see it as a playground for well-heeled residents of the unit towers being built nearby.

They could be right some day.

However, last Friday's crowd of swimmers and sightseers arrived on skateboards or by car.

Mayor of Mackay Regional Council Col Meng scoffs at the idea that the lagoon on the Pioneer River edge of the CBD is out of reach of struggling suburban dwellers.

"Lots of people don't like change, but at the end of the day it's a fact that it's going to happen," he told me last week in an interview at the waterpark kiosk.

"Old and young can use these facilities. I noticed on opening day there were a number of people aged 70-plus wading through the pools."

A crowd put at 9000 packed the lagoons at the official opening a fortnight ago.

Mr Meng, 58, a former tyre dealer and Chamber of Commerce president, predicts the water park with its coffee shop will become a popular stop on an 18km river and park-side 'Bluewater Trail' under consideration by his council.

Elected in March to head the new regional council, he said he supported plans by the old Mackay City Council to complete the boardwalk along the river and to revamp the waterfront.

"We will change the waterfront into a better public area," he said.

"You will see this whole area refurbished into a picturesque setting for tourists and locals."

Downstream from the lagoon, preliminary work has begun on the Bluewater Quay, a \$9 million project featuring play areas, covered shade for markets and amphitheatre, funded by the State Government and council to celebrate next year's 150th anniversary of Queensland.

Work is also under way on a convention centre with seating for 1800 people, adjacent to the Entertainment Centre.

Across the road from the Bluewater Lagoon, Lend Lease has announced plans to double the size of Caneland Central shopping centre to make room for a Myer department store.

Mr Meng denies the lagoon complex is Mackay's answer to Townsville's Strand opened in 1999 at a cost of \$29 million or Riverway, opened in 2006, at a cost of \$45 million.

He also dislikes comparisons with the \$30 million Cairns Esplanade, opened in 2002, or the \$8 million Airlie Beach saltwater lagoon, opened in 2001.

"To me, it's not that way," he said.

"The Strand and Riverway and Bluewater Lagoon are entirely different."

The former council had built the



An aerial view of the \$12 million Bluewater Lagoon, in Mackay, on opening day



Mackay Mayor Col Meng, flanked by Mackay State MP Tim Mulherin and Federal MP for Dawson James Bidgood, at the opening of the lagoon

## Factbox

Mackay Regional Council ratepayers face an average residential rate increase of 7.9 per cent this financial year, compared with the 14.9 per cent hike announced this week by the new Townsville City Council.

The Mackay council, which now takes in Sarina and Mirani, decided earlier this month on a budget of \$277 million this year,

or \$413 million including carried-over works from 2007-08.

Townsville council will spend \$477 million, half of this on capital works.

Mackay Mayor Col Meng says his amalgamated council is being hampered by staffing shortages, with nearly 50 unfilled vacancies, including six jobs for town planners.

complex in response to a petition in 2003 signed by 11,000 people, after a review of use of its two other public pools.

But despite Mr Meng's aversion to comparisons, there are some similarities between the North's chlorinated and freshwater waterparks.

For example, all are costly to run.

The \$985,000 budget for Bluewater Lagoon this financial year is on par with the bill for upkeep and patrolling of the Riverway pools.

Mr Meng has pledged not to charge for entry during his term as mayor.

And the council's health and recreation committee head, Cr Paul Steindl is tipping 'tourist-related benefits' with income for the city to help offset costs.

Co-ordinator of Mackay Conservation Group Patricia Julien believes the council is revamping the riverfront to lure developers to build more high-rise units with water views.

She sees this as a risky bid for extra rate income, because of the Mackay district's vulnerability to flooding after cyclonic rain, underlined last February.

More than 1000 people had been forced from their homes after a

625mm downpour in a relatively small catchment last February.

Ms Julien, a retired hydrologist, said she feared a one-in-30 year flood in the Pioneer River could have an even more serious impact on the city.

"From our point of view we would have liked the Bluewater lagoon area left as open public space," she said.

"Using public space to sell high-rise housing encourages development along the river, but council needs to be careful about what is built along the river even in case of a one-in-30 year flood."

Ms Julien said development in Mackay had been poorly handled by previous councils and the State Government.

"It was a cane town, the the coal-mining boom happened six years ago, but finding for infrastructure didn't come."

Mr Meng, who has pledged that his council will invest heavily in roads and other infrastructure, says the city has the 'critical mass' to cope with projected rapid growth in the next decade.

The population of the regional council area, from Mirani to Sarina is predicted to grow at 3.2 per cent per annum, from 110,000 to 150,000 by 2020.

"I think Mackay has come of

age, we've reached a size where we can move forward," he said.

"Not only do we have growth, but prosperity to go with it."

Born in Mackay in 1949, he said he could remember when it took five minutes to drive across town.

"It takes 10 minutes now," he joked.

As a boy he used to go crabbing in Mangrove Creek, a tributary of Pioneer River close to what has since become the Bluewater Lagoon.

Ironically, for a bloke who made a living from selling tyres, he sees

over-reliance on motor vehicles as a big problem in Mackay.

He concedes that commuters could be part of the global warming equation, and says they are definitely stretching Mackay's road network.

The council was considering a 'massive education program' to get more people to use public transport.

Meanwhile, he had high hopes for the proposed Bluewater trail.

"There are a number paths we are looking at completing in the near future, for people to be able to have a dip and a run," he said.