

Brisbane floods - rebuilding the Fairfield Gardens shopping centre

Summary

The Fairfield Gardens shopping centre, in the low-lying residential suburb of Fairfield near central Brisbane, housed 30 of the 3570 businesses affected by the Brisbane floods in January 2011. Coles, the biggest shop in the centre, used the flood as an opportunity to roll out a \$10 million new concept design, and created 148 new jobs. Despite significant hardship, many of the smaller businesses in the shopping centre also decided to return. The importance of a sense of community, as well as the value of small grants to assist recovery, were key lessons learned in rebuilding after the flood.

Background

The city of Brisbane is built on a flood plain, and on 13 January 2011 major flooding occurred throughout most of the Brisbane River catchment, most severely in Toowoomba and the Lockyer Creek catchment (where 23 people drowned), the Bremer River catchment, and in Brisbane city. A strong La Niña event since mid-2010 had saturated the soil and filled dams, and flooding in Brisbane was exacerbated by releases from the Wivenhoe Dam.

The damage from the flooding was severe, with more than 15,000 properties inundated in metropolitan Brisbane and 3,600 homes evacuated. Approximately 3,570 business premises were inundated, and commercial losses of approximately \$4 billion were reported across the mining, agriculture and tourism sectors. According to the Insurance Council of Australia, almost 56,200 claims were received by insurers, with an insured cost of \$2.55 billion.

Keywords

Brisbane floods, Fairfield Gardens shopping centre, small business

Rebuilding the Fairfield Gardens shopping centre

Fairfield, a residential suburb, is 4.5 km south of central Brisbane. Much of the suburb is low-lying. Before urban development took place, it consisted of wetlands and lagoons. In the January 2011 floods, the Fairfield Gardens shopping centre and surrounding suburbs were completely inundated (see Figure 1).

Opened in 1987, the shopping centre had 30 shops, most of which were small businesses except for the Coles supermarket. Following the flooding, the centre was closed for six months while it was cleaned out and largely rebuilt, and it reopened in mid-2011.



Figure 1: Fairfield Garden Shopping Centre in January 2011 floods. Photo: © Max Riethmuller.

Coles, the biggest shop in the centre, used the flood as an opportunity to roll out a \$10 million new concept design including a fish counter where fish are filleted for customers while they wait, a curry pot range, and a full production bakery. Coles created 148 new jobs to roll out the new concepts, as well as to make up for some team members who chose to stay in store locations where they were relocated during the refit post-flood. Despite significant hardship, many of the smaller businesses in the shopping centre decided to return.

Owners of sports store Sportspower, Maria and Vince Rodriguez struggled as the floods wiped out not just their business but also their family home. Maria explained in the Courier Mail: "It was a double blow for us, but we decided to get the shop up first and then give our time to the house once we finish here. It's been a long time since we closed our doors due to the floods but we are so happy to get back in. It's good to see everyone back here, sharing their experiences and helping each other" (Foster 2011).

The sense of community was very important in business owners' decisions to reopen. For Elaine Wilke, whose home retail store Loot Homewares lost \$30,000 worth of stock and required a \$40,000 fitout, returning to the shopping complex was a real test. Elaine told the Courier Mail: "We were close to walking away from it and just cutting our losses because of having to spend extra money when we weren't sure how the shop would trade. But at the last minute we decided to go back in. Everybody feels like Fairfield's home and they're really wanting to go home," (Foster 2011).

Lessons learnt

- Floods can cause significant economic losses to businesses.
- Small grant programs for affected small businesses were useful for ensuring businesses were able to get back on their feet.
- A sense of community was instrumental in ensuring that business owners decided to re-open.
- With the wider Fairfield suburb flooded and restoration taking six months, some customers moved elsewhere which increased the challenges for shops that re-opened quickly after the flood.

References

Foster, S., 2011: Fairfield Gardens shopping centre set to re-open after January floods, Courier Mail, 21 May 2011. Accessed 18 May 2017. [Available online at <http://www.news.com.au/national/fairfield-gardens-shopping-centre-set-to-re-open-after-january-floods/story-e6frfkp9-1226059896603>].

Further reading

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