



DISCUSSION PAPER

Unlocking the River

Four decades of attempts to unlock the Brisbane River.
Will 2026 be the year?

2026

Will 2026 be the year Brisbane unlocks its river?

The Brisbane River is the city's defining natural asset and its most distinctive point of difference. More than a waterway, the river shapes Brisbane's identity, character and global image.

It is central to how residents and visitors experience the city and underpins Brisbane's reputation as a unique river city. From tourism and recreation to transport, investment and cultural identity, the river is inseparable from the Brisbane brand.

As a connected waterway and ecosystem, the river's health and management must be considered along its full length, from the upper catchment to Moreton Bay. However, the opportunities and challenges associated with river activation are most concentrated within Brisbane's inner-city reaches, where demand for tourism, transport, recreation, events and riverfront development is greatest and where the river plays its most visible role in defining the city's identity.

Yet despite its importance to Brisbane's image, economy and liveability, opportunities to activate and enhance the river remain constrained by fragmented governance, complex tenure arrangements, lengthy approvals processes and inconsistent regulatory interpretation. Project proponents must navigate multiple agencies with overlapping responsibilities, while key decisions relating to tenure, navigation, environmental approvals and planning often occur sequentially rather than concurrently. This creates uncertainty, increases costs and discourages investment.

The consequences extend beyond economic opportunity. They affect Brisbane's ability to strengthen its identity as a river city, expand tourism experiences, improve transport connections and create more opportunities for residents and visitors to engage with the river. Fragmented governance can also make it more difficult to deliver coordinated environmental outcomes across the broader river system.

None of these challenges are new. The Committee for Brisbane and its predecessor organisation, the Brisbane Development Association (BDA), are among a multitude of stakeholders that have advocated for better river governance, stronger coordination, environmental restoration and improved public access since the early 1980s. Many of the barriers identified today are the same issues raised more than four decades ago.

The Committee for Brisbane believes Brisbane requires a clearer governance model, streamlined approvals pathways and a shared vision that balances economic activation, environmental stewardship and public access.

Addressing this challenge presents a defining opportunity to strengthen Brisbane's identity as a unique river city, unlocking the full potential of the river as the heart of the city and its most distinctive asset.

After forty years of discussion, the question remains: will 2026 be the year Brisbane finally unlocks the full potential of the asset that best defines the city?



THE CASE FOR ACTION

Why the Brisbane River matters

The river underpins Brisbane's economy, lifestyle and global identity. It supports:

Tourism and visitor experiences

Events and cultural activation

Ferry transport and water-based mobility

Recreation and sport

Riverfront investment and placemaking

Environmental and cultural values

Brisbane's global city identity

\$78.8B in trade annually via the Port of Brisbane

>150 cruise ship calls annually via the Port of Brisbane

Environmental stewardship and river health

The Brisbane River is not only an economic and recreational asset. It is also a vital ecosystem that contributes to the city's liveability, resilience and identity.

River activation and environmental protection should not be viewed as competing objectives. Rather, the long-term success of tourism, transport, recreation and investment opportunities depends on maintaining and improving a healthy and resilient river.

The river faces ongoing environmental pressures, including water quality challenges, habitat loss, bank erosion, flood risk and the impacts of urban growth. Responsibility for managing these issues is spread across multiple agencies and organisations, making coordinated, whole-of-river planning difficult.

As Brisbane continues to grow, environmental stewardship must remain a core consideration in decisions affecting the river. Protecting and enhancing environmental values will be essential to ensuring the Brisbane River continues to support economic activity, community use and the city's identity for future generations.

A healthy river is not a constraint on activation. Positive environmental outcomes, such as increasing populations of the rakali (native water-rat) and proactively supporting more effective catchment management, reinforce that a healthy river ecosystem is the foundation that makes further activation possible.

A healthy river is not a constraint on activation. It is the foundation that makes activation possible.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

We recognise the need to identify all environmental constraints and possible dangers. For example, the fish population is now slowly recovering from previous pollution devastation and increased fishing is undesirable. Mangroves should be preserved and flora and fauna that could be endangered by changes to riverbank habitats should be identified.

Brisbane Development Association, 1984



Credit: Tony Aspin

HISTORY

Four decades of attempts to unlock the river

History shows us that Brisbane's river activation challenge is fundamentally a governance challenge, rather than a lack of vision, investment opportunities or public interest.

The challenges associated with activating the Brisbane River are not recent. Many of the issues identified in 2026 mirror concerns first documented by the BDA in the early 1980s, and have been repeatedly revisited throughout the 1990s and beyond.

1983-84

The River City Campaign

The BDA's Brisbane River City Committee calls for a coordinated approach involving all authorities responsible for the river and its banks.

1995-96

River City Committee re-established

Members conclude little action has occurred since earlier initiatives and relaunch advocacy for clearer responsibilities and coordination.

2026

2026 Advocacy Agenda

The Committee for Brisbane restates its forty-year call for a single, dedicated approvals authority for the river.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

- . A major deficiency in relation to the Brisbane River is the lack of information about the extent of river activities and services and about which authorities have jurisdiction over specific matters.

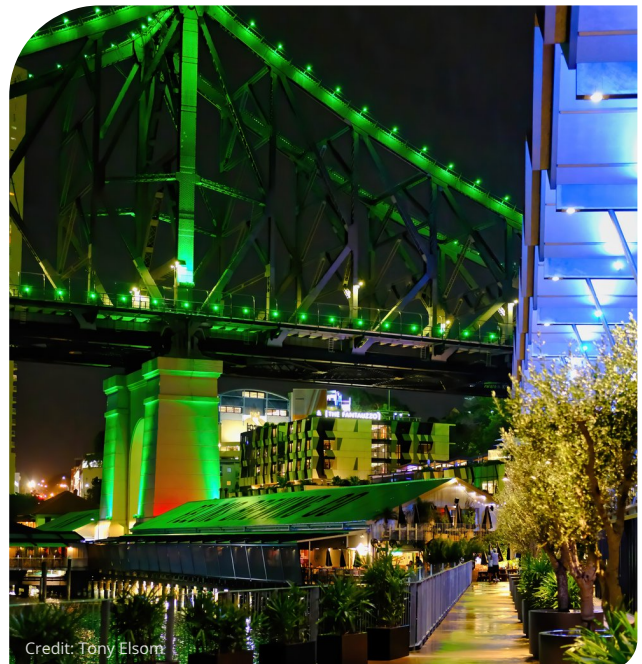
Brisbane Development Association, 1983

JURISDICTION

- . Jurisdiction over river-related activity is divided among:
 - Brisbane City Council (banks, access, etc.)
 - Port of Brisbane Authority (Port operations, structural fixtures, etc.)
 - Harbours and Marine Department (Vessel safety, speed limits, etc.)

Another, the Water Quality Council monitors pollution levels and issues licences for waste disposal in the river and has the power to prosecute pollution offenders (rarely used).

Brisbane Development Association, 1983



Credit: Tony Elsom

The River City Campaign

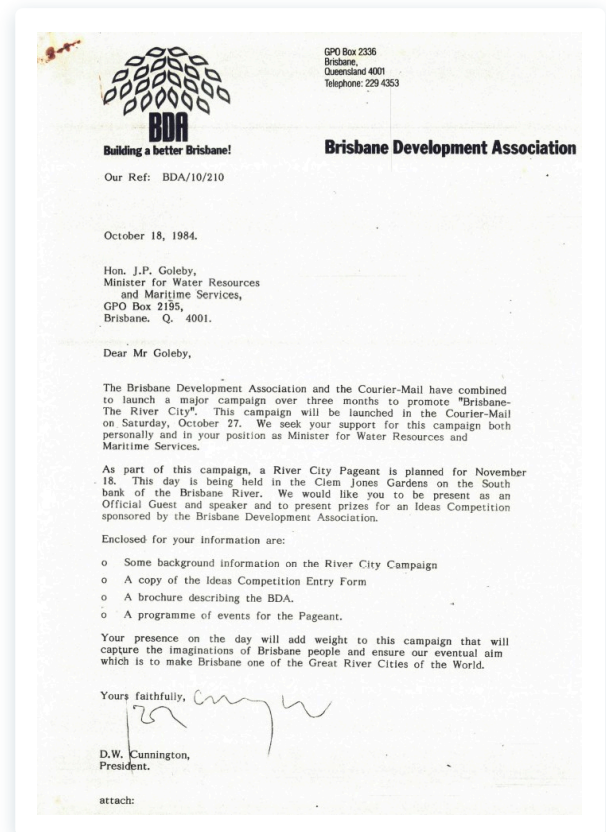
In 1983 and 1984, the BDA established a dedicated Brisbane River City Committee to promote greater use of the river as a tourism, recreation and transport asset. The committee argued that Brisbane had 'turned its back on the river' and called for a coordinated approach involving all authorities responsible for the river and its banks.

Notably, the committee identified several issues that remain highly relevant today:

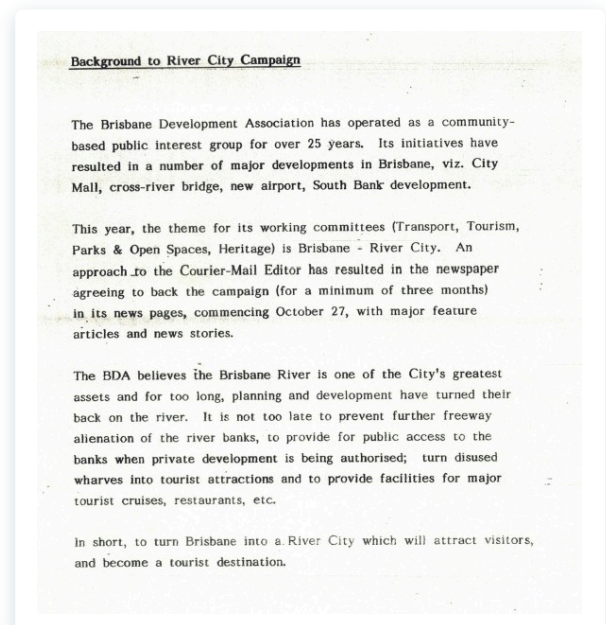
- fragmented jurisdiction across multiple authorities
- lack of clear information about responsibilities and approvals
- inadequate public access to the river
- insufficient short-term moorings and marina facilities
- the need for stronger coordination between government agencies, and
- underutilisation of the river as a transport, tourism and recreation asset.

A 1983 policy paper noted that jurisdiction over river-related activities was already divided across multiple organisations, and highlighted the need for authorities controlling the river to commit to a common set of goals.

The committee also warned that private development was progressively restricting river access opportunities and limiting future mooring locations, while poor public information made it difficult to understand which authorities controlled different aspects of river development.



BDA letter to the Hon. J.P. Goleby, Minister for Water Resources and Maritime Services, 18 October 1984



Brisbane Development Association, 1984

A longstanding call for better coordination

As part of the River City Campaign, the BDA proposed that all authorities concerned with the Brisbane River should be brought together in a coordinated effort to support Brisbane's evolution as a leading river city. The committee's policy platform specifically called for:

(2) All Authorities concerned with the Brisbane River and its immediate environment and the quality of its waters should be brought together to contribute in a single sustained effort to achieve the goal of Brisbane - River City for Expo 88 and thereafter reinforce this goal on a continuing basis.

Brisbane Development Association, 1984

While substantial progress has occurred through projects such as South Bank, Howard Smith Wharves, Riverwalk, CityCat expansion and Queen's Wharf, stakeholders continue to encounter many of the same structural barriers identified by the Committee for Brisbane's predecessor organisation more than 40 years ago.

In its 2026 Advocacy Agenda, the Committee for Brisbane has restated its forty-year call for a single, dedicated approvals authority to facilitate and promote activation of the Brisbane River.



2026 Advocacy Agenda: a dedicated approvals authority and stated aspiration to facilitate and promote activation of the Brisbane River and its surrounds, given its vital role in shaping the identity, economy and movement of Brisbane and beyond.

Brisbane River City Committee (1995-1996)

The Brisbane River City Committee was re-established by the BDA in the mid-1990s, after members concluded that little action in promoting the development of the Brisbane River had occurred since earlier river initiatives.

The committee's mission was to assist interested parties in achieving the potential of the Brisbane River as a tourism, transport and recreational asset. Its priorities included:

- improving riverbank facilities
- encouraging commercial river activity
- increasing public awareness and use of the river
- facilitating coordination between governments, and
- improving access and navigation opportunities.

The committee developed river activation proposals, marketing campaigns and river access mapping projects, while advocating for clearer management responsibilities and stronger government coordination.

Last year, the BDA decided to revive its 'Brisbane River City Committee' after very little action in promoting the development of the Brisbane River had occurred since this time.

The committee has as its mission statement: "to work as an independent representative body to assist interested parties achieve the potential of the Brisbane River as a tourism, transport and recreational asset".

The committee has been making representations to various stakeholders and is well advanced on a marketing program for the Brisbane River.

However, with the change of State Government, the question of responsibility for the Brisbane River and lack of action over resolution of numerous concerns, has once again become an issue.

Brisbane Development Association, 1996

Fragmented governance

As identified in the early 1980s, again in the 1990s, and as continues to this day, no single agency has responsibility for the holistic development and activation of the Brisbane River.

While early issues regarding jurisdiction related to the interplay between Brisbane City Council and the former Port of Brisbane Authority, Harbours and Marine Department and Water Quality Council, that complexity has now expanded to involve:



Additional input on proposed activities may also be sought from other Queensland Government departments, including the Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers, depending on the proposed use.

The complexity of the governance arrangements affecting the Brisbane River is frequently cited as a key barrier to desirable developments, activations and other river-based uses proceeding. The involvement of multiple agencies and stakeholders can introduce additional costs, delays and compliance requirements, which proponents may view as disproportionate to the scale or nature of a proposal. In some cases, these factors can discourage investment or prevent projects from progressing altogether.

The absence of a single decision-making authority further compounds these challenges. Proponents can find themselves navigating differing views across agencies, with no clear mechanism to resolve competing positions or establish a pathway forward. Where agencies are unable to reach agreement, there is often no formal avenue for dispute resolution or escalation to a higher authority, creating uncertainty and delaying outcomes.

Who does what?

Brisbane City Council

Council performs multiple functions as:

- planning authority
- landowner
- infrastructure provider
- River Access Network manager
- owner of the CityCat fleet.

Council is therefore central to delivering both riverfront activation and improved public access outcomes. It is typically responsible for development applications above the high-water mark.

Maritime Safety Queensland

MSQ is responsible for:

- maritime safety
- navigational aids
- vessel traffic management
- marine pollution regulation
- maritime industry regulation.

MSQ decisions influence pontoons, berths, vessels, events and activation proposals. MSQ provides expert technical advice to SARA on applications related to new tidal works. It also provides advice to Queensland's Office of the Coordinator-General and the Commonwealth Minister for the Environment on major development proposals with likely maritime impact.

Regional Harbour Master

The Harbour Master (located within MSQ) exercises navigational control and operational authority over ship movements in the Brisbane region, and has significant influence over:

- in-river infrastructure
- moorings
- vessel operations
- navigation safety.

Department of Natural Resources

The department manages State land tenure and tidal land interests. It also oversees many of the tenure arrangements required for river activation projects.

Department of Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation

The department manages environmental values, water quality objectives and environmental protection obligations relating to the river.

Department of Primary Industries

The department manages fisheries resources, including the protection and management of marine plants.

State Assessment and Referral Agency (SARA)

SARA is described as a 'one-stop-shop' within the Queensland Government for development applications that involve a state interest. In the context of the river, this could involve development such as new building structures, pontoons and jetties. SARA assesses these applications using criteria from the State Development Assessment Provisions (SDAP). If a riverfront site is within a Priority Development Area (PDA), this function may be undertaken by Economic Development Queensland.

Port of Brisbane Pty Ltd (PBPL)

Development consent is required from the privately owned and operated PBPL to undertake development on the ~1,870 ha of Brisbane Core Port Land at the mouth of the Brisbane River. This includes facilitation of a streamlined application and approval process that seeks to balance the development of import and export-oriented industries, cargo and cruise-related shipping, the maintenance of navigable access to the port for commercial shipping, and the management of conservation and buffer areas between the port and surrounding environs.

PBPL also has a referral agency role for any development near the shipping channels, berth pockets and swing basins of the defined Port Limits, which extend from Breakfast Creek, through Moreton Bay, to the southern end of the Sunshine Coast.

Seqwater

As the bulk water supply authority for the Brisbane city-region, Seqwater plays a protective role in the development and operational approvals process along the Brisbane River. It acts as a technical advisor, landholder and bulk water infrastructure custodian to protect Brisbane's primary drinking water supply catchments.

Local councils or SARA will frequently refer large-scale riverfront development applications to Seqwater to evaluate potential runoff, wastewater impacts and environmental degradation risks.

Urban Utilities

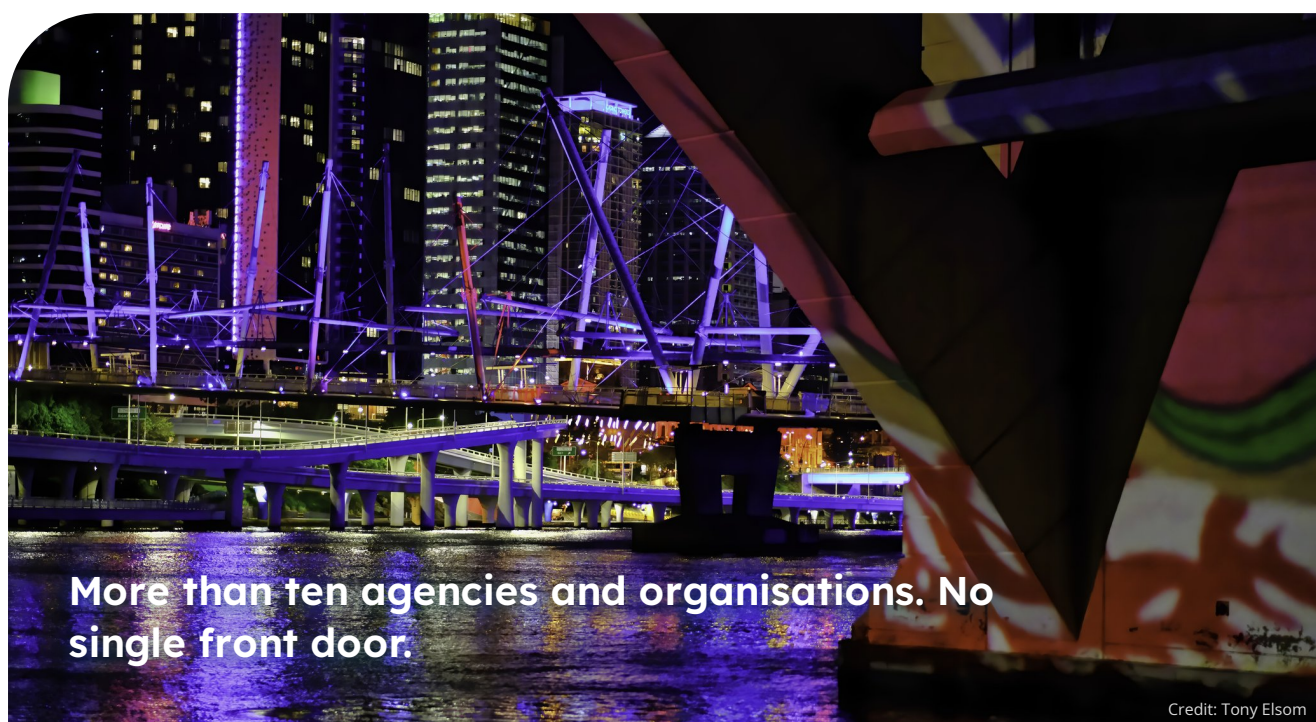
Urban Utilities delivers drinking water, recycled water and sewerage services to more than 1.6 million customers. Its planning, asset management and service delivery roles in drinking water supply, wastewater capture and treatment, and recycled water supply have a direct interface with the Brisbane River catchment.

Queensland Reconstruction Authority

QRA manages Queensland's flood risk management framework, which for Brisbane also includes a floodplain management plan, mapping, flood studies and evacuation guidelines. Its role is to deliver a long-term plan to manage the impact of future floods and enhance community safety and resilience in the Brisbane River floodplain.

Riverfront asset owners and precincts

Beyond government agencies, a range of public and private riverfront asset owners and precinct managers play an important role in operating, maintaining and renewing river-edge infrastructure such as promenades, pontoons and landings. Their responsibilities and practical experience should be recognised in any future governance arrangements.



Other factors impacting progress

In addition to governance-related challenges, stakeholders have identified several other factors that hinder activation and use of the Brisbane River. The issues raised most consistently are discussed below.

01

Tenure under the *Land Act 1994*

Stakeholders consistently identified tenure as a major barrier to river activation. Projects involving new or upgraded infrastructure, such as pontoons, boardwalks, riverwalks, tourism infrastructure or commercial moorings, often require tenure arrangements over State-controlled land or tidal areas. Key concerns include:

- long approval timeframes
- sequential assessments
- uncertainty regarding requirements
- inconsistent policy interpretation, and
- inability to align tenure approvals with development approvals.

Unlike Queensland's development assessment framework, which provides proponents with certainty through statutory assessment timeframes, approvals under the *Land Act 1994* are not subject to similar requirements. Stakeholders advised that it is not uncommon for tenure approvals to take 18 to 24 months to be finalised.

Given Queensland's development assessment framework requires proponents to provide evidence of State owner's consent before lodging an application, these processes cannot be run concurrently. This adds further to the time and cost complexity of developing alongside the river.

Additionally, when it comes to 'wet leases', the maximum tenure is typically 30 to 50 years, compared to landside, where tenure is typically held in freehold or for 99 years. Longer lease times provide proponents with greater security, alignment of investment horizons and ultimately stronger valuations over the long term. This certainty is required to enable greater upfront investment.

02

Navigation and Harbour Master discretion

The Harbour Master has a critical role to play in protecting navigational safety and managing vessel movements within the Brisbane River.

Stakeholders identified that while safety should never be compromised, proponents of new activities on the river (particularly outside of PBPL jurisdiction) frequently face uncertainty regarding likely decisions or requirements to be imposed, which increases project risks. Concerns raised include:

- the undertaking of navigational impact assessments
- discretionary decision-making
- limited policy transparency, and
- difficulty understanding requirements early in project planning.

03

Environmental and tidal works approvals

Depending on the scale and location of projects, approvals may be required for:

- tidal works
- coastal management
- environmental impacts
- marine plants/fisheries management
- water quality
- riverbank stabilisation
- flood management.

In the absence of an overarching plan for the Brisbane River and clear articulation of environmental matters of significance, stakeholders noted duplication and overlap between agencies remains a challenge, with some well-intentioned interventions acting in opposition to others.

Experience shows these challenges continue through design development and works approvals, with tides, marine access, operations and construction methods all influencing delivery. Early, coordinated agency engagement is needed, rather than sequential engagement once design is advanced.

04

Planning and mapping inconsistencies

Given the cross-jurisdictional governance of the river, no department or authority has responsibility for undertaking regular planning or mapping exercises for the Brisbane River. Stakeholders looking to develop over, on or adjacent to the river are often challenged by:

- outdated mapping
- inconsistent spatial information
- overlapping mapping systems, and
- river planning controls that do not always reflect current conditions.

Proponents commonly report the need to engage specialist mapping experts to produce project-specific mapping that meets the requirements of multiple approval authorities, adding cost and complexity to the approvals process.

In the absence of a reliable, shared source of truth, this requirement is repeated across projects along the length of the river, with each proponent required to commission its own mapping. Beyond creating duplication, this site-by-site approach also contributes to concerns about the lack of a coordinated understanding of the cumulative impacts of development and tourism activities on the river.

05

Infrastructure and commercial activation gaps

Another well-articulated challenge is the shortage of infrastructure within the river, particularly infrastructure that provides opportunities for private or commercial uses. As concluded through Brisbane City Council's River Access Network initiative, which identified eleven locations with activation potential, there is significant latent demand for infrastructure such as commercial berths, public landings, short-term moorings, event-support infrastructure and tourism access points.

Given the significant time, cost and uncertainty involved in developing privately owned infrastructure in the river, greater attention should be given to optimising the use of existing public facilities and identifying opportunities to deliver shared infrastructure that supports multiple users and outcomes.

Learning from other governance models

While no model can be directly transplanted to Brisbane, other jurisdictions offer useful lessons in coordination, strategy and a clear front door for proponents.

BRISBANE

Port of Brisbane Pty Ltd

Under legislative requirements and oversight from State Government agencies and Brisbane City Council, the Port of Brisbane Pty Ltd (PBPL) manages development through the Brisbane Port Land Use Plan, supported by Technical Standards and Infrastructure Plans.

These plans guide:

- growth in trade over the next 20 years (from a FY26 baseline of \$78.8 billion in international trade);
- future land use and infrastructure provision across approximately 1,870 hectares of Brisbane core port land;
- high-quality maritime industrial development through clear development standards that align with State and Brisbane City Council planning policies; and
- protection of important environmental assets, including around 693 hectares of conservation and buffer areas near the mouth of the Brisbane River, as well as Moreton Bay, a Ramsar-listed wetland of international importance.

PBPL's integrated planning framework provides proponents with greater certainty, efficiency and long-term clarity.

GOLD COAST, QUEENSLAND

Gold Coast Waterways Authority

The Gold Coast Waterways Authority (GCWA) provides a useful example of a dedicated statutory authority responsible for waterway planning, infrastructure and activation. Its legislative objective includes managing waterways while minimising unnecessary regulatory burden.

GCWA is a statutory authority, led by a board of seven members and a CEO. It is accountable to the Minister for Transport and Main Roads. While GCWA handles physical infrastructure, local planning, dredging and amenity management, Maritime Safety Queensland retains overarching authority for marine safety laws, licensing and registration.

GCWA is legislatively required to prepare and maintain a 10-year Waterways Management Strategy through consultation with the City of Gold Coast and the broader community.

Although its powers do not extend to all elements of development and activity within the waterways, the Authority provides strategic leadership and coordination across the waterfront. A key strength of the model is the establishment of a recognised 'front door' for waterway users and proponents, helping to simplify engagement, improve coordination between agencies and provide greater clarity around decision-making processes.

SUNSHINE COAST, QUEENSLAND

Sunshine Coast Waterways Authority

The Sunshine Coast Waterways Authority, a \$35 million State Government election commitment in 2024, is in its early stages of establishment.

Its inaugural Board has recently been appointed, and its intent is to 'act as a one-stop-shop to ensure local knowledge is better incorporated into waterway management while providing ongoing certainty for commercial tourism and fishing operators into the future' (LNP, 2024).

MELBOURNE, VICTORIA

Lower Yarra River

The Lower Yarra River Review, undertaken between 2016 and 2018, examined the jurisdictional confusion, licensing concerns and ecological protection of Melbourne's inner-city waterway.

The outcomes of the review included a range of recommendations, most notably that Parks Victoria and the City of Melbourne work together to develop a ten-year strategy for commercial berths, events and activations, and an infrastructure investment plan, with Melbourne Water retaining statutory authority for environmental management and waterway health.

SYDNEY, NEW SOUTH WALES

Sydney Harbour

Sydney Harbour is considered a poor example of waterway management, with stakeholders often citing the complex, cross-jurisdictional stalemates they must navigate across three levels of government.

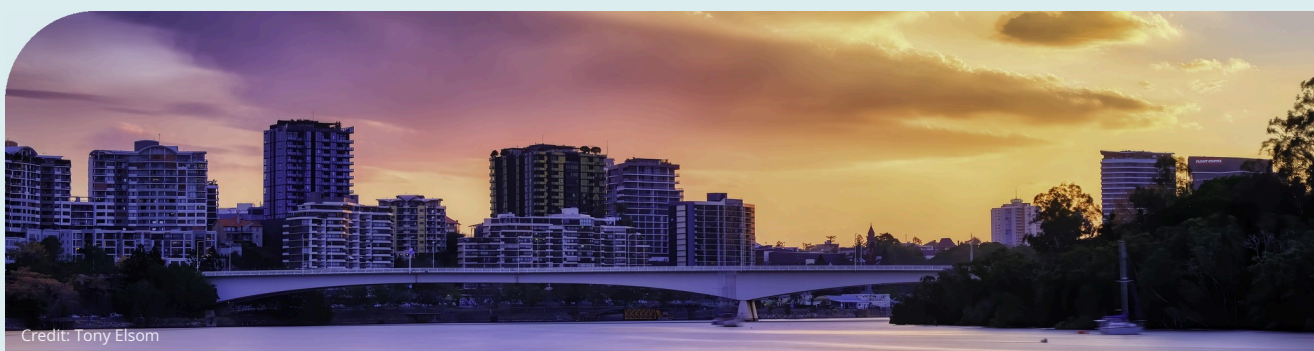
In response to this, the New Sydney Waterfront Company is a partnership model being undertaken in NSW to facilitate collective marketing and activation of a defined area of Sydney's western harbour (Walsh Bay to Blackwattle Bay). Through establishing Australia's first Community Improvement District, local businesses, council and State Government work together to fund and deliver programs and projects determined to be of need by the Company's members.

While it does not address issues relating to development or governance, it does provide a business-led model for considering the waterfront as a connected precinct with its own, valuable identity.

PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Swan and Canning Rivers

While governance bodies associated with the Brisbane River are typically concerned with flood mitigation, transport and infrastructure delivery, the Swan and Canning Rivers, overseen by the Swan River Trust, are particularly focused on ecological protection and cultural stewardship. Development control limits are imposed based on ecosystem health.



Credit: Tony Elsom

Recommendations

1

Establish a Brisbane River Approvals Authority

Adopt a SARA-style model under which proponents lodge one application and government coordinates responses from all relevant agencies, including tenure, so that tenure and development approvals are considered together rather than sequentially. Implementing this one initiative to create a 'front door' or 'one-stop-shop' for proponents would have the single biggest impact on activation of the Brisbane River, now and into the future.

Beyond coordinating applications, the Authority could be given a stronger mandate, including leading the master plan framework proposed under Recommendation 3 and overseeing incremental changes to flood risk that may result from development associated with river activation.

2

Reform tenure processes

Reduce approval timeframes and create greater certainty for proponents through:

- establishing statutory assessment timeframes under the *Land Act 1994*
- publishing service standards
- enabling concurrent assessments
- adopting standardised tenure agreements, and
- creating low-risk fast-track pathways.

Opportunities also exist to amend supporting legislation to ensure clarity and consistency, including the interaction between the *Planning Act 2016*, the *Land Act 1994* and the *Coastal Protection and Management Act 1995*, and to extend simplified approval pathways to maintenance, remediation and replacement works, not just new development.

3

Release a Brisbane River Vision

Inspire Queenslanders and demonstrate aligned priorities by delivering a jointly endorsed State-Council framework that articulates:

- a shared aspiration for the river and a statement of its importance to the identity of the city
- navigation principles
- desired long-term river outcomes
- environmental requirements and collective, restoration opportunities, and
- identified activation precincts
- opportunities for investor support and major project facilitation.
- infrastructure priorities

In addition, a master plan for the river should assess and prioritise different sections of the river against criteria and preferred uses, such as retail activation, passive recreation, views, ecology, tourism and river access infrastructure, to provide a holistic overview of the full spectrum of economic and lifestyle outcomes.

Recommendations

4

Implement a Digital River Atlas

Deliver better environmental outcomes and a holistic view of the river's status by creating a single, publicly accessible platform for up-to-date information on the river, including:

- tenure status
- planning controls
- navigational features and constraints
- flood and coastal management overlays
- environmental values
- existing infrastructure
- identified activation opportunities
- asset ownership and maintenance responsibilities.

This would help clarify who is responsible for different river assets and interfaces, particularly where ownership and responsibilities are fragmented.

5

Expand river landing and transport infrastructure

Expand Brisbane City Council's River Access Network program to create commercial and community opportunities to engage with the river, through delivery of a coordinated infrastructure program.

Expanding infrastructure such as commercial berths, public pontoons, short-term moorings, tourism access facilities and event infrastructure would create opportunities for new transport services, including water taxis and Bay Cats, while supporting tourism growth and greater community engagement with the river.

Planning for commercial berths should also consider overnight berthing for commercial operators, which is understood to have been an issue in recent years.

A defining opportunity for Brisbane

More than four decades of advocacy, investigation and stakeholder consultation have led to a remarkably consistent conclusion: the Brisbane River's greatest challenge is not a lack of opportunity, ambition or public interest. It is a lack of coordination.

Addressing this challenge presents a defining opportunity to strengthen Brisbane's identity as a unique river city, unlocking the full potential of the river as the heart of the city and its most distinctive asset.

Successive generations of city leaders, governments, businesses and community organisations have recognised the river's potential to support tourism, transport, recreation, investment and city identity. Brisbane has made significant progress in reconnecting the city with its river through projects such as South Bank, Riverwalk, Howard Smith Wharves and the expansion of the CityCat network. Yet many of the structural barriers identified by the Brisbane Development Association in 1983 remain unresolved today.

The development and growth of the Port of Brisbane notwithstanding, stakeholders continue to describe a system characterised by fragmented decision-making, lengthy and uncertain approvals processes, duplicated requirements and an absence of clear accountability for delivering river activation outcomes. While each agency fulfils an important role, no single entity is responsible for ensuring the river functions as a coordinated economic, environmental and community asset.

The cost of this fragmentation extends beyond delayed projects and foregone investment. It affects Brisbane's ability to expand tourism experiences, improve water-based transport, increase public access, support river-dependent businesses and realise the full social, cultural and recreational value of the river. It also limits the city's capacity to take a strategic, whole-of-river approach to environmental management, resilience and long-term planning.

The examples examined in this paper demonstrate that other jurisdictions have sought to address similar challenges through clearer governance arrangements, dedicated coordination bodies, long-term strategies and a recognised front door for proponents and stakeholders. While no model can be directly transplanted to Brisbane, the lessons are clear: effective river activation requires leadership, coordination and a shared vision.

As Brisbane prepares for a period of significant growth and global attention, including the opportunities associated with the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games, the question is no longer whether the river matters. The question is whether the city is prepared to adopt the governance and policy settings necessary to unlock its full potential.

The Committee for Brisbane believes the time has come to move beyond identifying the problem and focus on implementing practical solutions. A streamlined approvals pathway, more efficient tenure processes, a shared vision for the river, improved access to information and strategic investment in infrastructure are all achievable reforms.

The Brisbane River helped shape the city that exists today. With the right leadership and coordination, it can play an even greater role in shaping Brisbane's future. After more than forty years of calls for reform, 2026 presents an opportunity to deliver lasting change and finally unlock the full potential of Brisbane's defining natural asset.



To find out more about the Committee for Brisbane,
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