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Conservationist slams Brisbane's koala land deal



Australian Koala Foundation founder Deborah Tabart on the cleared suburban block in Brisbane's Mount Gravatt East on Friday. Picture: Russell Shakespeare

EXCLUSIVE

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Australia's best-known koala conservationist, Deborah Tabart, has labelled as "a complete waste of money" Brisbane City Council's \$6.2m purchase of a denuded suburban block it had deemed a "koala corridor".

The long-serving Australian Koala Foundation chairwoman, who met Brisbane Mayor Adrian Schrinner on Friday, said "political motivations" were behind most of the Liberal council's purchases under the Bushland Acquisition Program, funded by a ratepayer levy.

The third-most expensive buyback since the levy's inception in 1990, the 6500sq m block had been cleared by its owners for proposed townhouses and was bought by council earlier this year without any expert conservation assessment in a bid to quell local protests over the development.

New figures show that since the council's term began in March 2016, the council has spent \$77.3m of the levy's funds on bushland buybacks in Liberal-held divisions, with just \$2.99m in divisions held by the Labor opposition.

Ms Tabart joined the RSPCA and conservation experts in criticising the \$6.2m purchase of the block in Mount Gravatt East, in Brisbane's south, announced days before a rally by an anti-townhouse group threatening to target Deputy Mayor Krista Adams, who holds the local division on a slim margin.

"The Australian Koala Foundation has watched the purchase of this land with great concern; we don't believe this is the way to use the levy," she told *The Weekend Australian*.

"It could not be viewed as a koala habitat or corridor under any regulatory framework.

"The AKF has always had questions about how and why the Brisbane City Council chooses the land it purchases over the years, and we have written to offer the advice of the Australian Koala Foundation and that has never been taken up.

"It has been my experience that most decisions in purchasing under the levy have political motivations and are not a genuine attempt to protect koalas."

The purchase was announced last November before the council had even negotiated a price with developers, who made a \$1.79m profit on the land they bought just 10 months earlier.

Documents also show that, weeks before announcing the buyback, then mayor Graham Quirk told a Senate committee the block was not a koala habitat or corridor.

Emails obtained by *The Weekend Australian* show that the developers scoffed at the independent valuation of \$4.4m for the block, citing Mr Quirk's announcement before settling on a \$5.2m sale price.

"The Lord Mayor backed himself into a corner when he announced that council will purchase the site," the developer told the council officers during negotiations.

The cost later blew out by \$1m, with Mr Schrinner's office conceding it took \$750,000 of levy funds to cover "council's corporate overhead costs" of internal staff working on the deal.

Labor environment spokesman Steve Griffiths said the latest official reports of the Bushland Acquisition Program indicated the council was misusing the levy funds to favour its own councillors — a claim that has been rejected by the council.

The Liberals hold 19 of the 26 divisions of Brisbane's sprawling council region, with Labor holding just five and the Greens and independents one each.

Mr Griffiths said only two of the 39 bushland buybacks since 2016 had been in Labor divisions.

"These figures are stark evidence of how badly the LNP council has rorted a fund that should be sacred," he said.

“Brisbane people will be outraged to find their rates are being wasted on blatant political pork-barrelling while threatened species are dying every day.”

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/conservationist-slams-brisbanes-koala-land-deal/news-story/8e0b976a15ffdfef52d2a9f003f152ae>