

Organisation **Billen Cliffs Village Strata Plan 36965**

Name: **Mr Alfredo Bonanno**

I write as Secretary for Billen Cliffs SP36965 (115 units Strata Title community bordering Richmond and Page) and also as a lobbyist of nearly five years for proper telecommunication services in our area (Cawongla, Larnook, Billen Cliffs, Avalon and Stony Chute Road).

We are not satisfied with the telecommunication services available in rural areas on the North Coast We are paying too much for sub-standard services than our neighbouring villages and towns.

Attachment : Letter to Saffin and Elliott

Dear Janelle Saffin and Justine Elliot,

I write as Secretary for Billen Cliffs SP36965 (115 units Strata Title community bordering Richmond and Page) and also as a lobbyist of nearly five years for proper telecommunication services in our area (Cawongla, Larnook, Billen Cliffs, Avalon and Stony Chute Road).

The above mentioned areas are located across both Page and Richmond electorate boundaries and are approx. 30 to 38kms distance from Lismore, Nimbin and Kyogle. People living in these areas conduct a number of activities as farmers, solo traders, businesses, tradespeople, professionals, artists, performers, university graduates and students, not to mention tourists – all struggling to cope with inadequate telecommunications infrastructure.

In the last five years, despite a countless number of petitions, collections of expression of interest forms, meetings with local, state and federal representatives, Country-Wide and Telstra managements, we are still without essential telecommunication services (broadband, mobile phone and digital TV reception). All the major centres (Lismore, Kyogle & Nimbin) and most minor country locations around us now have access to broadband (ADSL & NextG) and adequate mobile and digital TV reception. In our area we have been excluded from any form of upgrade or telecommunication improvement.

Infrastructure: The telephone exchange servicing our area is located in Cawongla (Page), from the exchange there are three other Pair-Gain exchanges connected to it, one of them is located in Billen Cliffs (Richmond). The Telephone exchange in Cawongla is servicing 1,317 registered phones (unofficial figures provided by CountryWide in 2006) due to the nature of the copper wiring and outdated exchanges we also experience frequent phone line dropouts all over the area. Currently the exchange does not even support caller identification. The exchange allegedly has been upgraded to support ADSL (information from qualified witnesses, but it apparently hasn't been switched on). If ADSL were to be switched on it will be able to provide

Broadband only to households within a radius of 7kms and subsequently, Billen Cliffs' 115 units will still be excluded.

In 2005 the Department of Education (NSW) laid out optical fibre (approx 45Kms) carrying ADSL to two locations only – Barkers Vale and Larnook Primary Schools. The optical fibre is designed to carry enough traffic to satisfy the entire population between Lismore and Barkers Vale, with plenty of nodes (connections points) throughout its length. Unfortunately the access to this service is denied to private residences.

In 2003 the Broadening-Broadband scheme under the IBIS federal government funding was designed to provide wireless broadband to locations where ADSL wasn't available. When the scheme was officially closed the only beneficiaries were towns and villages which *already* had ADSL, All the rural locations, without any form of broadband, missed out on this scheme.

The only options left for the residents in our area are:

- **Dialup:** this is the only current option available to the majority of local residents; dialup, for those people on Pair-Gain exchanges, creates further slower connectivity and unexpected dropouts.
- **NextG:** the closest transmitter is located at Homeleigh (10Kms from Kyogle), the signal to our area is weak and in most of the valley is out of range (an apparent black-spot). Internet plans for Bigpond NextG Wireless Broadband are two/three time more expensive than ADSL and with very limited upload/download available.
- **Satellite:** Broadband Connect federal government schemes did provide, until 2006, subsidies for satellite connections. Now it appears that the \$600 million funding has been "frozen", leaving many applicants without the service. Satellite plans are more expensive than Bigpond NextG, less reliable and with less upload/download available for a comparative price.
- **Wireless providers:** there are many providers for wireless broadband operating in the region. Many have been approached by local residents in our area. yet none has managed to provide coverage in our area. According to these providers, Telstra has been denying or limiting access to existing transmitting towers.

Telstra Exchanges upgrades: it appears that Telstra is in litigation with ACCC and the federal government in relation to providing ADSL2 services to the competition at wholesale and retailing associated costs and charges. The Cawongla exchange (with another 1,300 and 300 Pair-Gain exchanges Australian Wide (2006 Telstra figures)) are to all effect some sort of blackmail instrument between Telstra & the federal government; we will never be able to get ADSL2 (ADSL2 requires optical fibre, exchange upgrade and copper wire – without a Pair-Gain exchange) and really we should be left out from being

used and abused in any form of political/financial arguments.

Telstra claims & sales: Telstra claims that “90% of Australian households have now Broadband and 98% of Australians can have, now, wireless broadband with NextG”. Where do these figures come from? Is there any independent body or federal government department (DICTA, ACMA or TIO) which can verify such claims? Where is the Telstra online database available to the public in which you could see every single Australian exchange (not the pair gain ones, though) and the time schedule for their upgrades to ADSL? (The database used to be at: <http://www.telstra.com.au/demand/index.cfm>). In our area it is quite common receiving calls from Telstra representatives offering ADSL at a very special cut down price. It is also typical, when residents ask what happened to the enabling our exchange to ADSL, to be answered that we should get NextG instead.

Competition: usually the competition offer better prices than Telstra on any type of Internet or phone plans. Unfortunately if we have a different land line provider and the line is out of service the waiting time for Telstra technician to fix the issue is much longer (7 to 10 days) than if we are a Telstra customer. Internet plans with competitors we can only access dialup plans – no ADSL is available to us and there is only one Wireless provider (Bigpond NextG) that can reach only some pockets in the valley.

Mobile Phones

Mobile reception: In rural areas the CDMA network has been a saviour in mobile telecommunications. By the end of January the CDMA network will be closed down; Telstra has decided that the NextG network is absolutely terrific and has now “reached 98.9% National Wide coverage”. Telstra claims the CDMA network is no longer required and NextG has greater national coverage. Our experience shows that NextG has a poor coverage if any at all in many areas of our valley. When we have enquired with Telstra about a potential improvement of the signal they answered that our area needs satellite phones and that there is no provision to install any antenna to extend to us the NextG service. Furthermore NextG mobile signal is of very poor quality or absent from many areas on the North Coast. The CDMA network is currently used by many other mobile providers like OPTUS, we are going to see a deterioration of mobile services and reception in rural Australia by the end of the month.

Mobile Phones: How many country people are interested to watch a rugby match, or a soap opera show on a 4x4 cm screen? Why on earth do we need to constantly buy a new mobile phone full of gimmicks and buttons, just to be able of being in touch with one another? How many perfectly functional mobile phones need to be replaced and discarded just because the CDMA network is going to be closed down?

Television

TV Reception: In our area analog reception of TV signal has been problematic for many years. It has slightly improved with digital signal but hasn't changed the fact that we are in a black-spot zone. Currently there are no federal government funds to address the issue of TV reception, and we fear we may still be in this situation for many years to come unless the current federal government will address our concerns. Many residents can receive bouncing signals, others opt for satellite free-to-air or pay TV. Free-to-air satellite TV is in somewhat limiting with a large chunk of TV stations not present in the service, including Regional ABC, ABC2, SBS2 and many other commercial stations. Has the new federal government included in the agenda some policy to address those issues?

Conclusions:

We are not satisfied with the telecommunication services available in rural areas on the North Coast. We are paying too much for sub-standard services than our neighbouring villages and towns. We can't figure out why we are constantly disregarded and forgotten by politicians and Telstra. We are losing opportunities, revenue and hard-earned cash to make do with what little is offered to us. We pay levies and taxes the same as anybody else in Australia and still we are stuck with last centuries technologies.

We would like to be heard and, in cooperation with both of you (our elected federal government representatives), Country-Link and Telstra, find an opportunity to address our concerns and needs. Would you be interested in calling an open door meeting where all concerned parties could be present? Our aim is to get some real deadlines for ADSL implementation on the Cawongla phone exchange and adequately priced wireless broadband, plus reassurances that we are not going to lose our current, and nearly decent, mobile phone coverage.

Thanks for taking the time to read this email. I will be happy to answer any of your questions, and assisting you both in any way possible towards achieving a better deal for rural residents in your electorates.

Regards

Alfredo Bonanno