



Our Reference: TRIM 2597#103#99 JS:rw

Standing Committee on Broadband
In Rural and Regional Communities
Parliament House
Macquarie Square
SYDNEY NSW 2000

4 October 2007

Dear Committee Members

SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO BROADBAND IN RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMUNITIES

I am writing on behalf of Wollondilly Shire Council in response to the Inquiries Invitation for submissions into Broadband in Rural and Regional communities.

I understand this committee has been appointed to inquire into the needs of Rural and Regional Communities in relation to telecommunications (including Broadband) and other technology services and in particular, to report on its terms of reference including availability, benefits, disincentives, consequences and options.

This submission deals with benefits and opportunities for Rural and Regional Communities of having access to telecommunications (including Broadband) and other technology services.

This submission has been prepared on behalf of the elected members of Wollondilly Shire Council who resolved:

Motion 221/2007

"That Council prepare a submission to the State Broadband Review Committee".

This submission is broken into two (2) parts;

Part A Economic Development

and

Part B Equity

Part A

Wollondilly Shire Council has prepared a Draft Economic Development Strategy which aims to encourage increased business investment, good jobs and learning opportunities within a framework that improves the quality of life of our residents.

The strategy is based upon seven (7) principles:

.../2

These are:

1. Integrated economic, social and environmental strategies
2. Build on local human and environmental attributes
3. Attract sustainable investment in jobs
4. Job opportunities that match local skills
5. Build partnerships
6. Innovation and Learning
7. Realistic and achievable

The strategy outlines six (6) strategic directions and a number of possible actions to assist this Council implement the economic development strategy.

The six (6) strategic directions are:

1. Planning for economic growth and change
2. Strengthening business competitiveness
3. Consolidating activity centres
4. Investing in people and infrastructure
5. Marketing Wollondilly
6. A sustainable economy

Council in planning for population and labour force growth must plan for a more complex and sustainable economy. In growing peripheral metropolitan areas, this is where Wollondilly lies, population growth drives new economic opportunities (eg retail business and community services, construction). These jobs are necessary although not usually sufficient.

Local job growth normally lags labour force growth in growing areas on the fringe and this results in high commuting and higher than average unemployment.

Wollondilly Shire's local economy was initially underpinned by agriculture and mining. The significance of these activities has declined in relative terms. Agriculture has become less competitive as land use conflicts with urban development, increasing rural land prices and transport and technological innovations created more opportunities for large scale agriculture distant from population centres.

Coal mining was rationalised in the early 1980's with the close of the Burragorang Valley mines and the increased competition from open cut mines. Both these primary activities remain important with high mineral prices re-activating interest in the southern coal fields and water, high energy prices and the sustainability agenda spurring interest in agriculture in the Sydney basin.

The growth of metropolitan Sydney and associated infrastructure improvements, particularly the southern freeway/M5, has increased the popularity of fringe areas such as Wollondilly for new residents. People can travel to the city by car in an hour compared to 2.5 hours prior to the construction of the freeway and the Sydney orbital network.

Train commuting, although impeded by the fact the line is not electrified south of Macarthur is still reasonably accessible. The key attraction is that people can live in quiet and rural settings surrounded by spectacular and natural attributes and yet be an hour from Australia's global city.

Another attraction is relative affordability of the area compared to the average in metropolitan Sydney. Whereas medium price per house in Wollondilly was \$373,000 in June 2006, yet was around \$475,000 in metropolitan Sydney. Medium prices for flats and units were \$265,000 in Wollondilly compared to \$385,000 in metropolitan Sydney over the same period.

Wollondilly is highly car dependent, due to relatively poor public transport to and from the dispersed villages and poor services overall. In 2001 around 4.7% of the labour force used public transport compared to 17% for the Sydney metropolitan area. 71.6% of residents of working age commute to work outside the Shire. Car dependence imposes a high social and environmental cost to the community.

Unemployment in Wollondilly remains low, at around 3.3%. The lack of local job opportunities may pressure people to leave and look for work elsewhere, this particularly impacts upon young people. There are 4,495 High School aged young people with a total of up to 1,266 enrolment places in Wollondilly. 3,229 young people travel outside the Shire. The sustainability agenda and declining global oil production is set to fundamentally transform cities over the next two (2) decades, resulting in significant and many unforeseen impacts on investment, employment, schools and location of jobs.

Higher energy prices and taxes as well as new regulations and programs will have a transformative impact on the building environment and transport networks. The current model of workers in outlying areas commuting long distances by car to more centrally located jobs will not be sustainable economically and socially, if oil prices reach US \$100.00 per barrel in the next three (3) years. This is not an unlikely scenario.

Wollondilly needs to be developed in the context of the sustainable sub-region in South West Sydney with emphasis given to strengthening accessible employment centres such as Liverpool, Campbelltown and increasing the supply of local employment lands.

The forces to decentralise economic activities and jobs to be served by good public transport will grow leading to greater integration between where people live and where they work. A national commitment to high speed broadband in the structure is critical not only to boost national productivity but also to facilitate better integration of where people live and where they work in our cities.

Home based work has grown at a lower rate than we expected but improvements in communication technologies which will provide for more secure data flows and home based video conference will accelerate these opportunities. This is the basis of this submission.

In preparing Council's Economic Development Strategy representatives from a range of businesses and community organisations were interviewed. In this interview process a number of critical issues were established.

These were:

- Urban and Rural Economy
- Infrastructure
- Community Environment
- Governance

Within the critical area infrastructure the following points were made:

1. Transport infrastructure and services need to be improved with better rail and road links to Sydney, improved scheduling and co-ordination of timetabling of bus, taxi and rail.
2. Access to broadband could provide more job opportunities and improve access to wider markets.

3. Important role for government in locating public sector jobs and agencies as a catalyst for other investment.
4. Main centres need to offer good parking, be pedestrian friendly and facilitate traffic flow.
5. Communications infrastructure and services need to be upgraded.
6. Consideration needs to be given to strengthening the railway line between Menangle and Yanderra.
7. Tourist infrastructure and services (accommodation, activities, signage, products) needs to be improved to increase visitors from the greater metropolitan region and overseas.
8. Recognise the high costs of maintaining infrastructure in dispersed villages.
9. Improved public and community transport services are required across Wollondilly.

Of these nine (9) points identified two (2) of the points include broadband and communications infrastructure. In terms of infrastructure development it was recognised that Council needs to develop a leadership role in developing Wollondilly as a learning community by investigating new education opportunities and developing partnerships with education providers including ways to make use of under-utilised facilities, upgrading local on-line learning opportunities and encouraging opportunities for local entrepreneurs.

As a result one of the recommended actions of the Wollondilly Economic Development Strategy is that Council approach educational organisations with the view of strengthening vocational training within the Wollondilly area through either the establishment of a campus on-line learning opportunities and/or making use of local facilities to increase education and training courses available to the residents of Wollondilly.

The recommendation also includes the identification of opportunities within our area for private schools and other educational institutions seeking green field's locations close to Sydney.

IN SUMMARY

It is this Council's submission based upon the Committee's term of reference 1d, being the consequences for Rural and Regional Communities of not having or not having adequate access to telecommunications including broadband and other technology services, having regard to likely future industry and technological developments.

It is very important for this community, as it will enable business to be conducted efficiently, it will generate future employment close to where our residents live and will also enable more work from home. In turn this will enhance job opportunities with the view of moving away from long distance commuting which is expensive, both in terms of the energy consumed and the time impact upon families.

Part B

The use of technology to assist in communication is a tangible part of our lives today. Access to reasonably priced broadband services is essential for sustainable development, community building and social equity across our shire.

Broadband is a crucial resource for social and cultural development and interaction between and within the communities of our Shire. Therefore we believe it is important that market forces do not become the sole basis for determining the rate of development of regional telecommunication infrastructure within our Shire.

We see telecommunication infrastructure and networks as a platform supporting social interaction, education, health and government services, business relations, and our communications with the world outside of Wollondilly. They are the means through which we establish a sense of community, maintain personal relationships, conduct our business, entertain ourselves and build links with the rest of the world. Access to efficient telecommunication infrastructure enables our communities to access information and the opportunity to participate fully as a member of society which is fundamental to our democratic processes.

More and more government services, such as health, education, and governance, are being provided online. If all citizens have rights to equal access to government services, then it is important to understand that market forces cannot be relied upon to provide affordable access to broadband services.

The current lack of access to the Internet at reasonable speed and limited access to broadband data products is a major obstacle to the future economic and social development within the Wollondilly Shire. The vast majority of residents and businesses in Wollondilly do not currently have access to the same standards of telecommunications service as their city counterparts.

We believe the current provision of this technology is focused on industry's profitability and competition policy, which results in our residents and communities needs being given too little attention. The current lack of competition means that prices are high and there is evidence that this significantly disadvantages local businesses. The connectivity barrier of availability at affordable price is beyond the capacity of local government to solve. The role of telecommunications in our rural community and business development cannot be overemphasised. Currently our communities have poorly developed information technology infrastructure which hinders the ability to generate attractive employment opportunities and retain existing businesses and residents within our shire. This is a concern for our Council.

Broadband has been shown to bring significant benefits to our residents and businesses that are able to access it. It can lead to productivity gains as businesses make use of electronic supply chains and can market themselves on the web, and it can allow employees to work more flexibly at home. Currently 71.6% of residents of working age in Wollondilly commute to work outside of the Shire.

Improved quality and accessibility of communications will reduce inequities in the delivery of health and education and open doors to new commercial opportunities within Wollondilly.

The use of broadband as a communication platform will support improved health services and better delivery of government services within Wollondilly. Currently the provision of outreach health and community services to our area is limited and the shortage of qualified and expert medical practitioners in our shire will increase the demand for the export potential of telemedicine services. Access to broadband for these services will assist in addressing the current inequity issues in the health care system and provide essential services to our residents, that are currently afforded to people living in metropolitan areas. The internet also opens up to people with a disability living in our Shire, new opportunities and means for participation in their local communities and access to the information society.

There is a strong need for the Police, transport and other monitoring and enforcement bodies to be able to interconnect across the Wollondilly Shire, but they are presently unable to get adequate broadband services even though they are only seventy kilometres from Sydney.

Many new opportunities for learning will present themselves with access to broadband particularly to the 3229 high school aged young people that travel outside the shire borders to gain secondary schooling. There is limited tertiary educational opportunities provided within the shire and broadband access would increase these opportunities.

The Internet has become one of the primary communication tools for young people in the Wollondilly Shire, surpassing even the telephone among some groups. Young people make up 30.5% of the population of the Wollondilly Shire. Many of our young people use the internet to email friends or relatives use it for instant messaging to send instant text messages both from their computer and via wireless devices, to download digital music and play online games for their entertainment. Young people also depend on the Internet as an educational resource and they also turn to the Internet for help when completing their schoolwork. For many young people in our shire the internet is their only means of communication with their peers outside of school hours.

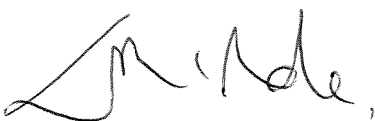
Connection to the internet provides access to information regardless of socio-economic status and geographic location however an ongoing concern for young people in the Wollondilly area is the accessibility and affordability of broadband technology and this can hinder their capacity to negotiate connectivity on an individual basis, inturn creating a social inequity of the "haves" and "have-nots". Many areas in Wollondilly do not have access to fibre optic cable or a reliable alternative means and ADSL high speeds, which is available for domestic use in other metropolitan areas is virtually non-existent in Wollondilly. Access to broadband and other telecommunication infrastructure and networks enables participation in economic and social events, equality of opportunity, and the prevention of social exclusion.

In summary and giving regard to the Committee's term of reference 1b, being the benefits and opportunities for rural and regional communities of having access to telecommunications (including broadband) and other technology services, improved telecommunication infrastructure, networks and in particular broadband will:

- Improve public service delivery
- Enhance public governance – transparency, accountability
- Enhance social equity for young people
- Strengthen cultural support and ties
- Enhance opportunities for public participation
- Greater access to information, training and education
- Enhance opportunities for social and economic networks
- Strengthen economic performance and opportunity

Council wishes to thank the Committee for any consideration that they may be able to give to this submission.

Yours faithfully



Les McMahon
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WOLLONDILLY SHIRE COUNCIL