

Submission
No 3

**INQUIRY INTO ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
IN CENTRAL WESTERN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Name: Mr Michael Neall
Position: Former Mayor, Wollongong City Council
Date received: 5/08/2011

4th August, 2011.

The Director.
Standing Committee on State Development,
Legislative Council,
Parliament House,
Macquarie Street,
Sydney. NSW 2000

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit some comments on economic and social development in the Central Western district of New South Wales. Some of my comments refer specifically to the Blue Mountains as this is the area about which I have the most direct knowledge.

I hope that improvements will be implemented as a result of the work of the Standing Committee.

SUBMISSION.

a. the provision of health, education and cultural facilities.

Health.

There is certainly a need to rationalise health services across the state. Health costs are inevitably rising as specialist skills and equipment become more complex and more expensive. Small hospitals can no longer be expected to provide a full range of these increasingly sophisticated services. Expansion of regional facilities seems to be the most efficient way to provide these services.

However, inevitably there is an outcry every time this is suggested. The community seems to irrationally demand that every service should be available in every hospital. (see comments below on community consultation)

Education.

Once again, there is an outcry whenever a re-allocation of resources is suggested. It would seem to me that the most equitable solution should be that each child is allocated the same amount of government funding for their education and the parents should then select the form of education that

they consider most appropriate. (The provision of respite care services is currently being organised on that basis)

Public educators would no doubt object bitterly at what they would see as an assault on the public school system. However, why should families who choose pay extra for the additional facilities of a private school, be denied the same level of basic support as those using public education?

There are already a large number of private educational institutions in the Central West and this suggested funding change would probably result in an expansion of this private sector. This would not necessarily be a bad thing and would take some pressure off the state run facilities.

Cultural.

There are currently a large number of individuals and small cultural groups competing for a necessarily limited number of available facilities. Councils are expected to provide venues for each of these entities, often at no cost or at least at a heavily subsidised cost.

Representatives of these groups all take the high ground and insist that they are providing substantial cultural benefits to the community. It could well be argued that if the opportunity they present is sufficiently valued by the residents, they will achieve a level of patronage which will allow them to pay an appropriate fee for the facilities they use.

b. the reasons for population decline or growth in different areas.

Development in the Blue Mountains has been severely restricted for many years by a succession of councils which have taken every opportunity to restrict development. The current zonings are extremely restrictive and this fact, coupled with the numerous specialist reports which are demanded before any proposal to develop land will be considered, has resulted in a situation where any subdivision has become so costly as to make it uneconomic. The result is that there has been little or no growth in the area for many years.

However, there has been massive residential development allowed on the agricultural land between Penrith and Parramatta. The decision to allow all this development may well be one which we regret in the future. It would seem much more logical to locate any future development in the mountains where the land is not suitable for agriculture.

c. the adequacy of transport and road infrastructure.

Highway.

There have been massive improvements made to the Great Western Highway over the last few years and when all the current work has been completed, we will have a first class 4 lane highway all the way from Parramatta to Katoomba. The highway between Lithgow and Bathurst has also been vastly improved. The RTA and successive state governments should be congratulated.

However, there is still a need to provide bypasses in some areas of the Blue Mountains such as Linden to allow traffic flow when the highway is temporarily blocked.

The next important item of infrastructure needed is an upgrade of the Bell's Line of Road and the construction of a link to the M7. This would redirect heavy traffic away from the Great Western Highway and also significantly improve the flow of freight to and from the west of the state.

Local Roads.

The good work being done on the highway contrasts with the apparent inability of Blue Mountains City Council to maintain its roads and footpaths adequately. Maintenance is at an all time low and unless urgent steps are taken to address this issue, the situation will continue to deteriorate rapidly.

Railway.

We are fortunate to have a good train service although some expansion of peak hour services will apparently soon be necessary. I understand this may not be possible until there are additional rail lines provided between Parramatta and Central.

The provision of appropriate secure car parking at all railway stations is an important factor in encouraging patronage.

d. ways to encourage development of local enterprises and the potential of the region overall.

Whilst Lithgow and Bathurst have local Councils which are prepared to encourage development, Blue Mountains City Council has policies and plans in place designed to severely restrict development. As a result, it is extremely difficult to obtain approval to undertake even relatively small developments.

I can provide two examples.

1) - I obtained development approval to replace some existing shops which had to be demolished to allow for the widening of the Great Western Highway through the township of Lawson. I eventually constructed 7 new shops on the land. The Council approval process took not 40 days but over 6 months.

In addition, the overall proposal to widen the highway and rebuild the shops had been the subject of "Community Consultation" for literally over 20 years! During that time, at the insistence of the community, the RTA explored options of bypasses, tunnels, even an aerial road constructed above the railway line. We also had focus groups, public meetings, planning committees, etc., etc., and I am advised that the overall cost of all this consultation was in the vicinity of \$10M!

The entire project could have probably been completed for \$10M in the early 1990s, but of course due to the delays, the cost increased out of all proportion. Needless to say, the cost of building my new shops also increased dramatically!

2) - A subdivision application was recently submitted to Blue Mountains City Council for a block of land in Blackheath. All the relevant studies had been undertaken and the proposal was carefully considered by Council staff. It was also subjected to a peer review by Penrith City Council.

It was then submitted to Council with a recommendation for approval.

Nevertheless, there were a number of residents who were opposed to the subdivision and some attended the Council meeting at which the decision was to be made. The Councillors reacted to their pressure by resolving to refuse the application.

As a result, the applicant was forced to lodge an appeal with the Land and Environment Court.

Now this was costly for the applicant and also for Blue Mountains City Council. As the Council staff had already considered the proposal and made a recommendation to approve it, Council had to employ expensive outside consultants as hired guns to oppose the matter in the Court.

The proposal was eventually approved by the Court as it complied with all the relevant planning controls, but what a waste of money for everyone involved. The Council has admitted to legal costs alone of up to \$100,000.

There have also been the costs imposed on the applicant by reason of the delay. Decisions like these are likely to further discourage other developers from even considering proposals for development in the Blue Mountains.

e. the comparative level of government business activity located within the region.

Obviously it is beneficial to have a state or federal government department or agency located in a region. This has become relatively easier to achieve with the development of modern communication technologies. The Central Mapping Authority at Bathurst is a prime example. However, I have experienced much reluctance whenever I have taken this matter up with various politicians and bureaucrats.

One of the difficulties is that senior members of staff want easy access to capital cities and the facilities available there. They are reluctant to support relocation outside the metropolitan area.

f. methodologies for local government to collectively cooperate to achieve increased infrastructure funding and economic growth.

The pursuit of infrastructure funding has been sadly neglected in the Blue Mountains. In the 1990s, Blue Mountains City Council employed a senior staff member in an entrepreneurial capacity solely to investigate and pursue grant opportunities. This was highly successful.

Unfortunately Council chose to dispense with his services but the opportunities are still there.

Just consider the potential offered by the World Heritage listing of the Greater Blue Mountains National Park. Blue Mountains City Council should be strongly pursuing grant funding firstly to promote the park and also to mitigate the impact of the city on the park.

As to the possibility of cooperation with adjacent Councils, it would be difficult to envisage opportunities for Blue Mountains to participate at this stage as its inherent ideologies are very different to those of neighbouring Councils.

g. any other factor restricting economic and social development in Central Western New South Wales

Community Consultation

Everyone is an expert! The days when we accepted that a civil engineer was the ultimate authority on where and how to build a road, have gone. Now many members of the community seem to think they know better!

The demand for community consultation has expanded out of all proportion. The project to widen the Great Western Highway through Lawson referred to above is a prime example. The actions of a small section of the community in demanding detailed investigation of exotic alternatives was just

ridiculous. It is significant to note that at the end of the process, the highway was constructed largely as it was originally proposed. However the overall cost of the project had multiplied several times.

Groups opposing a proposal inevitably insist on more and more consultation until their particular desires are met and the project modified to suit them.

Part 3A of the Environmental Planning & Assessment Act.

It is most unfortunate that the new state government has rushed to repeal the provisions of Part 3A from the Environmental Planning & Assessment Act. This legislation at least made a start towards distancing local Councils from the consideration of major projects. I can only hope that the legislation will soon be replaced and expanded.

Councillors spend far too much of their time and efforts in considering Development Applications and too often the final decision is based on the number of votes which they perceive might be won or lost at the next election. A separate entity charged with making these decisions would ensure objectivity and a much fairer process.

Solution.

Elected representatives, particularly at local government level must be encouraged to take a broader view of matters. For instance, it is the role of Councillors and then the State Planning Authority, to determine appropriate zonings for individual parcels of land.

This must be done in a broad context and there is already an appropriate process in place which allows for wide community consultation at this juncture.

Once the broad guidelines are set by way of these zonings, individual proposals should then be determined by a delegation of the decision to the appropriately qualified Council staff or preferably the proposal should be considered by an independent authority. There should not be a need for further consultation with the community as its views have already been taken into account.

In the 18th Century, political writer Edmund Burke wrote; "Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays instead of serving you if he sacrifices it to your opinion". That statement is still true today.

I hope these comments will be of assistance to the Standing Committee in its deliberations.

Yours faithfully,

Michael Neall.
Former Mayor.
Blue Mountains City Council.