

**Submission
No 35**

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

Organisation: Bland Shire Council

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Submission into the inquiry into economic and social development in Central Western New South Wales

Introduction

Bland Shire Council is located on the southern fringes of the Central West of NSW and has a population of 6,102 (at the 2006 census). Bland Shire is expected to experience an increase of over 380 people to 6,720 by 2021, at an average annual growth rate of 0.40% per annum over 15 years. This is based on an increase of over 190 households during the period, with the average number of persons per household falling from 2.50 to 2.47 by 2021 (Informed Decisions Bland Profile 2011).

The major administrative and business centre of the Shire is West Wyalong. Our economy and community have recently survived a decade of drought, however during this same period welcomed new investment and diversity in the form of the Barrick Cowal Gold project. Much of the future economic and social development in our area relies on the ability of the Shire to attract and retain new residents to fill the employment and business opportunities that exist within the local area.

a) Provision of health, education and cultural facilities

The provision of health, educational and cultural facilities in West Wyalong is critical for the future success and prosperity of our town and shire.

Health

Currently the Bland Shire is facing a growing crisis in the availability of doctors. We have two full time permanent doctors, who are supplemented by locums when available, for a shire population of 6,500. Approximately five full time permanent doctors are required to support this population. The lack of doctors limits the services available at our hospital, which is a modern facility, built in 1999. At times the hospital does not have access to a doctor, even on an on call basis. Ambulances are frequently diverted to Wagga Wagga, some 160km away. Patients often remain in hospital in Wagga Wagga for the duration of their illness, placing a burden both on that hospital and on the families who are forced to travel in what is already a difficult time. Our community has limited access to a GP in a timely manner. This puts greater pressure on the emergency departments of neighbouring towns.

The allied health needs of our community such as physiotherapy, mental health, speech therapy and occupational therapy are serviced in a fragmented and disjointed manner or in some cases not serviced at all. Several studies have clearly shown there is a significant demand for a range of Allied Health Services throughout Bland Shire. This need is not been met by the current strategy that promotes visiting Health professionals rather than establishing a constant local presence. Shortages of both funding and staff see this area being serviced on a shared basis with neighbouring towns. This places a significant travel burden on the staff in these roles as well as being a significant cost in terms of wasted hours which could be allocated to clinical care. Consequently there has been a marked decline in the availability of health services available locally in the past 10 years.

The availability of Health services is an important consideration for families thinking of moving to the Shire and for those thinking of remaining in the Shire to retire. Our higher than average number of over 65 year old residents increases our reliance on many Health Services. To fall short of meeting this need will result in the Shire losing population to larger centres. Working families have clear expectations that Health Services are easily accessible and affordable. Any shortfall in meeting this expectation will also result in population loss to other centres.

The issues of health services, particularly access to GPs with Visiting Medical Officer rights at the hospital is the most important issue for the future development of our town.

Education

The educational sector has established a reputation for delivering quality education programs in diverse learning environments. Schools throughout the Shire range in size from small two teacher Primary schools with a total student population of approximately 30 to the largest in West Wyalong with a student population of approximately 450.

Secondary Education is currently provided through Ungarie Central School and West Wyalong High School.

Over the last decade there has been clear evidence of fluctuation in student numbers. Burcher Primary School (although not in Bland Shire it serviced Shire families) was closed in 2010 after years of low student enrolments. Wyalong Public School has dropped approximately 40% in student numbers since 2000. The Secondary portion of the local Catholic School closed in 2009 due to falling numbers.

The West Wyalong Campus of TAFE NSW Riverina Institute plays, and will play an important role in the delivery of tertiary education although currently has limited courses and qualifications.

Attracting teachers to Regional New South Wales has never been easy but recent changes in staffing regulations by DECS are feared to have had a negative impact on the ability of schools to fill vacancies. Incentive packages to work in rural areas have been reduced or removed entirely. Failure of any school in the future to provide a stable, qualified staff will result in students being sent away to boarding school for their education.

The availability of good educational resources is a key criteria for many families when considering relocating and living in an area.

b) The reasons for population decline or growth in different areas

Agriculture

Increased mechanisation of farming operations and a shift to cropping rather than more labour intensive livestock based enterprises has seen an increase in the size of average rural landholdings in the area.

Farm amalgamations are common with neighbouring landholders expanding farm size rather than generational change or the attraction of new industry entrants. Ten years of drought have increased rates of change in farm expansion. There have been many primary producers exit the industry, which at the same time has struggled to attract new entrants. A more recent feature for many local agricultural enterprises is the "off farm" income component. For many, the decade of drought forced one or both partners to source employment in other industries. The local mining boom has afforded many this opportunity. In many cases farm output has declined as a consequence of this factor.

Mining

The establishment of the Barrick Cowal Gold mine in 2005 has been an economic driver for whole region, particularly for West Wyalong. The mine has a permanent workforce of 200 and approximately 100 contractors. The introduction of the mine has diversified the industrial mix of the local economy and provided a buffer to the effects of the drought described above.

Industry attraction

Within regional development in Australia there appears to be issues associated with a critical size. Large regional cities appear to be increasing in size, where smaller towns are either struggling to maintain their populations or reducing in size.

c) The adequacy of transport and road infrastructure

The closure of regional branch lines has put enormous pressure on the Council's local and regional roads. Following the extended drought period the full impact of these closures is yet to be experienced. Smaller trucks travelling short distances to local silos have been replaced by large trucks, B doubles and road trains travelling greater distances, with much greater damage to local roads.

Though local and State governments have, and should, focus on improving the economic diversity of the region, this area still remains one of the primary agricultural production areas in the State. The infrastructure demands of this industry need to be met in the long term in a cost effective, safe and environmentally sustainable manner. This means an upgrade to our rail infrastructure and a review of the closures that have occurred. The dismantling of rail infrastructure across NSW has been to the detriment of regional communities.

Renewed investment in this area is essential for the future prosperity of both the Grain Industry and rural communities everywhere.

d) Ways to encourage development of local enterprises and the potential of the region overall

The State Government's recently announced \$7,000 housing grant for those relocating to regional areas is positive for the Bland Shire. Similarly styled incentives for business relocations should be encouraged to boost development in regional area.

The New South Wales Payroll Tax Rebate Scheme (Jobs Action Plan) is also a good incentive to encourage the development of local enterprises, but compared to the previous Trade & Investment's Regional Business Development Scheme and Regional Business Employment Fund, is not flexible and is limited. The Local Infrastructure Support Fund was also an excellent scheme to assist infrastructure development for linked investment projects and should be continued to be offered.

Tourism and events are a \$28 billion a year business, supporting more than 162,500 jobs throughout New South Wales. New South Wales needs more innovative and dynamic marketing to better sell the State globally and throughout Australia. With the formation of Destination NSW and the aim of to double tourism expenditure by 2020, Regional NSW including the Bland Shire is positioned to assist in this target. West Wyalong is located on the cross-roads of the Newell and Midwestern Highways, offering excellent regional and interstate connections for domestic and international visitors.

The Renewable Energy Sector including solar and biomass feedstock (Mallee) power projects that could be developed in the Bland Shire and may involve the development of adequate high voltage transmission line infrastructure.

e) The comparative level of government business activity located within the region

Bland Shire Council is supportive of regional programs which see government offices traditionally based in metropolitan areas, moved to or retained in smaller regional areas.

f) Methodologies for local government to collectively cooperate to achieve increased infrastructure funding and economic growth

C-Change project is an example of local governments working together to attract more skilled staff to the regions. Bland Shire Council is currently involved with this project with our southern neighbouring Councils in the Riverina. Plans to expand the program across other areas of NSW will allow for greater funding for the program and increased media exposure.

Reducing State Government red tape and encouraging Government Agencies to work collectively together will be beneficial in increasing economic growth and infrastructure funding.

g) Any other factors restricting economic and social development in central western New South Wales.

Telecommunications

The inquiry is addressing transport and road infrastructure as a specific issue in the inquiry. An additional factor worthy of consideration at this level is telecommunications.

Parts of our Shire have insufficient mobile coverage and also suffer the double burden of inadequate internet coverage. To attract new service based businesses to our location we need to have competitive high speed internet. With an increasing reliance on PDAs and other mobile based devices, there is an expectation from the public that this technology will be available everywhere. When it is inaccessible in parts of the Shire it gives the distinct impression that the area is a rural backwater, not a progressive and dynamic business or residential location.

Rural based businesses in outlying areas do not have access to banking, business support, government and retail shopping facilities and are therefore especially reliant on access to these services via the internet.

Policing

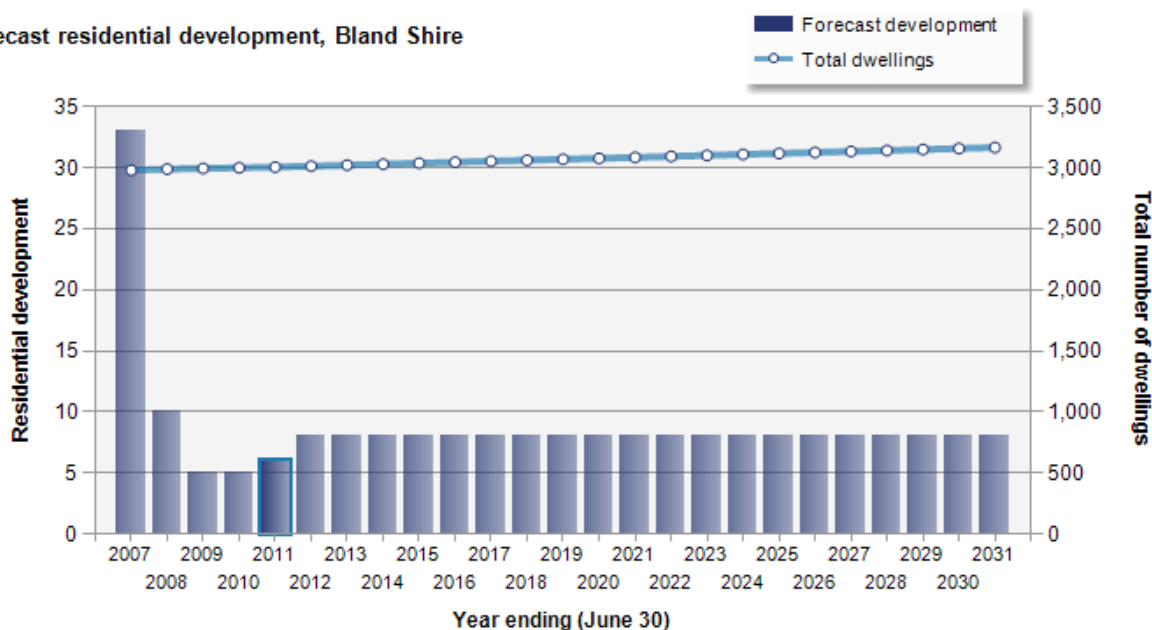
The recruitment issues faced by Council and other local businesses in attracting and retaining staff are also being experienced by the Griffith Local Area Command, which incorporates the Bland Shire. From time to time the command struggles to maintain effective numbers of police, with expected law and order implications.

The availability of quality Police Housing is an important incentive when trying to attract Police members to relocate and remain in rural/remote areas. Following decades of budget cuts the police residences in the Shire are significantly run down and consequently some positions are very difficult to fill. Additional funding in the area of police housing will impact on the success of Government in filling positions and therefore the general economic prosperity and public safety across our Shire will be enhanced.

Housing

Affordable and available housing to accommodate increased economic development in the Bland Shire. Informed Decision predicts that the Bland Shire will have low Residential development (6-8 dwellings per annum), which will be at a factor inhibiting further economic development.

Forecast residential development, Bland Shire



Source: Informed [Decisions 2011](#)

Industrial Lands

The availability of affordable and serviced industrial lands for economic development.

Changing Climate

A range of pressures will be faced by regional areas in NSW associated with a reduction and more variable water supplies for agriculture in the Murray-Darling basin and an ageing workforce. This will have a particularly pronounced impact on agricultural production. Adjusting to the necessary structural changes from these and other forces may be especially difficult for many regional communities.

Against these environmental challenges, rising incomes and burgeoning middle classes in China and India are likely to increase demand for agricultural products, providing substantial opportunities for NSW farmers to position themselves as safe and reliable food producers.

The following factors will also have an impact on the economic and social development in Central West New South Wales:

- A transition to a carbon reduced and constrained future
- The rapid development of the digital economy
- Demand and competition from emerging economies – China and India
- An ageing and growing population with continuing net migration to the larger surrounding regional centres
- Continuing high Australian dollar
- Increasing utility costs