

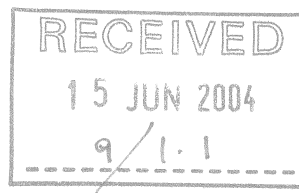
LEETON SHIRE COUNCIL

Preserving the Past, Enhancing the Future

RCP/VH/51.42

11 June 2004

Mr Ian Cohen MLC
Committee Chair
Legislative Council General Purpose
Standing Committee No. 5



Email: gpscno5@parliament.nsw.gov.au

SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY INTO THE MURRUMBIDGEE

COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

Dear Mr Cohen and Committee Members

Leeton Shire Council welcomes the opportunity to make this written submission to the Inquiry into the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture (MCA) and wishes to make the following statement in response to the terms of reference.

- a) The process by which the decision was made to close the residential training.

Council has little knowledge regarding the process by which the decision was made. From what little we have been able to glean it appears that the decision may have been based on a report published on 4 March 2001. The report, titled "Extending Education: Review of the Agricultural Colleges within NSW Agriculture", was prepared by the following employees of the Department of Agriculture, at the behest of K P Sheridan AO, Director General of the Department of Agriculture. (Circular No. 00/080 of 16 October 2000).

- Ellen Howard, Program Manager, Education and Training, Orange (chair)
- Stephen Elliott, Coordinator, Irrigation Industry Assistance, Orange
- Ian Hallett, Senior Project Officer, Audit and Project Services, Orange
- Myles Parker, District Agronomist, Griffith.

It is understood that the review was critically analysed by Mr A C Archer, Principal of Tocal, and Mr Geoff Creek, Principal of MCA, and that thereafter it was never subjected to any public or departmental scrutiny. If the Committee has not previously read the review or the comments by Messrs Archer and Creek it may be informative for you to do so.

It is my understanding that government departments, when considering issues that may significantly impact on rural communities, are supposed to complete a "Rural Communities Impact Statement" before implementing any changes. In this case the RCIS was undertaken two (2) weeks after the decision was announced and then only in response to objections raised by Leeton Shire Council and other concerned parties.

At best the RCIS was a superficial and shallow study of the situation and at worst a cynical and dishonest attempt to belatedly comply with the governments own guidelines.

- b) The Community and Industry Consultation that preceded the announcement of the proposal.
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Simply put, there was no community or industry consultation. The first that the Mayor and General Manager of Leeton Shire Council knew of the matter was when we were contacted early on 3 September 2003, and asked to attend a meeting at MCA where the announcement was made later that day.

- c) The impact on the Leeton and Yanco Communities and District.
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The adverse impact on the social and economic wellbeing of our community and region was significant. Altogether, 31 positions in the Education and Training programme plus a further 13 corporate services positions will see 44 jobs lost to our community. This would equate to a direct loss of over \$2M annually in wages and if you apply a minimal multiplication effect of 3 this will result in a loss of over \$6M annually from our economy.

Council is also very concerned about the very real loss of educational and training capacity in this region of the state, particularly in the agricultural and aboriginal training sectors.

Whilst I have not been able to verify it, I understand that only one (1) of the former MCA students actually transferred to Tocal.

The now unused facilities and infrastructure at MCA are of real concern to Council. The dining, catering and accommodation facilities, along with the lecture rooms and laboratories are now very much under utilised and we fear that through disuse they will fall into disrepair.

Despite all of the above, Leeton Shire Council remains hopeful (though not confident) that we may still see some positive outcomes from this unfortunate situation.

For example, we are aware that the Minister has established a working group consisting of representatives of Charles Sturt University, Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture and Cr Joe Burns, former Mayor of Leeton Shire Council to "search for new opportunities for the future of Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture (MCA)". We understand that this working party was to report back to the Minister by 31 May and we anxiously await the outcome of that report.

We are also aware that Mr Robin Shreeve, Assistant Director General of the Department of Education and Training has arranged for Ms Rosemary Campbell, Institute Director (Riverina) of TAFE and Mr Colin Parker, Regional Director of Education to work together to identify any training or educational gaps which may have been left by the demise of full and part time courses at MCA and to consider how these gaps may be addressed.

The Department has also appointed a Hospitality Management Consultant to examine all potential future uses of the current accommodation and catering facilities at MCA.

CONCLUSION

Council remains convinced that the closure of the full time and part time courses at MCA was a flawed decision made without any proper analysis of the real situation.

The impact on the social and economic wellbeing of our community and region are significant and ongoing and whilst we are hopeful that there will be some positive outcomes we are by no means confident.

Once again, Mr Chairman and Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

Yours faithfully

R C Pluis
General Manager