

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

Organisation: Lachlan Shire Council

Date received: 25/08/2011



The Heart of NSW

25 August, 2011

Hon Rick Colless MLC
Committee Chairman
Standing Committee on State Development
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Chairman,

Please find enclosed Councils submission to the inquiry into economic and social development in central western NSW.

I would be grateful for the opportunity for Council representatives to present to the public hearings on the matters raised in the submission

Yours faithfully,

George Cowan
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Submission to the Inquiry into economic and social development in Central Western NSW

I note that the standing committee are inquiring into economic and social development in central western NSW and make the following submission in relation to the particular areas of interest.

Lachlan Shire lies in the Central West at the heart of New South Wales, to the west of major centres such as Orange and Parkes, south west of Dubbo and north east of Griffith. These larger centres provide many of the higher level services to the Shire community including Government services such as health and education. The Shire is the home to many traditional farming cultures including sheep, wool and beef production and is one of the largest grain producing areas of NSW. A small but very successful light manufacturing sector has emerged in both Condobolin and Lake Cargelligo and Council has established Industrial Estates to promote further growth.

Lachlan Shire has a road network of over 4,000 km, the largest road network responsibility for any single local government authority in NSW. This network consists of 999 km of sealed roads and 3,000km of gravel, formed and unformed roads.

The Shire is the home to 6670 people across 14,973 square kilometres. Many of these people are located within the townships of Condobolin, Lake Cargelligo and Tottenham, as well as the villages of Tullibigeal, Burcher, Albert and Fifield. 14.8% of the population is indigenous.

Lachlan Shire Council is a member of Centroc the regional organisation of Council which has been very active and successful in coordinating the councils of the region on a number of fronts including health, transport and water. I am aware that Centroc have made a submission to the inquiry and Council supports that submission. However there are a number of issues that relate particularly to Lachlan Shire that are relevant to the work of the committee.

1. The provision of health, education and cultural facilities.

Whilst the Central west region is generally well served with health, education and cultural facilities, there is no doubt that the availability of these facilities and services in parts of the region such as Lachlan shire affects its economic and social development. When local businesses including the Council try to recruit the first question prospective employees ask is usually in relation to these services. This is particularly relevant when trying to recruit into the "family" age bracket.

Over the past several years there has been a steady but certain decline in the level of health services available to residents immediately within Lachlan Shire as the availability of GP's has declined. To the extent that surgery is no longer performed within the shire, no birthing facilities are available and patients have to be transported out of the shire to regional facilities to receive specialist treatment. Recognising the importance of health services Council plays an active role in recruiting GP's into each of the towns in the shire and provides medical centres and financial support but invariably those recruited are overseas trained doctors with limited experience and over time we have found that the services immediately available continue to contract. The situation has been reached where new hospitals in Orange and Bathurst appear overloaded and are struggling to cope with patient load and at the same time the hospitals in the smaller towns are underutilised and suffer from lack of regular maintenance and use. Council has made a number of submissions to the State Government on both issues and maintains active dialogue with what is now Western Area Local Health Network but it seems that no one wants to accept responsibility for making sure that

doctors are available within the smaller local communities. Certainly natural or market forces will not ensure that availability of doctors and medical practices are no longer marketable.

Large numbers of children particularly high school age children are attending private and public schools out of the shire because the local high school is not meeting their educational needs. Most trade course students have to travel to Parkes, Dubbo or Orange to attend TAFE training. Council has considerable difficulty recruiting employees into the shire that have school age children and I am sure other organisations face the same difficulty.

Lachlan Shire communities are very fortunate in that the regional organisations such as “Arts out West” and the “Mitchell conservatorium” are active in the shire and provide support to local groups in the provision of cultural experiences. Council is also active in support in a number of ways such as has recently happened with the trip to the shire by the Penrith Performing and Visual Arts group who not only presented to the public but also ran a number of workshops for school children

2. The reason for population decline or growth in different areas

The population in Lachlan Shire has been declining for a number of reasons.

The contraction of government and agency employment is one of those reasons. Over the last twenty years authorities such as State rail, Telstra, Country Energy and its forerunner, Department of Primary Industry, Department of Health, Forestry and the Livestock Pest and Health Authority have contracted to the regional centres and or shed considerable numbers of staff. Each one of those employees represents a family and even though in some cases numbers were small nevertheless the combined effect of the reduction in jobs is considerable. Those cutbacks then flow on through the schools, health and other areas. Unfortunately the cutbacks continue. The local Agricultural research centre is a good example. Despite sustained efforts by both Council and the community in lobbying the NSW government that centre has been progressively reduced to a shell of its former self and even the “manager” is now located in the government office block in Orange. Recently one of the states leading agronomists located at the centre has retired and his position has not been filled.

The combined effect of the long and severe drought and improved technology has led to a reduction in population in the rural sectors of the shire. Better farming systems and equipment mean that larger holdings can be managed and as a result of the drought those larger holdings are needed to sustain the farms. Between the 2001 and the 2006 census the employment in agricultural sectors dropped significantly

I believe that the indigenous population in the shire is increasing and this may well be supported with the information out of the latest census. The increase is putting more strain on the public housing stock and increasing Councils involvement in child care, preschool care and youth services.

Growth in a light manufacturing sector and the reopening of the Mineral Hill mine creating employment opportunities will also assist in turning the decline around. State Government support for this growth would be welcomed.

3. The adequacy of transport and road infrastructure

A significant proportion of Councils budget relates to the provision of roads and transport facilities as these are regarded by Council as a high priority. The support that Council receives from both the State and Federal governments for roads is significant and much appreciated. However more can be done and if done would assist in the local economy. There is a group of road projects that fall below those currently winning funding from Infrastructure Australia and the Federal Government mainly around the regional road network.

Many submissions have been made to Federal Government, Infrastructure Australia and to the State Government seeking funding for the upgrade of the regional road network known as the Hillston to Eumungerie Road link. This road which would provide a sealed route north south across four shires including Lachlan Shire would reduce freight costs for business and attract tourists off the Newell highway injecting a shot in the arm economically. Unfortunately roads of this classification and there are a number of this type of project in the central and far west fall outside the gambit of current funding arrangements and are being delayed or not completed at all as a result. In its business case for the project submitted to Infrastructure Australia Council identified economic benefit of over \$1m annually just to the businesses that would use the road for freight if it were upgraded.

The main crop produced in the shire is grain and a grain line system has been established to cater for the transport of much of this product to the processing plants and the ports for export.

Unfortunately these lines are being used less and less resulting in more grain being transported by road with all of the attendant issues that go with that. The lines are class five lines in relatively poor condition despite the not inconsiderable investment by the State in recent years. They have weight and speed restrictions that limit in a practical way the transport of product. The very inconsistent yields in recent years have affected the financial viability of the system and the way in which grain is now stored on farm and the behaviour of the agents and markets also lends itself to increased transport of grain by road.

4. Ways to encourage development of local enterprises and the potential of the region overall

Council would encourage the State Government to partner with the Federal Government and Infrastructure Australia to advance the construction of the Bells Line of road expressway.

If the road was built it would provide an enormous boost to tourism, business growth, population growth and regional development. It would also promote the development of the central west as a genuine "hinterland" for the State capital in a way not yet seen from the central and south coast regions. The central west is a major food production region it has tremendous natural assets and good educational facilities.

At the moment the second class transport system linking Sydney and this region is restricting growth in business and in tourism. Businesses in the Lachlan Shire constantly complain about the poor and expensive freight options that they are faced with – poor road access and even worse rail options.

Currently the biggest market for tourists for the central west is regional NSW even though we are close to the largest population base in the country in Sydney and despite offering outstanding

natural tourism product. It is not possible to get on a virgin or jet star plane and fly to any airport in the central west region and these airlines are major carriers of tourists. If the road is built natural market forces will do the rest.

5. The comparative level of government business activity within the region

I have already submitted above Councils views on the gradual contraction of government business activity to regional centres and the detrimental effect on the smaller towns such as those in Lachlan Shire as being one of the factors in the decline in rural population.

From the perspective of Lachlan Shire government business activity has declined in recent years and continues to decline. Many services are now provided by staff that drive into the shire each day from regional centres and leave each night

6. Methodologies for local government to collectively cooperate to achieve increased infrastructure funding and economic growth

The central west is indeed fortunate to have a very effective regional organisation of Councils CENTROC that has been very active in the area of infrastructure in recent years. Major studies have been completed in relation to water and Transport and those studies have helped to inform local councils and State and Federal governments alike as to the infrastructure needs of the region. There is good evidence of the councils working together in this framework to achieve economies of scale and deliver genuine benefits to the region as a result. Currently Centroc is coordinating this regions response to the management of water and waste water systems in rural and regional areas and facilitating the implementation of best practice across the region.

On a smaller scale I have also above mentioned the Eumungerie to Hillston road link which is a project initiated by Narromine, Parkes, Carrathool and Lachlan Shire in an effort to attract Federal government funding to upgrade a freight and tourist link in the west of the region.

7. Any other factor restricting economic and social development in central western NSW

Lachlan Shire like many other local governments in the state is currently preparing its community strategic plans and associated documents. Coordination of government activities at a local level is often very difficult and Council submits that increased communication and coordination between all levels of government would greatly assist in the development of the shire and the region.