

Submission by Ingrid Stonhill, Deputy CEO, Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation and Mr Wesley Campion, Chairman of the Board, Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation.

Thursday 5th April

Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. Our submission is broad however we hope it will address consideration under the following terms of reference.

- social and economic impacts of air route supply and airfare pricing;
- pricing determination, subsidization and equity of airfares;
- airline competition within rural and regional routes;
- consistency of aircraft supply and retrieval of passengers by airlines during aircraft maintenance and breakdown;

Bawinanga is a progressive Aboriginal corporation based in Maningrida. Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (BAC) was formally established in 1979 to represent the Aboriginal people in Maningrida and of the 32 homelands surrounding Maningrida in West Arnhem Land. We are the major service provider for people living on those homelands.

Bawinanga is a not for profit Aboriginal Corporation and Maningrida's largest employer with some 200 staff and approximately 600 participants in the Community Development Program (CDP). All of our work is carried out in the context of people's traditional lands, cultural practices and languages. In addition to our significant advocacy role, we deliver housing maintenance, municipal and essential services to homelands. We manage other programs and enterprises including the Bawinanga Rangers, Maningrida Arts & Culture, Bábarra Women's Centre, the Djómi Museum, Barlmark Supermarket, a Tucker Run service to the homelands, two mechanical workshops and an extensive civil works program maintaining roads and airstrips in the region. As well as managing Maningrida's Community Development Program (CDP), we deliver the services of Night Patrol, Money Management and the Remote School Attendance programs. Maningrida has a population of approximately 3,500 people which grows close to 4,000 during the wet season.

Maningrida and its homelands are a very remote location with only one main dirt road out of community in the dry. This road is closed for approximately 5 months of the year during the wet season meaning the only transport available to the population is via air. There are no bus services, ferry services or any other forms of transportation.

The Australia Bureau of Statistics (ABS) socio economic indexes are designed to help the government determine areas in most need of extra funding and improved services. According to the ABS Socio Economic indicator and liveability index Maningrida has disadvantage in terms of socio economic measure, scoring only 2 out of 100 across Australia. The ABS also shows Maningrida to have a median weekly personal income of \$219, the published ABS average Australian weekly wage is \$1,164.60.

The ABS also states that approximately 58% of the population resides in multiple family dwellings, ie many families in one home. Our own experiences show us that on average 17 people reside in and around a two bedroom one bathroom home. Unemployment is measured at 20%.

In real terms not provided by statistics, this level of remoteness and economic disadvantage presents the majority of population without access to home phones, computers, internet and mobile phones and or reliable coverage. Basic communication is therefore difficult and added to by the complexities of culture and language barriers. Credit cards are not usually available to the majority of Maningrida and surround residents, primarily due to the lack of banking institutions and facilities in community, but also an indication of personal financial viability.

I highlight these disadvantages to demonstrate the real difficulties faced by residents seeking to book travel on commercial air services. On line bookings are simply beyond reach without the support and advocacy of an organisation such as ours. The lack of customer service facilities offered by the only scheduled commercial airline service is extremely evident and debilitating to the majority of residents. There is no office or booking facility offered outside of the single person airport operation, only open during flight arrival and departure hours, for last minute cash exchanges, if at all available. However, this also produces constraints for the single staff member who is required to check in passengers and luggage, load and unload a plane single handed.

Like any other Australian city, town or community, residents need and have a right to access affordable, reliable public transportation. Whilst the government has done much work around the Disability Discrimination Act this does not extend to address the situation found within remote aboriginal communities. There is no provision of government legislation to protect the rights of residents in remote situations, despite that the human rights legislative rights and responsibilities continue to oblige transport providers to ensure accessibility for all.

There are only two options of transport available to Maningrida residents. Airline services for 12 months of the year and road, private vehicle for only 6 months of the year. There is no other choice.

The community residents of Maningrida and surround, visitors and essential services (such as post) are at the complete mercy of the regular public transport operator, provided by Air North. Having said that, there are small charter airline services that are utilized by BAC, usually to transport deceased bodies to and from Darwin mortuaries. There is no operational mortuary service provided in the community. Charter services are also sometimes used to transport grieving family members between locations not serviced by scheduled commercial flights. For example, Goulburn Island to Maningrida.

The only regular Public Transport Operator services currently offered to Maningrida residents are to and from Darwin daily. These flights use to be offered twice a day, direct. However due to recent changes, that were implemented without any customer consultation, flights have been restricted to only one flight per day and some days with two flights, however the second flight is now not direct, turning a 50 minute flight into an hour and a half stopover journey.

Having only one regular Public Transport Operator offering scheduled flights and therefore lack of competition has a significant financial impact on an already socio economic disadvantaged community. The minimum Air North one-way flight price already exceeds the average weekly income at \$249. These flight prices appear available if booked on line, weeks in advance of

proposed travel, they are also very limited. They are out of reach for most community members, who cannot access on line bookings and who are unable to plan travel weeks in advance. Whilst there are three price types published, on line by Air North most flights appear to be offered at \$469 one way, making a return journey from Maningrida to Darwin \$938. Over three times the medium weekly wage. Currently by comparison a return flight from a major Australian city to Paris, France could be purchased for the same price.

Whilst there are a lot of government paid workers who travel to Maningrida almost on a weekly basis for business related matters, the majority of local residents travel to Darwin is for unplanned or unscheduled reasons. By way of example one of the key issues for women in Maningrida relates to air travel costs. The government does not currently always fund medical escorts (a carer or family member to accompany) when travel to Darwin is required for health reasons, including giving birth. Women are obliged to give birth in Darwin as they are not permitted to do so in Maningrida due to current regulations. This is a challenging situation for women, who culturally, as well as emotionally and socially would understandably prefer to give birth near their traditional country as well as near family. Previously, this has caused women to hide their pregnancy from health workers entirely and give birth secretly in risky situations at home in Maningrida. The high cost of last minute (not booked weeks in advance) flights has a hugely negative impact for young mothers, who have to travel on their own to give birth. Young mothers often report feeling lonely, scared and homesick during their birthing period without natural family and community support. Anecdotally women suffer increased post-natal depressive tendencies because of this.

Due to multiple factors, primarily involving no communication and therefore awareness, and financial inability, some community members are faced with large unpaid traffic fines, which result in the requirement to be removed from community by Police to serve a short sentence period in exchange for unpaid fines. Other members are also removed by Police due to criminal behaviours. Whilst NT Police Air Wing transport members from Maningrida to Darwin to serve their sentence there is no financial provision made to return them home. During wet season, when there is no other option but to fly, the cost of a flight is prohibitive. Whilst they try and raise \$469 via family and friends it is not uncommon that they have no choice but to wait in Darwin with no money, sleeping rough, which has significant negative health and wellbeing impacts on already disadvantaged people. During the dry season, when Maningrida is accessible via a six-hour road trip, it is not uncommon that those unable to afford to fly home from Darwin, pool resources to purchase a cheap second hand vehicle to attempt the journey home via road. If successful, this also contributes to the high number of discarded non roadworthy vehicles in Maningrida, introducing other health issues.

Another commonly reported issue is that there are no children fares available from Air North; this is not in line with what is offered by most other commercial airlines. With 28% (ABS) of the population of Maningrida being 14 years or less, parents with children in Maningrida often have to leave their children in the care of others when travelling to Darwin, simply because they cannot afford full price airfares for their children.

Last minute unscheduled flight cancellations by Air North also have significant financial impacts on workers and community members in Maningrida. Workers who have planned holidays value their time away from community. Flights are expensive to get to the flight hub of Darwin. Air North cancellations of flights offer no alternatives for paid passengers. Even when rescheduled by Air

North it did not allow paying passengers to meet their connecting flights. Numerous staff members were severely financially disadvantaged over the 2017 Christmas period with missed connecting flights costs, peak season airfares for re bookings, peak season hotel accommodation required, with no insurance or compensation offered. Community members unable to be contacted and rescheduled lost full airfares.

Lack of customer service by Air North staff is often discussed throughout community. Examples of local residents being offended or shamed by Air North check in staff at Darwin and by their flight crew is often brought to the attention of BAC. BAC staff also report regular events of below standard customer service, but fear complaints may result in some form of retribution from a single service provider. A BAC senior staff member last week, attempting to change a flexi airfare but was told it was not possible and that it would have to be cancelled and rebooked at the full rate fare, plus change fees. The reservation staff also stated that it was not possible to change one leg of a return fare and that the return fare would also be rebooked. It was not until demands were made to speak to Air North management that some concession was offered. BAC fear that local residents may not be able to negotiate to a similar level and would therefore accept extra costs or loss of fare.

BAC paid in excess of \$150,000 over the last calendar year on Air North airfares for business reasons alone. However we have not been considered for a corporate discount? This does not include any of the approximate 200 employee personal airfares. BAC is but one organisation of many such as the Health Clinics, Housing Department, Council, Land Council, Centrelink, PM&C, private tourism organisations to name but a few dependants on the monopoly service of Air North. BAC supports the aviation industry, by providing JetA1 and Av Gas refuelling facility, at Maningrida, allowing aircraft to carry greater payload, rather than fuel from Darwin. BAC charges for fuel, but incurs the operating and logistical expenses, including repairs to equipment when misused by airline staff.

BAC is well versed in balancing social considerations versus business return. Business profit is an important and legitimate part of the economy and society, however making what can be perceived as "super profit" because there is no competition, comes at the expense of customers, who are situated in an identified low socio economic position.

BAC understands that Air North staff flight costs from Maningrida to Darwin are charged at only \$81, where as customers usually pay \$469. Other regional airlines for similar trip distance, with competition, are able to offer better prices and better terms of service in regard to guaranteed baggage allowance, up to 23 kg rather than the 13 kg; and consideration of connecting flight luggage allowance. Child fares and Senior fares are available on most all other air services. Consideration around price but also most importantly service provision to the market would be well worth investment. Trained staff that are able to provide polite, friendly check in service would be a good start. The provision of a service counter to accommodate local fare purchases, offering assistance rather than just collection of cash in community would be worthy of investment and should be considered an essential service provision within community.

BAC strongly request that the people of Maningrida and its Homelands should not be further disadvantaged through the provision of only one unmonitored or regulated public transport operator.