



Mareeba

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Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

To Whom It May Concern

SUBMISSION TO PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO NORTHERN AUSTRALIA WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Mareeba Shire is a Local Government Area located in Northern Australia with more than 23,000 residents dispersed across 53,000km² and encompassing numerous rural and remote towns. While the Shire has bucked the trend of many rural areas to enjoy steady and consistent population growth and increasing GDP over the years, delivering a stable and prosperous economy for many, only 17% of other LGA's in Australia have a lower socio-economic status. The Shire's resident population is culturally diverse, is older than the Queensland average and has the highest unemployment rate in the region with figures still 4% above pre-covid levels (Cumplings Economics from ABS Census Data). These unique characteristics give rise to unique workforce issues and Mareeba Shire Council is pleased to submit the following information to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Northern Australia Workforce Development.

COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

A strategic priority for Mareeba Shire Council, as identified by the Mareeba Community Taskforce, is to attract and retain a skilled workforce for our region. The Mareeba Community Taskforce is a joint initiative of the Mareeba Chamber of Commerce and Mareeba Shire Council to continue to promote Mareeba's prosperity and wellbeing.

The taskforce brings together representatives across business, industry, community, and government sectors to tackle the big issues:

- Growing Mareeba's economy
- Overcoming disadvantage, including youth justice and vulnerable families
- Creating healthy active communities

The inaugural meeting of the taskforce in 2021 was attended by 60 representatives from industry and business, government and community-based services, volunteer sporting, arts and cultural groups and clubs, service clubs and involved residents. At this meeting participants voted on the top high-level priorities they believe would make a real difference to the community.

The first annual Mareeba Taskforce Forum was held on 15 November 2022 to report on progress with implementing the action plan and reviewing the priorities. The 50 participants confirmed that these five big issues continue to be most significant priorities:

1. Improving health services

2. Improving transport connectivity
3. Attracting and retaining a skilled workforce
4. More affordable housing
5. Community safety and youth support

The Taskforce Action Plan includes the following actions in relation to the priority outcome of attracting and retaining a skilled workforce for the Mareeba Shire:

PRIORITY OUTCOME: ATTRACT AND RETAIN A SKILLED WORKFORCE

Improved focus on attracting and retaining a skilled workforce to support industry objectives, meet the demands of a growing rural population and keep pace with a quickly changing world to ensure future economic sustainability and liveability.

Priority Actions	Organisation	Timing
Explore new models and partnerships for improved health services and workforce attraction and retention: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish the Mareeba Health professional Workforce Alliance (MHPWA) with funding by PHN 	Mareeba Community & Family Health Care Primary Health Network (PHN)	Completed
Promote the liveability of Mareeba and the Shire to attract workers to fill skill gaps and shortages	Mareeba Shire Council Mareeba Chamber of Commerce	Commenced
Partner with the Queensland Department of Small Business and Training and Chamber of Commerce and Industry Queensland (CCIQ) to support small business in Mareeba	Mareeba Chamber of Commerce Mareeba Shire Council	Continuing
Support initiatives to increase access to housing to enable businesses to attract and retain staff	All	Continuing

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT ISSUES AND TRENDS

Through this experience and engagement of the Mareeba Shire community working to attract and retain a skilled workforce, Mareeba Shire Council provides commentary in relation to the impediments facing workforce development in Northern Australia with particular reference to the following areas:

a. Trends in Northern Australia that influence economic development and industry investment;

Mareeba Shire is currently the fastest growing LGA of the main local government areas in the Cairns Region and remains the largest urban centre in the region outside of Cairns (Cummings Economics from ABS Census Data). On a wider Australian regional perspective, the growth of Mareeba Shire is very healthy at about 1% per annum, where most rural LGA areas are experiencing population declines. The consistent growth in the Mareeba Shire is a key factor in the Cairns Region remaining the fastest growing of the regions across Northern Australia as per the 2021 Census data.

Behind Mareeba Shire's growth has been a continuing major increase in the value of agricultural production, especially fruit production. In the Mareeba Shire, Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing is

the most productive industry, generating \$201 million in 2020/21 (DAF QLD Regional Profiles). There is significant diversity in the region due to access to reliable water, which enables a wide range of high-quality produce to be farmed year-round. The largest agricultural industries are cattle, avocados, mangoes, poultry, and bananas.

The picture that emerges from the latest 2020-21 Census data, when compared with 2015-16, is one of the wider Cairns Region leading agricultural production growth in Queensland by a substantial margin to clearly emerge as the largest in the North and second largest in the State. It is notable that the expansion of horticultural production, especially in the Mareeba Shire, has taken the Cairns region's value of fruit production to the third largest in Australia. If grape production (mainly for wine production) is excluded, the Cairns Region is now the second largest in Australia.

The major changes in the jobs held by local workers between 2016 and 2021 in the Mareeba Shire were for those employed in:

- Health Care and Social Assistance (+112 local workers) – across many sub-divisions
- Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing (+110 local workers) – mostly fruit/nut and agriculture support services
- Education and Training (+74 local workers) – mostly school education
- Public Administration and Safety (+61 local workers) – mostly public order/safety

(Source: ABS Census 2021)

With Mareeba Shire's economy increasingly reliant on agricultural production, it is imperative that there is a skilled workforce for the agricultural industry. A range of jobs exist requiring different skill sets including physical skills, workplace health and safety, farm management, marketing, telecommunications, transport and logistics, research and development plus high-level technical skills and knowledge for a wide range of expertise's. Employers report it is becoming ever more difficult to attract skilled workers to the region creating the opportunity to develop a suitably skilled and qualified local labour force for the agricultural industry.

An opportunity exists to establish higher education and training in agriculture (especially horticulture), because of the leading position of the Mareeba Shire in this field, the proximity of Mareeba to education facilities in Cairns, and the fact that much of the potential to increase agricultural production across the North is in irrigated cropping.

Supply is now exceeding demand in some industries, eg avocados. Most of the horticultural production increases have been based in the domestic Australian market with limits of that market being approached. There will be a challenge to extend the market to shipment of product overseas, opening up opportunities for the Mareeba and Cairns Airports and creating increased demand for expertise in overseas marketing, contract negotiation and digital communications.

A significant trend holding back economic development in the Mareeba Shire is the high unemployment rate with First Nations people over-represented in these figures. A dedicated program to prepare and support low skilled, disengaged workers into the labour market is required with a particular focus on connecting this workforce to the significant opportunities offered by the agricultural industry in the Mareeba Shire. This would be a win/win by reducing unemployment and providing a local labour force for the industry. However, there has been a lack of government funding for intensive support programs to help unemployed people become work ready and then to be appropriately supported to not only enter the workforce, but to stay on in the job.

b. Impediments to building the economic and social infrastructure required to support industry and business to expand and create regional jobs;

The Mareeba Shire features over 2,300km's of roads. The road network in Northern Australia is critical to economic development and future-success and growth. The competitiveness of the Mareeba Shire in national markets has been strongly influenced by road sealing and improved efficiency of freight vehicles. Transport connectivity needs to be improved to facilitate the resilience of key routes between Mareeba and the Gulf of Carpentaria, Cape York, the Atherton Tablelands and Southern Australia, while also focusing on active recreation and commuting options for residents and visitors. Progressive sealing of more direct road links to Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth will present opportunities to increase penetration of those markets for horticultural products.

Mareeba Shire Council advocates very strongly for the following in relation to the road transport network in Northern Australia.

- i. Road improvements for Cairns to Mareeba access: Kuranda range improvements and / or alternative route; Inclusion of the Kennedy Highway Cairns to Mareeba, including Kuranda Range Road, in the National Highway. The Kuranda Range Road currently restrains the transport industry with limited weight and combinations allowed on that road. This causes the cost for transportation to be higher and ultimately more truck movements needed to transport current freight need.
- ii. Untethered funding to Council for progressive sealing of the entire length of Ootann Road and recognition of Ootann Road as a Road of Strategic Importance. The Ootann road is a key link from the Burke Development Road to the Kennedy Development Road (Hann Highway) and Peninsula Development Road, a strategic north-south link, and provides the only triple road train access into the upper Gulf and lower Peninsula, which allows travel times South to be decreased considerably for produce in the area and stock from the cattle grazing properties to the North and West.
- iii. Actions to deliver the Mareeba Bypass to reduce heavy-vehicle traffic through the main street and improve agricultural sector productivity.

Other impediments to building the economic and social infrastructure required to support growth include: lack of innovation and out of the box thinking, lack of access to financial resources to grow, difficulties recruiting qualified and skilled workers for specialist, technical and management positions, lack of access to foreign markets, as well as government policies that encourage devolution of infrastructure and services to regional and city centres.

c. Challenges to attracting and retaining a skilled workforce across Northern Australia;

- i. lack of housing
- ii. lack of access to health and welfare facilities
- iii. lack of General Practitioners
- iv. concerns about community safety
- v. concerns about education opportunities
- vi. drift of young people to cities for education, work and leisure and ultimately staying there
- vii. inadequate planning by private and public sectors
- viii. workers reluctant to move due to never having lived in a rural area before
- ix. poor telecommunications including a need for high speed, reliable internet and the elimination of mobile phone blackspots

More Affordable Housing

With a rental vacancy rate of 0.5%, employers in the Shire report the lack of housing as one of the major impediments to attracting and retaining staff. The Mareeba Shire is suffering the impacts of a shortage of housing, high rents and high levels of overcrowding and homelessness. This is manifesting in an increased incidence of youth crime and anti-social behaviour, which is causing fear and division amongst the community. Mareeba Shire Council has taken an active and collaborative approach to improving community safety, working closely with several State government departments including Children, Youth Justice & Multicultural Affairs, Justice & Attorney-General, the Queensland Police Service and community support services to ensure that local resources are equipped to respond to these issues.

- There were 180 homeless persons counted in Mareeba in the 2016 Census, almost twice the rate as for Queensland as a whole.
- There were 81.4 homeless persons per 10,000 persons, almost twice the proportion for Queensland as a whole. (Department of Housing and Public Works, QLD Housing Profile Nb. The 2021 homelessness data has yet to be released.)
- 412 people received support from Specialist Homelessness Services in the Mareeba local government area in 2020-21. This is 184 per 10,000 population, almost double the rate for Queensland as a whole. (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Specialist Homelessness Services Data Collection, 2020-21)
- There are 260 public housing tenancies in Mareeba Shire as of June 2022 (this excludes community housing - ~100 more dwellings), and 118 households on the waiting list. Almost all of the households on the list are in either very high or high need, and 41 of them have been waiting for two years or more to be housed. (Queensland Social Housing Register Queensland Government Data Portal)

Housing affordability and accessibility needs to be improved to deliver sustainable benefits to health, employment and well-being in the Mareeba Shire. This crisis calls for innovative thinking around public/private partnerships and incentives for private development for one and two bedroom dwellings in the Mareeba Shire where suitable land is readily available.

Improving Health Services

The Mareeba Shire has had good population growth, but primary health services have not kept up. Just as there is a shortage in many cities, regional centres, and rural towns in Australia, so too do Mareeba Shire residents struggle to see a GP when needed. The GP shortage is a national crisis that needs a well-coordinated state and national response that should include, but not be limited to the following;

- Reviewing the employment conditions of GP's, especially in rural and remote locations
- Offering more GP training courses and placements in rural and remote locations and incentivising students to enrol in these to experience the rural lifestyle. Experience and research show that the likelihood of a graduate working in rural areas increases if they have had the opportunity to experience for themselves the rural lifestyle during their studies.
- Investigating innovative models for GP Clinics in rural and remote areas and reviewing the funding models for these clinics. For example, some Mareeba residents banded together to establish the Mareeba and Community Family Health Centre. It is an innovative social enterprise model that involved taking over a private GP Clinic that would otherwise have closed due to the retirement of the principal GP
- Work to decentralise the delivery of primary health care to improve access to GP's and specialised medical services and increase the frequency and number of medical specialists providing visiting services to Mareeba.

Health services need to be improved to meet the needs of a growing rural population in the Mareeba district with high risk of chronic disease, ageing faster than Australian averages and experiencing high socio-economic disadvantage.

d. Empowering and Upskilling the local indigenous population

In the Cairns region, the Mareeba Shire has the highest percentage of the population not engaged in the labour force, with an unemployment percentage that sits at around the 6% mark. In addition, Mareeba Shire's unemployment figures are still 4% above pre-covid levels.

There is a great deal of action and collaboration underway to improve community safety and to improve the lives of some of the most disadvantaged in the Mareeba Shire. Mareeba Shire Council has facilitated a new interagency network meeting, known as 'Mareeba Collaborating for Community Safety', and through this a number of commitments have been made by government and community organisations to increase service levels.

The proportion of indigenous population in the Mareeba Shire is much higher than Queensland and Australian averages, with a 13% growth in the indigenous population in the Mareeba region for the period 2016-2021, compared to 4.6% for QLD and 3.3% for Australia (Cummings Economics from ABS Census Data). A dedicated program to employ low skilled, disengaged workers into the labour market is required with a particular focus on connecting this workforce to the significant opportunities offered by the agricultural industry in the Mareeba Shire.

SUMMARY

The Mareeba Shire is growing, and for the continued expansion and workforce development of key sectors including tourism and especially agriculture, it is essential that the transport network in our region no longer impedes this growth. Safe and reliable roads are the greatest opportunity to unlock the expansion of industry and business in Northern Australia and we will continue to call on the State and Federal governments to hear our cries to make an investment in the future of northern Australia here, in the Mareeba Shire. Along with action to overcome impediments to transport connectivity, more action is required to deliver reliable fast internet and remove the mobile phone black spots to enable workforce development to progress.

Mareeba Shire Council will continue to advocate for equity in funding for schools, housing, and services for domestic violence, alcohol and drug addiction, youth and health services.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Northern Australia Workforce Development Inquiry.

I look forward to hearing about the next stages and outcome of the Inquiry. For further information or to discuss this submission please contact Chief Executive Officer, Peter Franks on 1300 308 461 or info@msc.qld.gov.au.

Yours faithfully

PETER FRANKS
CEO