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28 November 2022

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

Burdekin Shire Council submission:

Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia inquiry into workforce development in Northern Australia

Please find below Burdekin Shire Council's submission in relation to the Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia inquiry into workforce development in Northern Australia.

a. Trends in Northern Australia that influence economic development and industry investment including population growth, economic and business growth, workforce development, infrastructure development, and Indigenous economic participation:

Building human capital

- Burdekin Shire Council is concerned with declining population and other demographic trends suggesting a shifting age profile of the population of the region.
- Education and skills training in regional areas improves the capability and employment prospects of the local workforce. This contributes to productivity, local economic activity and assists with attracting and retaining local talent. In smaller regional areas, the local government is a key training and skills provider and the skill levels of the local government sector influence service delivery and living standards in the community.
- State Government assets such as TAFE Queensland (Burdekin Campus) is currently underutilised and could be providing additional training courses - both in-person and online – to train new recruits, upskill existing employees and the wider community to support our major industries including agriculture, horticulture and manufacturing.
- The retention and attraction of people to a region, as consumers and as a local labour force supporting local industries, is a fundamental objective for regional development policy.

Decentralisation policies

- Decentralisation of government services is a positive step and would assist regional councils and access to services.

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Innovation

- There is growing concern that regional areas will be faced with a lack of skilled workers for the digital economy and that the innovators/entrepreneurs will leave regional areas for better access to support services and workforce.
- There are locations within the Burdekin Shire that still have limited mobile network coverage and NBN capabilities. This has a major effect on businesses operating within the area.

Infrastructure

- The Burdekin Shire economy is dominated by sugar cane production and its processing. Without a sustainable sugar industry, the entire Burdekin district would suffer. The flow-on effect of increased farming input costs has already had a significant economic impact not only on businesses servicing the sugar industry, but also the wider community in general.

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

- In recent years, Burdekin Shire Council has been focused on diversification to bring new and value-added industries to the area, increasing employment opportunities and further stimulating the economy of the Shire. We have received significant enquiries and delegations from companies who are interested in identifying opportunities and progressing development with local industry to convert biomass to energy.
- There is currently a shortage of industrial land in Burdekin Shire, hampering the capacity of the district to support the growth of local businesses and provide new employment opportunities for its residents and attract new businesses/ventures.
- The existing industrial estate is at capacity. It is home to over 25 businesses which employ more than 200 people.
- To support industrial activity in the Shire, the Council purchased a 14-hectare allotment in 2019 to enable the provision of additional industrial land in the Shire.
- This expansion is planned to provide more than 40 new blocks of industrial land, which will be in a staged release, and will help encourage local entrepreneurs and business owners as well as investors and developers to not only establish new businesses but also expand their existing operations.
- The project is shovel ready but requires funding support to construct the necessary infrastructure to develop the land for industrial purposes.
- The cost of the required infrastructure to service the land is significant and support from Federal and State governments has been sought since 2019 to assist with the costs of undertaking Stage 1 of the development.

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- Unfortunately, after three years, Council is yet to secure funding.
- This is frustrating to Council as this small investment by State and/or Federal Government can create a significant boost to the economy and the sale of land / lots in Stage 1 will fund the development of Stage 2 and then Stage 3.

Reef Regulations

- The Lower Burdekin coastal floodplain is one of Australia's most important irrigation areas. It produces some of the nation's highest yields and highest quality sugar cane and is adjacent to nationally and internationally recognised wetlands and the World Heritage-listed Great Barrier Reef lagoon.
- While Council acknowledges that the Great Barrier Reef is iconic and an extremely valuable asset for Queensland, Council is concerned that increased regulatory measures for local growers in our community will not only have major financial implications but also reduce the number of young farmers willing to enter the industry.
- The Burdekin has a population of positive, hard-working, achievement-oriented people. Our farmers are innovative and proactive in embracing complementary crops, new technology and implementing best management practices to manage on farm irrigation and eliminate the impact on the environment. This is evident by the number of farmers who are engaging and participating in programs currently being implemented through natural resource management groups.
- The next generation is vital for the future prosperity of the agricultural, horticultural and grazing industries in the Burdekin region.

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

- It is getting difficult to attract and retained a skilled workforce in the Burdekin due to a highly competitive job market in larger businesses and mining.
- The Burdekin has experienced positive economic growth after 3 years of negative growth.
- 2020 to 2021 saw a 12.5% growth in Gross Regional Product.
- All sectors of the Burdekin Shire including Local Government are seeing a reduced number of people applying for positions and existing employees with highly sought-after skills and experience are approached regularly by other businesses/companies.
- In recent times, Council has been focused on delivering infrastructure projects that improve the liveability of the shire to retain locals, attract new families and appeal to those looking to the area for work.

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- The Burdekin also suffers from an aging population with 23.2% of the population aged 65+. As these people exit the workforce, Council is concerned about how the employment gaps will be filled. Council is currently investigating ways to attract young families to the district to assist with filling the skills gap that will be increasing over the coming years.
- COVID-19 – The pandemic has had a negative impact with reduced numbers of working holiday makers coming to the Burdekin to support the agriculture and horticulture sectors. Prior to the pandemic, the agriculture and horticulture sectors were well supported with significant numbers of backpackers coming to the district each year and providing labour throughout the fruit and vegetable harvesting season. Due to border closures, growers were required to source alternative arrangements with many now engaging workers through the Federal Government's Seasonal Worker Programme.
- Limited housing availability is also contributing to the challenges of attracting and retaining a skilled workforce in the Burdekin and across Northern Australia.

d. Empowering and upskilling the local Indigenous population.

- According to the latest ABS Census of Population and Housing data, 6.6% of Burdekin Shire's population identify as being Aboriginal peoples and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, compared to 4.6% for Queensland.
- Indigenous enterprise development is a critical foundation of Indigenous economic development.
- Realising the potential of Indigenous businesses is important for Indigenous communities and the regions in which they operate more broadly.
- Burdekin Shire Council is situated on the land of the Bindal and Juru people.
- Gudjuda Reference Group Aboriginal Corporation was established in 1999. It became a not-for-profit Indigenous social enterprise with a focus on employment and training.
- Gudjuda also supports Traditional Owner groups in the Burdekin NRM region in land and sea country management.
- The group has a training centre and two officers based at the Home Hill showgrounds. Gudjuda deliver various Indigenous employment and land and sea management projects. These include:
 - Gudjuda Land and Sea Rangers Program
 - Gudjuda Café and Cultural Centre
 - Juru Walk and Bush tucker experience
 - Gudjuda Market garden and nursery
 - Gudjuda Work for the Dole Program
 - Skilling Queenslanders for Work Program
- The Gudjuda Reference Group is highly regarded in the community and Council works closely with them on various projects and initiatives to support upskilling of the local Indigenous population.

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- The planned Ayr Industrial Estate that Council is undertaking will also provide an added enabler for existing and prospective Indigenous enterprises as it will for businesses more generally. It will also encourage Indigenous economic development by providing more opportunities for the involvement of Indigenous people in employment, business and wealth creation in the community where they live.
- Indigenous enterprise development can help generate a greater culture of employment and social contribution within Indigenous communities and foster an environment which supports further innovation and opportunity by inspiring the next generation of Indigenous business owners.

Thank you for considering Burdekin Shire Council's submission to the inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

Lyn McLaughlin
Mayor

