

The Secretary
Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia
Email: itrdlg.reps@aph.gov.au

House of Representatives Inquiry into a new regional development funding program

Submission from:

Western Australia's South West Area Consultative Committee Inc.
Molloy Street (cnr Symmons Street)
Bunbury WA 6236

This Submission is in two parts:

- PAGE 1: PART 1 - Background on the South West Area Consultative Committee and the Regional Partnerships Programme
- PAGE 2: PART 2 - Case study examples of Regional Partnerships projects in the South West, with particular emphasis on the process by which projects are proposed, considered and submitted for funding

PART 1: BACKGROUND

Western Australia's South West Area Consultative Committee is a non-profit organisation incorporated under the WA Incorporations Act 1987, and operates as part of the Australian Government's Network of Area Consultative Committees, with annual operational funding provided through a contract with the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government (DITRDLG) (previously the Department of Transport and Regional Services (DOTARS)).

The primary role of the Committee is to provide a conduit between the region that we serve (the South West Region of Western Australia) and the Australian Government. We assist our region by ensuring that all Australian Government programmes aimed at helping regional Australia to grow and prosper are promoted and accessible to all communities in our region.

The chairman and the Board members are volunteers from diverse backgrounds and communities across the South West Region. They receive no remuneration for their participation in Committee meetings and events.

The Board determines organisational policy and strategic direction, and has administrative oversight of the South West ACC, including three staff members funded with DITRDLG funding and (until recently when the Small Business Field Officer program was closed) two staff members funded through contracts with AusIndustry.

The Board also provides advice to the Australian Government on programs and projects of benefit to the South West Region.

The South West ACC supports significant projects in the region that demonstrate a planned, cooperative approach and that lead to regional economic development, employment and social opportunities. In particular, the committee gives priority to projects that address needs in four main areas:

- Priority 1:** Where industry structural reform is impacting adversely on communities in the region
- Priority 2:** Where particular communities are suffering from economic and/or employment disadvantage compared with the rest of the region
- Priority 3:** In sectors of the economy where regional economic development and sustainable employment growth can be demonstrated to be most likely.
- Priority 4:** Where social opportunities can be encouraged through innovative programmes.

This support is provided through the assistance of the Board members and staff, and through the Board's recommendations to the Australian Government for funding and support for projects from a variety of Australian Government funding programmes and services. In particular -- and until recently -- the South West ACC has been working since the introduction of the Regional Partnerships Program on July 1, 2003, to ensure that this programme has been successfully and equitably delivered in the South West Region.

Since the program's introduction, the South West ACC has dealt with hundreds of inquiries regarding the program, however, only a total of 62 projects proceeded to formal applications as at 29 February, 2008. The total funding requested for these projects was \$15,272,000 with the total project cost being \$61,900,000. Thirty-nine projects were approved and contracted with \$5,378,900 from Regional Partnerships for projects worth \$19,576,000. A further six projects were approved but not contracted and another 15 applications were under assessment at the time the program was closed by the federal Government in May, 2008.

The South West ACC Board carefully considered all applications against the Regional Partnerships assessment criteria, and the regional priorities, as stated in our three-year Strategic Regional Plans, before providing their advice to the Australian Government.

PART 2: CASE STUDY EXAMPLES

This section provides three examples of Regional Partnerships Program projects, showing the processes undertaken to bring multi-faceted projects to fruition. In addressing the Inquiry's Terms of Reference 1 and 2, the case studies bring to light the importance that any new regional development funding program:

- Allows incorporated community organisations to apply, that is, it is not restricted to local government or other government agencies;
- Provides local on-the-ground resources to assist community organisations to apply (for example through an Area Consultative Committee or the new Regional Development Australia committee), and
- Provides flexibility in the guidelines to truly address the "one-size-does-not-fit-all" approach to funding of regional development.

These case studies focus on applications from community organisations. Each project is different, and each addresses the particular needs of their respective communities.

However, it is important to note some commonalities:

- All projects were undertaken in 2004 and 2005, and are still being successfully operated.
- Two of the projects operate in some of the smallest and least-resourced communities in our region.

- All projects are as the result of the hard work and passion of community volunteers.

It is our contention that these projects – typical of those approved in the South West Region – represent “genuine and accountable community infrastructure projects”.

Case study 1: Augusta Regional Hydrotherapy Centre

Applicant: Augusta Community Development Association Inc

Funding approved: \$123,904

Project cost: \$295,813

Augusta is a small town of 1700 people at the far south-west of Australia close to Cape Leeuwin. Though one of the oldest towns in WA, established to support farming in the area in the 1800s, today it has a limited economy based on agriculture, seasonal tourism and a growing retirement population.

The Augusta Community Development Association (ACDA) was established in 1990 following a community planning day called to identify ways to sustain the town and local area of Augusta, economically and socially. The planning day identified the community’s aspirations and priority projects at that time, and ACDA was formed as a vehicle to progress the community’s wishes.

In 1994, ACDA held another planning day and more than 94% of the residents nominated a hydrotherapy pool as a high priority for the community. In 1996, ACDA received a bequest of \$22,000 from an Augusta resident, whose will decreed that the funds be put to the construction of a hydrotherapy pool.

In 1996, another planning day reiterated the community’s desire for a hydrotherapy pool. With the bequest as a base, ACDA began to investigate other funding sources, and prepare a plan for the pool facility, including full costings. ACDA prepared and submitted a number of applications for funding to Federal, State and local government agencies, all without success.

The proposal first came to the attention of the South West ACC in March, 2000, when discussions were held with representatives of ACDA regarding the hydrotherapy pool and a proposed ecomuseum for Augusta. Further contact ensued from time to time over the following years, and in August, 2003, South West ACC staff and ACDA representatives met with State and local government representatives to identify appropriate funding sources for the project. At that stage, ACDA had exhausted all other approaches for government support, and the (then) new Regional Partnerships Programme was seen as a possible source of funds.

Enter Owen Jones. Mr Jones was a septuagenarian and an active committee member of ACDA. He was legally blind and was a well-known figure in Augusta, where he and his guide dog could be regularly seen walking around the streets.

With ACDA’s support, Mr Jones had relentlessly – but unsuccessfully - pursued funding and support from Federal, State and local government sources for the hydrotherapy pool project. Working with staff from the South West ACC over many months, Mr Jones gathered relevant information and secured a \$161,000 commitment from the Shire of Augusta-Margaret River to construct a building to house the pool adjacent to the community recreation centre.

The critical elements that would support a funding application under Regional Partnerships were identified: The project is a high priority for the Augusta community (94% of residents say so); Augusta has a very high proportion of people aged 60 and over (39% - almost three times the regional average); there is a need to support well-ageing in the community, in addition to providing rehabilitation facilities for sports and other injuries (hydrotherapy pools are recognised by health professionals as being invaluable for the treatment of a range of medical, health and social issues);

Augusta is a remote community (currently patients must travel a 300 kilometre round trip to the nearest hydrotherapy facility in Bunbury, limiting treatment and prolonging recovery).

Mr Jones, a community volunteer, committed many, many hours to gathering the relevant statistics, preparing the project budget, sourcing the pool and other equipment (the hydrotherapy pool required was not manufactured in Australia and had to be imported from the United States), securing local government commitment, identifying the best location, negotiating with other users of the recreation centre, and then writing the Regional Partnerships application.

The application was submitted to the South West ACC Board on May 18, 2004 and funding approved in August, 2004 – more than four years after the project was first discussed by ACDA and the South West ACC.

The pool was constructed and was ready for use in 2006, more than 10 years after the Augusta community nominated it as a high priority for their community.

Regretably, Mr Jones died before the pool was opened; fittingly, the Augusta community named the facility the Owen Jones Memorial Hydrotherapy Pool.

The project represents a “genuine and accountable community infrastructure project”.

Case study 2: Rotary Foodbank South West

Applicant: Rotary District 9460

Funding approved: \$77,000

Project cost: \$378,000

Foodbank WA was established in 1994 in Perth, and operates as a not-for-profit organisation collecting fresh and packaged food that would otherwise be wasted and distributing it through service providers to needy people in the community. With a small core staff and an army of volunteers Foodbank is supported by 350 companies and distributes food through 400 support agencies to tens of thousands of people each year. The programme model has a triple bottom line: Social – helping people in need; environmental – less waste going into landfill rubbish dumps; and economic – food companies and retailers avoid the costs of dumping food.

Foodbanks also operate in Mandurah and Kalgoorlie, however, in the most populous region of WA, the South West with an estimated 140,000 people, there has been no such service available.

Enter Rob Prestage. Mr Prestage, a long-time Bunbury resident, had recently retired from a highly successful business career, and in 2002 became aware of Foodbank WA and the good work it does. He became passionate about establishing the Foodbank model in Bunbury, and servicing the South West.

As a member of Rotary, he began to raise support for the project through the four Rotary clubs that make up district 9460 – Bunbury, South Bunbury, Bunbury Central and Bunbury Leschenault.

Mr Prestage approached the South West ACC in July, 2003, seeking advice on possible funding sources to assist the project become established. At that stage, the Regional Partnerships Programme had just been launched, and discussions were held about a possible funding application. However, the project was just an idea, and Mr Prestage was advised to undertake further research, prepare a business plan and ascertain costings.

A steering committee was established with representatives from the four Rotary clubs, as well as the Salvation Army and a retired police superintendent. A business plan was written and Mr Prestage continued to gather support from business, community and government agencies for the project.

In the following six months, numerous meetings were held with South West ACC staff and members of the steering committee, including Mr Ross Ranson, a highly successful local businessman and past president of Bunbury Rotary, who was tasked with writing a Regional Partnerships funding application.

The critical elements that would support a Regional Partnerships application were identified – the Foodbank model is highly regarded as a successful vehicle for supporting disadvantaged people in the community; the South West is a key food-producing region in WA, with food producers having the potential to make a significant contribution to the region's needy (local orchardists and vegetable growers indicated strong support to supply products which would have been sent to waste); the project has many partners (14 contributing partners, mainly local businesses providing cash and in-kind, with letters of support from another 14 businesses, community support agencies, churches, local governments, and the WA Police); the project has a triple bottom line (social – Foodbank South West will supply food for distribution to 40 support agencies across the South West, a breakfast-in-schools programme will also be established; environmental – an estimated 10,000 cubic metres will be diverted from landfills each year; economic – savings to food companies and retailers in dumping costs).

Mr Prestage, Mr Ranson and other steering committee members (all community volunteers) committed many many hours to gathering support for the project, securing cash and in-kind commitments from businesses and others (Rotarians are nothing if not well equipped to encourage support for their activities from other Rotarians), gathering the information to support the assessment criteria for Regional Partnerships application, and working with South West ACC staff to write the application.

The application was submitted to the South West ACC Board on 17 February, 2004, and funding approved in June, 2004, almost a year after the project was first mooted with the South West ACC and more than two years after Mr Prestage brought the concept to the region.

Foodbank South West opened for business in September, 2004, with Mr Prestage as full-time operations manager (voluntarily), together with around 40 other volunteers, many local Rotarians. Four years later, Foodbank South West is still operating successfully, and has expanded its services to include the planned breakfast-in-schools program.

The project represents a “genuine and accountable community infrastructure project”.

Case study 3: Southern Forest Sculpture Walk

Applicant: Southern Forest Arts Inc.

Funding approved: \$208,903

Project cost: \$758,808

Until recently, the tiny town of Northcliffe – deep in Western Australia's southern jarrah and karri forests -- was dependent on what the clearing of forests could yield commercially; either by the cutting and selling of timber, or opening up of land for dairy farms and tobacco production.

As these industries declined or collapsed completely, the town lost population, lost businesses and lost community services. The community recognised that effective revitalisation of the town could only be achieved through creative and lateral thinking.

Taking their impetus from successful sculpture trails in forests in the United Kingdom, the community turned to their own magnificent Northcliffe Forest Park on the town's outskirts and decided to ask visual artists, writers and musicians to use their chosen media to express their most emotional and imaginative responses to the forest.

The result is the Southern Forest Sculpture Walk, the first trail of its kind in Australia, and a drawcard for visitors both domestic and international.

However, setting up the sculpture park to an internationally-recognised standard – seen as vital if the project was to be self-sustaining – required an immense amount of work.

Enter Fiona Sinclair. With the support of Southern Forest Arts Inc. (a small band of artists dedicated to developing and promoting cultural expression in the forest region), in 2004 Ms Sinclair volunteered to take on the challenge of coordinating the development of the sculpture walk project and securing support and funding to bring it to fruition.

With a young family at home, she began by attempting to source funding from various arts bodies and State Government agencies. By early 2005, she was in discussions with the South West ACC, and had developed a concept proposal -- then one thing led to another.

Since not one single grant programme would fund the project, a complex web of funding applications were prepared and submitted, each addressing particular aspects of the project as relevant to the funding agency: Several funding applications were to arts bodies for the sculpture works and multi-media requirements; a number were to local government, State and Federal Government agencies to put towards the infrastructure costs like boardwalks, entry statements, power and water; local community groups, businesses and individuals pledged their time and labour to do things like mapping and surveying, earthworks, clearing, website design and promotions.

As each funding application was submitted there was a nervous waiting period for a response: Would it be successful or not? When an application failed, another funding source was identified and pursued.

Letters of support were sought from politicians, local community groups, tourism organisations, arts bodies and government agencies.

Throughout 2005 a veritable blizzard of correspondence came in and out of Southern Forest Arts Inc.

In addition to trying to attract the cash and in-kind support for the project, the requirements of the project – and the funding bodies – became more and more demanding: Detailed construction plan (with quotes), detailed budget aligned with the phases of the construction plan, operational budget, action plan, risk management plan, fire management plan, controlled access plan, artistic interpretation plan, building development application, economic rationale, community needs plan for economic renewal -- the list went on.

Under the weight of demands, Southern Forest Arts remained true to the vision.

With Ms Sinclair at the helm, they secured 60 letters of support from individuals, community groups, businesses, arts bodies, local, State and federal Government, politicians, and tourism bodies. More than 20 partners were secured, providing both cash and in-kind towards the project cost.

More than 50 individual quotes and tenders were secured for work as diverse as the interpretation coordinator and historian, the supply of dieback-free fill, the automatic turnstile, the trailhead rammed earth walls, and the commissioning of local and international artists. All these quotes had to be matched with the individual line items in the master budget, and then matched with the requirements of the various funding bodies.

Throughout the year, South West ACC staff provided on-going support for the volunteer group, such as advising on possible sources of funds when a funding application failed, advising on preparing budgets, business plans and other documentation, and even providing a supportive shoulder for Ms Sinclair and others when the going got tough.

In August, 2005, Southern Forest Arts submitted a funding application to Regional Partnerships. It was approved in December that year and almost a year later, in November, 2006, the Southern

Forest Sculpture Walk (<http://www.northcliffe.org.au/Sculpture%20walk/Sculpturehome.htm>) was officially opened. The 1.2km walk circuit gives the public easy access to the intense beauty of the pristine karri, jarrah, and marri forest that surrounds the town. Specially commissioned permanent and temporary sculptures are positioned along the trail. Accompanying books and audio tours with poems, stories, photographs and music celebrate the forest's survival through images, words and sounds.

The project represents a "genuine and accountable community infrastructure project".

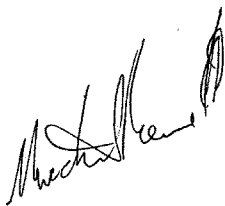
CONCLUSION

These three case studies are representative of the Regional Partnerships Program approvals in the South West of WA. They demonstrate that a "bottom up" process in regional development, with communities seeking their own solutions to issues, is by far the most successful model.

Community organisations (like the ones in these examples) are the key ingredient in these successful projects, and need to be supported by government, but not directed by government.

A new regional development funding program needs to adopt the best elements of good regional development policy.

- Flexible guidelines that allow local communities a significant say in what is good for their community, not bureaucrats in a distant Canberra, nor politicians. If the project is well-founded and supported, is a local priority and meets the overarching national objectives of strengthening economic and social opportunities in the regions, then the project should be funded. (Though approval would naturally be constrained by the competition for funds from other applicants).
- Allowing incorporated community organisations to apply, that is, eligibility is not restricted to local government or other government agencies;
- Providing local on-the-ground resources to assist community organisations to apply (for example through an Area Consultative Committee or the new Regional Development Australia committee), and



CHAIRMAN

