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19 December 2012

Mr Glenn Worthington
Secretary
Joint Select Committee on
the Recognition of Local Government
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Mr Worthington

Re: Constitutional Recognition – The Case for Change

Council is pleased to hear about the recent establishment of the Joint Select Committee into constitutional recognition of local government. No doubt this will provide a good opportunity for submissions to be lodged recognising that this is an important issue for local communities.

For some time Longreach Regional Council (LRC) has demonstrated its ongoing support for constitutional recognition through formal resolutions and via its commitment to an image campaign undertaken by the Queensland Local Government Association of Queensland Ltd (LGAQ).

Council supports financial recognition because it is seen as only a minor change to section 96 of the Constitution. This change would provide the Federal Government with the power to be able to provide funding directly to local government, particularly where this was in the national interest. Importantly, this simple change to the Constitution would have no impact on how local government works or its relationship with State Government.

Council currently experiences ongoing challenges in funding local services, particularly given that community expectations continue to grow. LRC was amalgamated in 2008 and is now a regional body that is required to not only demonstrate ongoing financial sustainability, but provide services to an equivalent standard over a larger, combined area.

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Without the ability of the Federal Government to fund local government directly, there will be an ongoing challenge to meet the needs of the community. Since local government was established in Australia in 1840, the number of services provided by local government has grown well above its ability to raise revenue. Overall, local government collects approximately 3% of national taxation, which in Council's view is disproportionate to the responsibilities vested upon us.

Our community has high expectations, not only in the day-to-day services such as roads, rubbish and rates but in recent times, it is being recognised that local solutions provide the best outcomes. For example, disaster management has become a major issue for local communities, one that is best dealt with locally. Whilst Council achieves a high standard of disaster management, there would be serious repercussions if the Federal Government was unable to fund local government into the future. After all, the Federal Government, through Emergency Management Australia has provided local government with valuable funding for local disaster mitigation initiatives over a long period of time.

The *Roads to Recovery* (RTR) program is another example of the Federal Government providing valuable funding for roads. Since its inception, this program has remained a cornerstone of road revenue, helping local government deal with the well known infrastructure backlog. Of course, it was important within the RTR program that no Council reduced its own road expenditure and treat the funding as a 'cash-cow'. This pre-condition guaranteed that funding levels could not reduce so that the community could experience real improvements to the standard of roads.

Council further believes that in order for this issue to be successful, bi-partisan support is an essential precondition. Various Councils in Queensland have written to State and Federal members of Parliament to gain support. Whilst this community is represented by a relatively few number of voters, Council recognises the importance of getting a majority of support that fundamentality recognises the valuable role local councils play in peoples lives.

LRC has demonstrated its support through an LGAQ statewide image campaign through a special levy. The LGAQ being a peak local government body, recognises the importance of a referendum being held at a time that maximises its chance of success. To that end, the image campaign has highlighted the important role played by local government, particularly in a time when there are so many government cut-backs and demand for services remains high.

Lastly, it is also imperative that a publicly funded national education and awareness campaign be conducted to inform the public about the Constitution. After all, change to the Constitution is uncommon, mainly because proposed changes are viewed with

conservatism by the public. If the community is informed about the issue being asked of them, a voter with relevant information is much more likely to agree to vote for change.

Should you require further assistance in relation to this matter, please do not hesitate to contact me on

Yours faithfully

Mark Watt
Chief Executive Officer