



Greater Hume Shire

simply greater

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The Secretary
The House of Representatives Standing Committee
On Infrastructure and Communications
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Dear Sir/Madam

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO THE NATIONAL BROADBAND NETWORK

The Greater Hume Shire Council (GHSC) is pleased to respond to the invitation to make a response to the Inquiry which is examining the capacity of the National Broadband Network to contribute to nine identified aspects of Australian society.

Introduction

The Greater Hume Shire (GHS) was proclaimed on 26 May 2004, having been created through the amalgamation of three existing local government areas in Southern New South Wales.

The Shire has an area of 5,939 square kilometres with an estimated population of 10,400 people. It is located immediately north of the Victorian border and shares borders with NSW local government areas of the regional cities of Wagga Wagga and Albury and rural shires of Urana, Lockhart, Corowa and Tumbarumba.

The five main towns in the Shire are Holbrook, Culcairn, Henty, Jindera and Walla Walla, as well as the villages of Burrumbuttock, Woomargama, Gerogery, Walbundrie, Morven and Brocklesby. The traditional role of the towns and villages is to service the productive rural industries in surrounding districts. The GHS includes many first class agricultural districts primarily producing wool, wheat and other grains, lucerne, fat cattle and sheep and there is a significant plantation timber industry at the eastern fringe of the Shire. Despite the recent long period of drought, Holbrook is accredited with having some of the best grazing land in NSW.

The Shire is traversed by the Hume Highway and the Olympic Highway and the current duplication of the Hume Highway and its bypass of Holbrook and Woomargama is expected to generate significant business and lifestyle opportunities throughout the Shire. It is relevant to note that the rollout of high-speed broadband through NBN will enhance the opportunities in these circumstances and mitigate possible negative impact on the two towns to be bypassed within the next 2-3 years. Faster broadband will enhance opportunities generally throughout the Shire and reference to this will be made in the following responses to a number of identified areas of interest to the Inquiry.

The Council and its broadband needs

As the focal point for many aspects of community activities, including aged care services and children's services, across a wide area and significant number of population centres, the Shire would benefit greatly from a greater capacity within its internal telecommunications and ICT network generally.

The Shire has administrative facilities at Holbrook, Jindera, Culcairn and Albury with generally poor connectivity, with inability to run systems at acceptable speeds. Speeds between the main offices at Holbrook and Culcairn (30kms apart) are at 1 megabit per second utilising a Telstra dedicated line with BDSL system. The Council will soon trial a new Telstra system that could provide up to 2 megabits per second, however this will still be well below speeds that will make the conduct of business more effective and efficient across the Council's business centres.

Response to the Inquiry's 9 Heads of Consideration (a) to (i)**(a) the delivery of government services and programs**

It is well known that significant numbers of the Shire's population cannot currently get ADSL so are reliant on dial-up capability or in limited circumstances, satellite connectivity. Very poor speeds are available with dial up and generally only up to 1 megabit per second through satellite. While there are Rural Transaction Centres in the Shire that provide good services, it is not always possible for people in rural communities to travel significant distances to access RTCs at convenient times because of the nature of their daily work commitments in a rural environment or because of seasonal demands.

Therefore the natural correlation is that there is poor ability for residents and agencies throughout the Shire to be able to effectively and efficiently access government services and programs.

(b) achieving health outcomes

The Shire has three hospitals at Holbrook, Henty and Culcairn and four medical centres. However, it suffers the same situation as experienced elsewhere in rural Australia in that there is a dearth of doctors. Therefore the availability of a reliable high-speed broadband service would maximise the ability of doctors to obtain specialist on-line advice from major centres and minimise the occurrences where patients' health is compromised through limited diagnostic and treatment capabilities with long travel times to major hospitals in Albury or Wagga Wagga and in extreme circumstances, to capital city hospitals.

(c) improving the educational resources and training available for teachers and students

There are 10 Public Primary Schools across the Shire and 4 Private Primary Schools, 1 major High School and 2 Colleges (1 Primary, 1 High).

A Government imperative has been to improve the availability of computers to children in schools, however this is a limited value exercise in circumstances when students are unable to effectively use on-line capabilities. The intent of providing computers was not so much to educate students on the development of keyboard skills and general clerical capabilities but more to utilise the internet as a teaching/learning/research resource and email services for connectivity with others.

Therefore to ensure that there is improvement in the educational resources and training areas, an effective high-speed broadband service in the Shire is considered essential. Rural students are entitled to equitable treatment to ensure that they can be competitive in their chosen career pathway.

(d) the management of Australia's built and natural resources and environmental sustainability

Environmental sustainability is high on the agenda of many people in the Shire particularly farmers and agencies such as LandCare.

Research capabilities and information available on-line are great tools for people living in a predominantly rural environment and the availability of high-speed broadband would undoubtedly improve the efficiency and productivity in the rural sector and lead to better local and national outcomes in environmental sustainability.

(e) impacting regional economic growth and employment opportunities

The Riverina/Murray Region featured strongly in building a case in the last decade for telecommunications infrastructure and technology improvements in rural and regional areas through its Government supported Riverina **First** project. The acronym **First** represents the *Foundation for Innovation, Regional Services and Telecommunications*.

This project, managed by the now disbanded Riverina Regional Development Board, involved 20 Local Government Areas across the Riverina/ Murray region of NSW and was a multi-faceted project in alliance with Telstra Country Wide.

The focus of the project was the development of an accelerated telecommunications infrastructure program to ensure that rural communities and businesses in the target region were not disadvantaged at a time when telecommunications and broadband development in particular was concentrated in the major metropolitan population centres.

Reference is made to this project to highlight the fact that the struggle for inland regional areas to obtain high capability telecommunications and high-speed internet connectivity is not new.

The evidence is clearly available that, given the capabilities, rural business and industry is more productive and competitive and that business and industry located in country regional areas and rural areas will benefit greatly from better/faster broadband.

In the situation where the towns of Holbrook and Woomargama are to be bypassed by the Hume Highway creating industrial land development, lifestyle land development and transport and logistic sector development opportunities, the need for competitive high-speed broadband is obvious. If places like Holbrook, already a recognised truck stopover point on the Hume Highway, cannot offer broadband services comparable to major centres then the competitive opportunities will be lost and the economic growth and employment growth plans already in place will be compromised.

The Shire is cognizant of the contemporary thinking of place-based approaches to regional development. This now widely accepted paradigm of local and regional development emphasises the identification and mobilisation of endogenous potential, that is, the ability of places like Holbrook to grow drawing on their own resources, notably their human capital and innovative capacities.

Therefore the provision of high-speed broadband is essential to ensure that the innovative capacity of the Shire is not wasted and the economic development of Holbrook and the whole Shire compromised.

(f) impacting business efficiencies and revenues, particularly for small and medium business and Australia's export market.

The Shire is well represented by a wide range of small to medium enterprises and well represented by numerous farming and grazing enterprises.

The town of Jindera, close to the regional City of Albury, features a progressive industrial estate that will soon be expanded. Recently a medium sized manufacturing company relocated from Albury to Jindera, attracted by a large affordable site to enable the development of a new state-of-the-art factory. Another major enterprise has recently announced a duplication of its industrial production line. These industries have acknowledged that faster broadband will lead to greater efficiencies and expand their market capabilities, leading to improved revenues.

Another rural based enterprise and large employer, located at Culcairn, boasts a high-output 24/7 operation and because high level technology is involved, improved broadband would greatly improve their business efficiencies and opportunities.

(g) interaction with research and development and related innovation investments

The Shire is well known for its quality cattle breeding capabilities and major research facilities servicing the industry are located in the region. As this industry responds to world demand, it is essential that research capabilities are of the highest level. The research facilities are located to be near the agricultural communities involved in the cattle industry so the provision of high speed broadband would complement the efficiency of existing operations and help attract more research groups to support the improvement of cattle breeders export capabilities.

The regional cities of Wagga Wagga and Albury boasts campuses of Charles Sturt and Latrobe Universities where there are leading research facilities addressing the needs of the rural sector. The ability of grain growers and sheep and cattle breeders to have rapid on-line access to the relevant centres at these universities would greatly enhance productive capability for the farming sector.

(h) facilitating community and social benefits

Upon examination, the maxim, 'tyranny of distance' is still a reality in rural Australia. While Australians are incredibly resourceful and take every opportunity to attend and support community events and activities, the ability to communicate rapidly and frequently is not always available. Therefore faster, more efficient broadband would greatly add to the quality of life for people living in relatively remote locations within the Shire and enable a more interactive environment for families spread out across the district.

One of the greatest and most valued assets in the Greater Hume Shire is its social capital and there is a strong commitment to community building, delivered through a range of social projects aimed at assisting communities to develop networks, partnerships, structures and frameworks to support ongoing improvement to overall community identity, health and well-being. Emphasis is also placed on fostering community capacity through investment in young people. Clearly high-speed broadband would facilitate further community and social benefits within Greater Hume Shire.

(i) the optimal capacity and technological requirements of a network to deliver these outcomes

Reference to capacity and technological requirements has already been made under the previous heading - **The Council and its Broadband needs.**

Please accept this submission as the Council's evidence to the Inquiry.

Yours faithfully

Steven Pinnuck
General Manager
9 February 2011