



GREAT LAKES COUNCIL

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**Committee Secretary – House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Legal and Constitutional Affairs
Inquiry into Crime in the Community
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT**

**Submission from Great Lakes Council on behalf of the Mayor and People of
Great Lakes**

Description of the Area:

Great Lakes Local Government Area covers an area of 3,373 square kilometres and is situated on the Lower Mid North Coast of NSW. It is 320 kilometres north of Sydney and 168 kilometres north of Newcastle. Great Lakes Council Area has a population of 31,384 (ABS 2001 Census). This population increases by 4 times during the spring, summer and autumn holiday periods. Principle towns in the Area include the coastal twin-towns of Forster/Tuncurry in the north & Hawks Nest/Tea Gardens in the south, Pacific Palms 15 minutes south of Forster, on the coast and Bulahdelah, Stroud, Nabiac and other small rural communities in the hinterland.

The Local Crime Issues:

- High incidence of malicious damage to property – cost to Council and Community.
- Break and Enter non-dwelling – Great Lakes is the 11th highest Local Government Area in NSW for this offence (Bureau of Crime Statistics 2001).
- Theft – this includes from dwellings and motor vehicles (Great Lakes rates per 100,000 population exceed the NSW rate in most of these categories).
- Offensive Behaviour including offensive language.
- Anti Social behaviour involving excessive and underage abuse of alcohol and drugs and the combination of the two.
- Perceptions of crime having a negative impact on peoples sense of personal safety and good neighbourly behaviour.
- Lack of 24 hour policing in the main population areas of Forster/Tuncurry. The nearest manned station is Taree 46 kilometres to the north.
- Lack of resources for police to adequately perform their tasks such as vehicles and technological support.

Introduction:

Great Lakes Council Area is one of the fastest growing Local Government Areas in NSW and has the highest median age in the State 47.3yrs (ABS Regional Statistics). The population has grown rapidly over the last 10 years, 1991 population 25,997 – 2001 population 31,384, this represents a 20% increase. Great Lakes is a popular tourist destination promoting quality lifestyle and environment for families. With the rapid increase in population and tourism the rates of crime have increased dramatically and present a real challenge to Council, Police and the community to develop realistic and achievable strategies to address crime in a pro-active manner.

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Council has a strong commitment to the development of goals and strategies in Crime Prevention, these include –

- Actively networking with Police, Juvenile Justice, Department of Community Services, Local Aboriginal Community, Youth Services and organisations, Health and Educational institutions to develop appropriate strategies to attempt to address the increasing crime problems.
- Holding public meetings in relation to Law & Order issues, to listen to the concerns, perceptions and experiences of the people of our communities.
- Council is in the initial stages of developing a Crime Prevention Plan.
- Developing a budget and Physical Infrastructure Plan to address some identified issues such as; increased lighting in problem areas, design of public spaces to reduce opportunities for crime.
- Actively lobbying Local and State Police Commands for increased manning of Forster Police Station to 24 hours.

Council constantly receives letters from individuals, groups, organisations and businesses in our community complaining about the high cost of crime and the lack of response from the police. The nearest 24 hour manned Police Station is Taree 46 kilometres to the north. This Station is also understaffed and under resourced to adequately address and reduce the incidence of crime. This is not an attack on the professionalism of the police or their willingness to work towards collaborative solutions, but rather a fact, that police cannot address issues and undertake pro active policing without adequate and up to date resources to do so.

Types of Crime in our Community & its impact on the Community

Malicious damage, vandalism to public and private property has become a major concern especially in the main towns of Forster/Tuncurry. The cost to Council in terms of repairing damaged public facilities throughout the Shire is in excess of \$100,000 per annum; this does not take into account the cost to private enterprise. The CBD of Forster/Tuncurry is a 'hot spot' for this type to damage and has lead some businesses to close their doors, due to the high cost of repairs, their inability to obtain insurance due to excessive claims eg 4 window shop front replacements in a 1 year period.

A large majority of this crime can be attributed to young people and be related directly back to four main areas;

1. Abuse of drugs and alcohol including the responsible sale of alcohol,
2. Lack of parental control,
3. High level of unemployment,
4. Lack of services and facilities to address youth issues.

The twin towns of Forster/Tuncurry have a population of 18,000 (ABS 2001 Census) which is a 23.5% increase in population in the last 10 years. This population expands to four times this number during peak holiday periods; the levels of reported crime also increase dramatically during these times.

The Forster High School is the largest in NSW with some 1500 students attending a facility that was designed for 800 to 900. Young people and their use of public space is an issue of ongoing concern to many residents in the Great Lakes area. This is often linked with illicit drug and alcohol use and significantly increases the perceptions of fear for much of the community. Conversely, our work with young people has revealed that they feel isolated and excluded and are often fearful themselves in public spaces, especially at night. They feel they are targeted by Police and the media and are used as scapegoats for any crime in the community. They also feel they do not have a voice and that their views are not listened to or acted on.

Other major areas of concern are theft and anti-social behaviour; these two issues have major implications for our tourist industry. During the peak tourist season these types of crime increase.

It is not possible to fully ascertain if the offenders are opportunistic tourists or local people preying on the increase in population and the relaxed attitude of people on holidays eg leaving cars unlocked enabling easy access.

It is clear that these issues are not isolated to our area, but rather our community is a reflection of a wider social problem that needs serious debate, and the realistic allocation of resources, to enable a variety of responses to the problems of crime and anti-social behaviour in our community. These responses need to be multi-faceted and include:

- Allocating extra resources to police to provide for 24-hour policing and quick and appropriate response times.
- Providing creative social strategies to address offenders and repeat offenders, such as community conferencing.
- Allocation of resources to other Government and Non Government services to provide education and support to families, especially reinforcing parental responsibility.
- Providing creative programs that focus on changing culture in relation to social values such as; good neighbourly behaviour, acceptable behaviour, responsible citizenship, acceptance of others. These are some of the traditional Australian social values that seem to have been slowly eroded from our society.
- Education campaigns that address the fear of crime and its negative impact on people, creating social isolation, mistrust in the community and melts the glue that binds us together as a free society.

In closing Council would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to express some of the concerns and problems facing the community of Great Lakes.

Yours faithfully



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Clr John Chadban
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