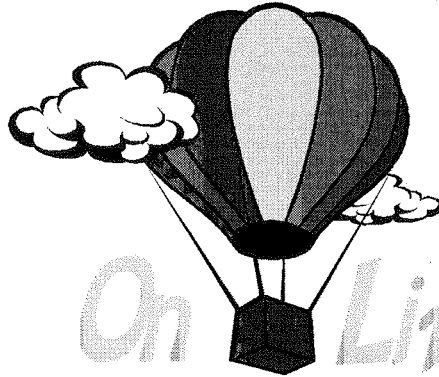


Get'n High



On Life

MILDURA YOUTH HOT AIR BALLOON CLUB

**INQUIRY INTO A
NEW REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT
FUNDING PROGRAM 2008**

3rd July 2008

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport,
Regional Development and Local Government
PO Box 6021
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

Submission to the Inquiry into a new regional development funding program

The **Mildura Youth Hot Air Balloon Club** appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to this Inquiry.

Review/Overview:

The aim of the club since 2003 has been to provide Sunraysia (Mildura, Victoria) and the surrounding region with quality accredited adventure therapy training for at-risk mainstream, Koori and Tongan youth, which builds their resilience and self-esteem while teaching them life skills. They are then encouraged to move into further education training and or employment. This is achieved by running innovative training programs that attract at-risk youth which is supported by experts in the field.

Due to the unique nature of our project, management issues arose frequently and we would like to thank our dedicated team of volunteers for their exceptional efforts and persistence on how well they have and continue to overcome the expected and unexpected growth issues that have arisen.

A major hurdle and concern for our club was more than two (2) years that has passed while we have been working through the funding application and grant process. It has meant a large turnover of volunteers as we were unable to continue the practical programs as intended, due to the very long delay in firstly obtaining the grant and then the purchase and delivery of the equipment.

Some of our volunteers then made other commitments due to the lengthy delays. Simplifying and streamlining the application process would have reduced our volunteer problems and we would have been able to help more at-risk youth in the mean time.

We have been blessed again with recruiting new volunteers with years of experience in running unique projects and most important the return of four at-risk youth we have worked with in the past who have come back to be trained as leaders to run programs for other at-risk youth!

We would like to point out that without the Sunraysia Area Consultative Committee guidance and support we would never have attempted to take on a project this size for at least another five years if ever. It was a very daunting task. Our success in reaching our ten year plan in five years is mainly due to the encouragement and hard work done by the SACC team, especially Jenny Neaves and Tom Crouch. Thank you all very much!

Another thank you must go to the Bendigo office of DOTARS and especially Karen Norris for her guidance and the clarification of the grant implementation process. The club was able to work through issues that were major concerns and Karen found simple solutions, which saved us time, money and stress.

The paperwork side of volunteering is hard enough without having to work through a major challenge like this. The human touch is so important when working through problems which arise in these situations. This played a major part in the success of our application and positive outcomes.

It is important to remember that these community projects are designed to help reduce cost for wilful damage, welfare and social security while building better networks between educational institutions, federal and state government, council, privatised and volunteer support service groups thus benefiting the whole of our community. This gives us an opportunity to take ownership for the development and growth of the at-risk and needy, and will develop a more resilient and caring community that we can be proud of.

1. Please provide your thoughts on future funding of regional programs in order to invest in genuine and accountable community infrastructure projects;

The club is writing this submission to the Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government of the importance of renewing a regional funding program aimed at enhancing community infrastructure. In doing so we hope we can help bring about improvements that will make such programs more effective for regional communities in the future.

A funding structure that engages community groups, local and federal government in the development of appropriate local projects a good example of a healthy democracy at work where all parties take ownership of the projects.

We as others would have found the application extremely useful and an opportunity to develop advanced skills in setting up a quality sustainable project. It allowed for a thorough development and reviewing process that is not normally available to non profit groups like ours. This confirmed that the project was well thought through and fulfilled the needs of our community.

If this process was followed and there is a clear separation between the project development and any potential political issues, we think it would be very successful.

We urge the Standing Committee to make a **recommendation to establish a New Regional Development Funding Program** that provides a fair and accountable application process for regional communities to access funding for projects that contribute to the economic development of our region.

A very clear example of how rural communities can be offended was at the media release of the funding where Mark Vaile Deputy Prime Minister was in Mildura to make the funding announcement and made the comment that it was good that the federal government had given \$179,000 and the state government had matched it. This offended me and our hard working team of volunteers as the state government had not made a contribution due to lack of funds. Someone should have informed the Deputy Prime minister we had worked very hard to develop a unique partner, sponsorship, fundraising program that was combined with grants and donations.

Without grants from our major partners ADRA Sunraysia, ADRA Victoria, ADRA Australia, the Mildura Rural City Council and many contributions of cash and in-kind support from major and minor sponsors whom number over one hundred (100) the project would never have past the first review.

This also brings to mind the struggle the club had when our second hand equipment reached its retirement stage and even though we had raised and banked over one hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000) we were told it may jeopardise the success of the application if we purchased a new envelope before the application was approved. This meant we had to postpone at-risk youth programs until finally we said our priority is working with the youth and take the risk of spending hundreds of hours volunteer work for the sake of the cause. The long process of working through the application has caused a major turnover of volunteers who are very hard to replace.

The club was very concerned that a process of approval of individual grants by Ministerial discretion may lead to inconsistency and a lack of transparency. When public servants are put in a position where they are unable to have any form of physical interaction with the applicants then is reliant on the quality and literacy skills of the submission writing support team available to the hardworking volunteer groups. This link to the applicant would help maintain transparency with stakeholders, because many of the reasons behind funding decisions are unable to be publicised.

We feel that the decision-making authority for the grant applications should be an independent panel. Ideally this panel would operate under the national Board of Regional Development Australia. This would enable the Minister to monitor the performance of the program to ensure it meets the Government's objectives.

Simplification of the application process would make the process much less daunting. The application process should be easy enough for organisations not to have to acquire professional grant-writers. Many of the questions overlapped, were confusing and time consuming just trying to ascertain the information that was being requested.

Without the encouragement and support of the Sunraysia Area Consultative Committee we could not have applied for a Regional Partnerships grant. The completion of a Regional Partnerships application was a very challenging task for us as we didn't have the high level of administrative and research capabilities other more established not-for profit groups have at their disposal. Our small number of volunteers had to expend months, to research and prepare the application. This meant we had to rely very heavily on the Area Consultative Committee to interpret major sections of the application

Advisors of the club commented that the presentation and content of the application needed to be prepared in a professional manner as it would be critical for the success of the application.

A simplified application process with a clearer, stronger set of guidelines would have helped to overcome many of the hurdles we had to overcome.

If the department had professional assessors they would be able to make more informed recommendations, especially for applications that clearly adhere to the guidelines. Applications could be assessed in a much shorter time frame this in turn would help to minimise administrative costs and reduce the application process saving time and money.

Our club believes that to have an effective Local Community Infrastructure Program, the Government would need to establish an interface with local communities. Without a system that provides assistance and advice to grant applicants, successful applicants will tend to be large, well resourced organisations.

A grant program that assists regional communities *at the application stage* will be more likely to benefit a broad range of organisations like ours that work with disadvantaged and Indigenous groups from our community. It is hard enough for our and other organisations to work with the targeted groups never mind the added challenge of having to stop working with the disadvantaged and Indigenous groups so we can make an application which took over two years and may or may not be successful.

New Concept:

After reviewing the submissions on the website, it occurred to me that there may be an opportunity for organisations like the men in a shed type project to develop a partnership with other organisations like our balloon club to develop programs that would utilise the skills and assets of both groups to possibly run mentoring style programs. If there was a video review and contact details of each project that could be placed on the web site for prospective applicants to view it may also assist existing organisation in other parts of Australia and inspire them to network with other in their local area groups. This would then save time, money and possibly infrastructure while building a national network of like minded organisations.

2. How should the Federal Government design regional programs in a way to minimize administrative costs and duplication for taxpayers;

Dysfunctional assessment process / Lack of clear communication with stakeholders

When the new Regional Partnerships program guideline applications came out in 2006 it resulted in confusion and frustration about the assessment process, and reinforced the widely held impression that the guidelines were being interpreted in the context of a political agenda.

When the assessment role of the Department's regional offices was removed in March 2006 and given to a new team in the national office, there seemed to be a lack of understanding by the Department's national office about regional needs and practical program delivery issues

The department's communication about grant applications became more difficult and local issues facing the communities seemed to lose their importance. There also seemed to be unrealistic expectations of the capability of community organisations to be able to prepare complex grant applications and raise funds for local projects. ie. the ratio of 60% organisation 40% government funding would be more likely to be successful. This puts a great impost on rural organisations especially in the severe drought we are in at present. We also had concerns at the lack of understanding about the damaging impact on community organisations of delays in decision-making process.

Many community needs and problems are very similar and it would save many work hours and reduce submission costs if the applications for national, state or local governments could reflect these similarities in the application questions and reports.

In summary the process of learning how to develop a funding submission has been a long and arduous task. On reflection it has developed skills of many of our volunteers and exposed the need to recruit qualified volunteers to help produce a professionally presented submission.

My personal challenge equates to having done a university degree in submission writing over two years, where the final exam was worth \$180,000. It has been a large and challenging learning curve with many personal benefits but has come at a cost of being frustrated with the delays in completing at-risk youth programs (as they are the reason we established the club). It has also strained friendships within our volunteers who are unable to contribute due to the complexity and high standard required in the submission. Five years ago six friends got together to start a unique adventure therapy club that taught life skills to at-risk youth and encouraged them to go on the further education and or employment. Since then we have presented many successful programs and raised in-kind and cash contributions through grants

Thank you for your contribution

Regards,

Rowland Hughes
Vice President

