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30 AUG 2002

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
REGIONAL SERVICES

**Submission – Inquiry into Commercial Regional
Aviation Services in Australia and Transport Links
to Major Populated Islands.**

Toowoomba is both Australia's "Garden City" and its largest inland regional centre. While the city has a population of 89,000 people, in excess of 100,000 people reside within a 10-minute drive from the city centre. The city population is predicted to reach 95,000 by 2010, growing at a rate of approximately .7% per annum. Toowoomba City is a major service center servicing an economic region covering:

- Darling Downs and Gatton Shire
- South West Queensland to the Northern Territory border
- Part of the Burnett region covering the Shires of Nanango and Kingaroy
- Northern inland New South Wales, stretching from Walgett Shire in the west to the Glen Innes district in the east

The overall population of this economic region is almost 333,000 people, making it one of the largest economic regions for a major provincial city in Australia. By way of comparison, Toowoomba's economic region's population equals 70% of the combined populations of the economic regions of Townsville and Cairns covering the northern, far north and northwest regions of Queensland.¹

As a major hub for the education, health, agriculture and manufacturing sectors, air transport services are vital to the economy of the City and region. Service industries provide support to populations spread throughout Western Queensland, Southern Queensland and northern New South Wales. In turn, these populations make substantial input into the economy of Toowoomba, visiting for business, education and health purposes, usually for a period of 2 –3 days. Also, the Abnett & Doonar study indicates that 74% of businesses - larger firms and specialized niche market businesses – have markets outside Toowoomba and 54% have markets outside the Darling Downs.

The city lies at the strategic junction of three national highways linking Toowoomba with four capital cities. The highways are the Warrego Highway linking Brisbane and Darwin; the New England Highway linking Sydney and Brisbane with the Cunningham/Newell Highway providing the in-land link to Melbourne. This fact makes Toowoomba easily accessible by road from other centres within the region. As the major roads between centres are generally good, they facilitate the majority of freight movements and the vast majority of

¹ Toowoomba Central City Economic Strategy – Abnett Consulting & Mark Doonar & Assoc Pty Ltd – 1997

private travel within and through the region. Toowoomba's vehicular accessibility to Brisbane, the Sunshine and Gold Coasts is a deterrent to improved air services into Brisbane. Other inhibitors to an improved air service are an hourly coach service to Brisbane and a door-to-door mini coach service to Brisbane airport.

Toowoomba Airport, with a gross replacement cost of \$8.5m is located within the administrative boundaries of, and is operated by the Toowoomba City Council, which exercises operational control over all airport activities. A 2C class airport fully licensed to ICAD standard, the airstrip is 1,121 metres in length. The Toowoomba Airport suite of ground aids includes GPS, AWIB, Approaches, PAPI and lighting. Toowoomba Airport currently services approximately 20,000 aircraft movements per annum and has a capacity to accommodate up to Dash 8 aircraft² and 60,000 aircraft movements annually. This airport provides charter services and is a base for maintenance operations, aero club training, recreational flying and private hangarage. Toowoomba City Council has allocated a budget \$1.8m to the upgrade of the terminal, taxiway, apron and apron lighting at the airport in an endeavour to encourage and ensure the sustainability of commercial regional air services to the region. The airport has a major role to play being an intra and inter regional gateway for business and visiting friends and relatives in the region.

According to the *Queensland Aviation Plan*³, passenger growth for Toowoomba Airport was expected to grow from 10,000 in 1997 to approximately 15,000 for the medium growth scenario and 20,000 for the high growth scenario by the year 2011. These forecasts were based on assumptions associated with general population growth, tourism development and a worldwide trend to greater utilisation of air transport. Importantly, they were unconstrained in that they were formulated on the basis that there be no impediments associated with the airport that might limit or constrain growth. At this time there were two Regular Passenger Transport (RPT) operators, Eastland Air (Qantas partner) and Flight West (Ansett partner) servicing Toowoomba, respectively, with 19 return flights to Brisbane per week and 2 return flights per week via Toowoomba, forming part of the Brisbane, St George, Cunnamulla, Thargomindah route.

Unfortunately, since this time, Toowoomba has experienced a significant decrease in its RPT demand from 12,000 passengers per annum to between 5,000 to 6,000. This can be attributed to the worldwide decline in aviation usage and the post September 2001 sense of insecurity. As a consequence, Eastland Airlines Toowoomba-Brisbane RPT services ceased to operate on 27th June 2002. The cessation of the Eastland Airlines Toowoomba-Brisbane RPT service, leaves Toowoomba and the region without a direct air service to Brisbane. The opportunity now exists for a Brisbane to Toowoomba service to be incorporated

² Vandongen, A. Qantas 30th December 1998. "Assessment of Dash 8 performance capabilities from Toowoomba aerodrome".

³ 'Queensland Aviation Plan' - *Queensland Transport* - 1997

into the Brisbane-Roma-Charleville route. This provides a solution to the current situation and an acceptance of the current commercial aircraft services market.

Since the cessation of the Eastland Airlines Toowoomba-Brisbane RPT services and mindful of the fact that there were no opportunities to subsidise the Toowoomba-Brisbane service, Toowoomba City Council (TCC) met with Queensland Transport officials to ascertain the feasibility of including Toowoomba in to the currently subsidised Brisbane-Roma-Charleville designated service operated by QantasLink. TCC is also prepared to consider waiving its passenger and landing charges and other financial and non-financial incentives to secure a regular Brisbane – Toowoomba RPT service. The subsidy provided by Queensland Transport to the Brisbane-Roma-Charleville air service results in the fact that educational, professional and other service opportunities fly over the City of Toowoomba daily through to the Brisbane market.

Following a personal submission by the Mayor of Toowoomba to QantasLink, a Safety Assessment Team inspected the feasibility of Dash 8 operations from the Toowoomba Airport. The inspection was seen as addressing the technical, loading and safety considerations of the airport prior to QantasLink examining the commercial viability of including Toowoomba in the Brisbane-Roma-Charleville service. To date, no decision has been made on Toowoomba's inclusion in this air service.

Toowoomba City Council is working vigorously to provide a reliable, safe and commercial air service to Brisbane. The Council has approached Queensland Transport, QantasLink and the Mayors of the cities of Roma and Charleville to have Toowoomba included in the Brisbane-Roma-Charleville air route. Council is now reviewing its airport funding allocations to ensure that all technical services are suitable for that air service operation. Toowoomba and the region's economy is suffering because of its lack of air services. There is some irony in the fact that the Queensland Government subsidy of the Brisbane-Roma-Charleville air service results in Toowoomba's potential customer base accessing Brisbane products and services directly.