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Our Ref: 07/0220

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

RE: Inquiry into a New Regional Development Funding Program

1. Singleton Council received a Regional Partnerships grant in 2006

In 2006 Singleton Council received a Regional Partnerships grant of \$267,844 for the construction and the building fit-out of the new Singleton Youth & Creative Enterprise Centre. The total value of this project was \$944,825.

2. Positive Aspects to the Regional Partnerships Grant Program and Application Process

Area Consultative Committee:

The local Area Consultative Committee provided very valuable input in further developing the project to maximise community benefit; assisting with research; leveraging other sources of funding; and submitting the application.

No closing date:

No fixed closing date for the application was a major benefit as the flexible timing fitted the requirements of the other funding providers and also Council's processes.

Provision of a Large Scale Grant for Capital Works and Equipment

Singleton Council is of the view that Regional Partnerships is a very valuable funding opportunity providing access to relatively large sums of money that can be used for the provision of capital works and equipment for community facilities. Outside of the Regional Partnerships program the funding options for such projects are extremely limited.

Short Assessment Period

Approval for the Singleton Council project was gained within three months. The assessment period for the Singleton Council project was "fast tracked" in order to ensure funding from other project partners was secured. This was crucial to the projects viability.

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Priorities of the Program

The published priorities of the program were easy to understand and the suitability of any potential project able to be evaluated.

Use of a Two-Part Application Process

The use of an Expression of Interest followed by the full application was very valuable as applicants would be saved the considerable time and expense of completing the full application form unnecessarily.

Flexibility of Projects Eligible to be Funded

The wide range of projects eligible to be funded was very important. The funding program was therefore able to assist many different communities with many different needs, problems and priorities. The fact that items eligible for funding included works, refurbishments, construction, equipment, and provision of staff in certain circumstances, was very valuable.

3. Negative Aspects to the Regional Partnerships Grant Program and Application Process

Transparent Assessment Process:

The assessment process was not transparent with regard to how funding was distributed to various projects across the different Area Consultative Committee regions in Australia.

Clarification of Eligibility Regarding Retrospectivity:

Nearly all grant funding programs include a stipulation regarding retrospective funding, however, the conditions in the Regional Partnerships program relating to retrospectivity were overly restrictive. Additionally, the retrospectivity conditions seem to have not been uniformly enforced across different regions.

Singleton Council had planned to construct a new Creative & Youth Enterprise Centre for some years. Council had set aside land valued at approximately \$500,000 for this purpose pending securing funding from external sources. When Council commenced the Regional Partnerships application process the local Area Consultative Committee representative advised that the value of the land could not be included as part of Council's contribution. This resulted in Council's applying for a larger percentage of the project costs from the Regional Partnerships grant compared to the percentage of the overall costs Council was meeting (as the land value was excluded). In effect this reduced the attractiveness of our application, however, the application was ultimately approved.

Singleton Council staff subsequently spoke to other Councils in NSW and found that apparently in some cases the value of land and other existing funds were able to be included as part of the applicant's contribution.


Perceived Bias of Local Committee

Singleton Council feels that the Local Committee in the Hunter, which reviews and provides feedback on initial Expressions of Interest, may not adequately reflect the views of the Hunter Valley region as the vast majority of its members are from Newcastle, with none from the Upper Hunter Valley. The members also appear to be represent business and education with no "grass roots" community representation.

Conditions of the Funding Agreement Regarding Publicity and Promotion

Singleton Council found the conditions relating to Publicity and Promotion of the Department of Transport and Regional Services (DOTARS) Regional Partnerships Program Funding Agreement to be overly onerous with regard to DOTARS personnel being present at the opening of the project/facility.

Singleton Council organised the official opening of the Singleton Youth & Creative Enterprise Centre. DOTARS staff at the Newcastle office advised that Senator Sandy MacDonald would be present to open the facility. Council organised for a plaque to be constructed stating the venue was opened by Senator Sandy MacDonald. The spelling and title of the Senator was approved by return fax by staff at DOTARS in Newcastle. Shortly after production of the plaque staff at DOTARS in Newcastle advised that the Senator would not be able to be present and that they confirmed the details of another representative to open the facility. Singleton Council then arranged for a second plaque to be produced and destroyed the Sandy MacDonald plaque. Staff at DOTARS subsequently advised that due to a change of schedule Senator Sandy MacDonald would be opening the facility as per the original arrangement. Singleton Council, at very short notice and some expense, was able to have a third plaque produced ready for the opening. At the opening of the facility DOTARS staff advised that the plaque produced did not have the correct spelling of the Senator's name and that his title was incorrect, however, the information on the plaque was exactly as per that originally authorised by the DOTARS Newcastle office.



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