

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION INTO THE INQUIRY ON REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Economic Development Australia (EDA) is a relatively new organisation that has approximately 500 members ([www.edaustralia.com.au](http://www.edaustralia.com.au)) EDA has been established to meet the needs of economic development practitioners in local, state and federal government fields. EDA seeks to provide input on policy development, whilst also providing or acting as a clearing house for strategic economic development information.

EDA has also managed to secure professional training for its practitioners through the development of modules and a post graduate course for which agreement is being finalised with RMIT and WA Universities.

In the past, EDA has provided comment on the Regional Partnerships Program and the operation of Regional Development Committees and met with the Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Development, the Hon. Gary Gray in March 2008. Representatives of EDA also provided comment in relation to how funding programs could be better designed. These papers are attached for information of the Committee.

1. Provide advice on future funding of regional programs in order to invest in genuine and accountable community infrastructure projects.

The first criteria of the Terms of Reference requires organisations or individuals to provide feedback on how regional programs can support community infrastructure projects that will in the long term foster economic prosperity.

It is argued that Local Government understands and knows what additional or expanded community infrastructure is required to support growth in the local economy. Local governments are often the key conduit to understand which businesses or sectors of the local economy are seeking to expand in the short, medium and long term.

It is recommended by EDA that each local government authority prepare a set of guidelines in consultation with its regional development authorities and in line with regional strategic plans or future directions that outline where infrastructure extensions are required that will facilitate or foster further employment growth. After this is undertaken, there should be a process by which each local government can approach a relevant funding body to engage funding for this infrastructure.

It should be noted that under the Regional Partnerships Program, this was attempted to a degree and failed on many occasions. Its attempt was exemplified by the funding contributions that were meant to come 30% from Local Government, 30% from State Government and roughly 30% from the Federal Government. The way the program was structured meant that these funding requirements could never be met within the timeframes that were allocated.

### *Case Study*

*Complementary to this infrastructure planning initiative, LGAQ is negotiating a project to aid regional planning for key utilities in recognition of issues surrounding the timely and cost effective supply of electricity to regions. Through an initial partnership with Ergon Energy, the project will build strengthened planning links and improved shared information between the industry and local government to aid sustainable regional*

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*development. LGAQ believes the national regional development program should have scope to support such strategic initiatives which have an impact on key issues of national significance and can be rolled out in other States.*

EDA is focussed on bringing out the best in economic development from each municipality. It is therefore recommended that no local governments or organisations be permitted to participate in new funding programs, unless they have either an Economic Development Strategy, or some other longer term plan with clear economic development considerations (ie. "Plans for the Future", Strategic Plans, Corporate Plans, etc) that has been formally adopted for that region. Such strategies should represent the requirements and opportunities of not only the local government authority, but also from state government and business.

To be accountable as indicated, projects must fit into an adopted plan or strategy of Council. Accordingly, the recommendation from EDA is that all economic development activities be dependent and subject to the adoption of an Economic Development Strategy or similar plan. In the majority of cases, the Economic Development Strategy will be monitored by an Economic Development Committee / Regional Development Organisation. This is seen as one mechanism to make funding for such projects more accountable. These groups are required to update and maintain the Economic Development Strategy as well as report back to Council / their boards on the progress of such strategies.

It is noted that local governments are compelled to advertise Economic Development Strategies for public consultation for usually up to four weeks, and this should encourage community and regional ownership of the strategy. It is also suggested that many of the regional boards and development agencies still in existence should be able to use their regional strategies as a similar mechanism.

The establishment of projects within an Economic Development Strategy should also ensure that everything that is put forward into a funding program has been well considered and is important to Council and the community as well as the state government. This should stop erratic funding applications being made and assist the orderly economic development of regions and areas.

Lack of Economic Development awareness and strategy is a key challenge for the profession and for sustainable regional development and this is an opportunity to address this weakness. At present there are many economic development practitioners working in local, State and Federal Government agencies that lack the appropriate training and professional development. This lack of comprehension means that there is a high possibility that there can be a lack of understanding about sustainable development. Economic Development Australia wishes to strongly recommend that all practitioners seek to complete the formalized training now established by Economic Development Australia and in the future become "certified" economic development practitioners.

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### *Case Study*

*Many Queensland councils are seeking consultants to 'write' strategy for them as they grapple with the demands of local government reform and servicing new geographical areas and the worry is that the knowledge and ownership is not being built within the sector.*

*In Queensland LGAQ's recent funding submission to the Queensland Government outlined the need for financial assistance and training resources for councils to develop economic development strategy. This included the suggestion that Councils should only be eligible for this funding if they had followed the LGAQ guidelines "Incorporating Economic Development into Local Government Planning" and undertaken associated training. This measure would help ensure improved understanding and practise of economic development, broad industry and community engagement and ownership of the strategy, sound performance measurement frameworks and solid links to corporate planning.*

Whilst EDA advocates for the good practice of using economic development strategies as a guide for funding, EDA recognizes that many local governments are not in a position where there is an adopted formal strategy, therefore the existence of an economic development strategy is not seen as mandatory.

It is incumbent on the Federal Government to make a clear distinction between those programs that are going to foster community development and those that are going to foster economic development. It is recommended that there be two separate streams of funding. One funding stream should focus on economic development that supports employment outcomes, attracting investments, adding value to the local economy, or other outcomes with clear economic benefits. The other stream of funding is the community sector funding which should be identified as those projects that create a level of community capacity building or community empowerment or deliver facilities that will be utilised by the existing community.

The funding criteria of previous funding programs, has resulted in situations where applications are presented as leading to regional development outcomes when the actual impact has been economic. It is therefore recommended that when considering the future funding of regional programs, that the federal government develops criteria that deals purely with economic development orientated initiatives and keeps those quite separate from community development initiatives.

An example of this distinction could be where the most significant need within a community is to have a park or playground upgrade occur. This will have no significant benefits to the ongoing community from an economic development perspective (perhaps a labour market program to construct the facility), but there will be many improvements from a community perspective. Alternatively, the installation of a large piece of infrastructure such as a gas pipe or an upgrade to a water supply to meet the needs of an industry or agribusiness may have extraordinary economic benefits but minimal community benefits.

In relation to accountability, to date accountability measures have been established through complex and often ineffective reporting mechanisms. This has often resulted in councils or local government authorities engaging accountants and auditors to scrutinise spending on projects of \$30 - \$40,000. This is clearly an unnecessary expenditure of financial resources.

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EDA also recognises the parliamentary Secretary for Regional Development and Northern Australia's Hon Gary Gray's disinclination to support for profit organisations under a new funding program but EDA believes that this would exclude many projects which would be of strategic importance to the region.

There are many examples of infrastructure costs for industry / private sector not being equitable with urban or city developments. In many cases it is the private sector that has to bare the infrastructure costs for the growth of a region. In many situations the public sector or not for profits cannot afford the matching funding contributions or in some cases in kind contributions.

EDA supports assistance being provided to the private sector with reference to infrastructure support with the following exclusions:

- Not include building or items of plants and equipment
- Projects undertaken by private sector as a result of any tier of government contractual arrangements.

A further way to make funding more accountable would be to appoint separate members or ask Council / a board to appoint separate members of Project Control Groups including Independent Chairs. There are issues here in how these people are trained up and how these people are appointed. If however, the projects are to be fully accountable, the suggestion of establishing a Steering Group with an Independent Chair to manage projects in excess of \$200,000 may be appropriate.

It is recommended by EDA that a sliding scale of grants be developed and with them a sliding scale of accountability. In the past, the same amount of financial reporting and project reporting has existed for a project to the value of \$30,000 as for a project to the value of a couple of million dollars. The past reporting mechanisms have proved as indicated both cumbersome and time consuming. It may be that where there is the opportunity for small projects that are going to make a significant difference that are covered within an Economic Development Strategy, there is the opportunity for minimal reporting to occur. Economic Development Australia does however, recommend that as the level of financial resources per project increases, that the level and standard of accountability increase to the same proportion.

The setting of levels of funding should also provide local governments with an indication of how much resources are required to undertake a specific project. For example, in the first instance a local government may seek to undertake a feasibility study to the value of perhaps \$40,000. This feasibility study may look at the options for developing a business incubator. Given that the majority of the costs will be to employ a consultant or an individual to undertake a study and report back to Council, it is not envisaged that the reporting requirements for the initial project should be substantial. The main reporting or financial accountability should exist when the local government authority or other organisation then makes an application for a more significant project often relating to infrastructure such as constructing a business incubator. It is at this point that consideration should be given to an Independent Chair within a Project Control Group and a high level of reporting and accountability should be required.

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In relation to major projects, EDA believes that on an annual basis, there should be a report undertaken on all projects that are funded through a Regional Development fund across Australia. Whilst there are a number of good reasons for doing this from an accountability perspective, this also provides an opportunity to demonstrate best practice both in project management and economic initiatives occurring across Australia. EDA would be more than happy to highlight where best practice is taking place and has a number of mediums at its disposal to assist in this way. In particular, EDA's National Economic Development Awards, quarterly Journal and professional development courses undertaken with project partners RMIT University and the University of Western Australia, could be utilized. This would also limit the amount of "odd" projects that maybe funded outside the criteria.

Worthy of consideration in this review is the Regional Infrastructure Development Fund that exists for Provincial Victoria. The fund has successfully managed to give out substantial money over a number of years and has a fairly comprehensive funding criterion. Whilst there are some shortfalls with the Regional Development Infrastructure Fund, which include the ineligibility of Interface Councils and the time taken to approve projects, the funding model is perhaps a good example that could be used at a federal level. One of the major problems with the Regional Development Infrastructure Fund is the need to find substantial funds to meet the funding criteria outlined within the application. Whilst the application does not require \$ for \$ funding, it still does require a substantial contribution from local government. It has in the past also required matching or at least contributing funds from Federal government or the private sector.

There is the opportunity to develop regional strategies for the Commonwealth via allocation of resources and using the expertise within Regional Development Committee's which could provide an overarching strategy to assist in a logical and consistency for Government decision making.

EDA believes that the new regional development funding programs should ensure that they can value add to projects which have been able to source funding from various partners but that the process of applications should not wait for confirmation of other funding sources to proceed.

One of the concerns related to retrospectivity and the model used by the South Australian Government with their Regional Development Infrastructure Fund is a model worth investigating. This allows work to commence after an application has been lodged, recognising that there is no guarantee of any funding.

This will ensure that projects are not unduly delayed when some aspects of the project which are not reliant on the funding were seen as a commencement of a project and as such made applications not workable.

The issue of matching funds is very important given that many local government authorities or regional economic development boards will not have the capacity to identify \$ for \$ funding (as discussed). Consideration needs to be given to the value of having a \$ for \$ funding and what it achieves for all the stakeholders involved in the project.

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**2. Examine ways to minimize administrative costs and duplication for taxpayers**

In relation to this second point of the Terms of Reference, that is to examine ways to minimise administrative costs and duplication for taxpayers, EDA has the following recommendations.

EDA has long been of the opinion that there is a need to coordinate the budgets and priorities that come out of State, Federal and Local Government in a meaningful manner. In many instances in the past, examples have been put forward where strong funding programs have been made available to local government, however they have been conditional on a \$ for \$ matching basis or have been issued at a time when a local government budget has already been prepared and cannot be altered. A clear recommendation from EDA is that a list of priority projects be developed by each local government authority. These Priority Projects without funding applications should be forwarded to both state and federal authorities to gain a better comprehension of which projects are foremost in the mind of local government.

Under the Regional Partnerships Program, there was a focus on seeking to secure funding contributions from community organisations, local government and state government, with roughly 30% to come from the federal government. This requirement leads to a considerable doubling or tripling of effort across all levels of government, which incurs increased administrative costs for taxpayers and ratepayers in each community.

As indicated earlier, EDA believes that another way to minimise administrative costs is if projects are under a certain financial ceiling, then reporting methods should be limited and minimised.

Duplication for taxpayers should be avoided by having a clear comprehension of what the initiatives are within each local government authority, through their Economic Development Strategies or similar plans.

The opportunity exists for duplication to be reduced by having a clear recognition of what exists in local governments' capital works programs and recurrent funding where there might be a bigger bang for one's buck that can be achieved if there is a full comprehension of what exists. This will require Regional Development Committees (RDC's) to be more detailed in their planning and the development of their strategic plans if this is to be avoided. This of course assumes the role of the RDC in funding programs will continue.

In relation to the role of RDC's there needs to be a clear description or definition of the role of RDC's and the relationship they have with the department which is the funder of projects. It is logical to have the RDC's directly fund projects and initiatives as the funding authority, especially lower cost projects. This would avoid duplication and repetition of a number of functions that have occurred in the past. This duplication often led to unacceptably long delays in funding approvals and implementation with accompanying angst and scepticism for proponents.

There is a clear opportunity for the RDC's to be more involved as regional leaders. The better connected RDC's are with their communities, the better placed they will be to undertake strategic planning functions. Whilst some parts of Australia are well

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served by Regional Development Committees, not all regions experience this representation. This is where RDC's can fill the void and clearly articulate deficiencies and opportunities.

A further challenge is to identify state government initiatives that have the potential to mirror or duplicate local initiatives. This is always difficult as funding programs interchange on a regular basis. Again, to avoid administrative costs and duplication, it would be important to have a three way liaison between local, state and federal to establish both shared and individual objectives.

A suggestion is to establish a tripartite committee to consider the high order objectives of local, state and federal government within the context of regional development to establish agreement on how funds should most appropriately be apportioned.

Another related option to help make this happen is for this 'coordination' function to be allocated to RDC's in the form of staffing, providing it with the necessary resourcing. There would be advantages in this staffing resource being provided 'on the ground'. This is especially relevant as State Government Investment Facilitation agencies are often dispersed into regional representative offices. Such positions could be shared between say 2 or 3 RDC's within close geographic proximity (e.g. 0.5 staff per RDC).

A key issue in dealing with administration and duplication and ensuring that taxpayers money is well spent is understanding how the RDC's will function in the future. EDA has supplied limited comment on the consolidation of RDC's that occurred approximately 12 months ago.

RDC's have the potential to undertake significant initiatives, however there needs to be a coordinated approach as to how RDC's will operate in the future. This includes a close examination of how Board members are appointed to RDC's, and as indicated a far more rigorous approach to the development of the strategic planning documents that support the RDC's. Better planning at an RDC level might also result in better sector analysis which will allow funding steams to be identified in specific areas such as agribusiness, automotive, tourism and aviation.

3. Examine the former government's practices and grants outlined in the Australian National Audit Office report on Regional Partnerships with the aim of providing advice on future funding of regional programs; and
4. Examine the former government's practices and grants in the Regional Partnerships Program after the audit period of 2003-2006 with the aim of providing advice on future funding of regional programs.

### Audit Reports

In relation to the criteria within the next Terms of Reference which is to look at the audit report on the former government's Regional Partnerships Program and examine new ways to fund Regional Development, EDA concurs with the report from the Office of the National Audit and considers this report to be a comprehensive analysis of the Regional Partnerships Program. EDA has already provided both

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written comment and verbal comment to the government on the thoroughness and comprehensiveness of this report. As indicated previously, EDA held significant concerns about the “programs or projects” that were being left behind by the proposed immediate scrapping of the funding. EDA also has concerns about the funding void that now exists whilst various investigations are undertaken.

In relation to improving funding programs, there are a number of additional initiatives and comments that EDA would like considered.

Firstly, EDA has concerns with the definition of ‘regional development’. Regional development implies that development is either only needed or only occurs within regional areas. EDA believes that the issues that are occurring in regional Australia are often a microcosm of the issues that are occurring both in the interface and urban areas of some of the Capital cities and certainly the regional centres. It appears to be illogical to have funding only for regional areas whilst there are no opportunities for any of the interface, semi-urban or indeed fully urban areas to participate in the appropriate funding programs. EDA believes that funding programs should be applicable to all areas of Australia without exception.

In the past the economic development industry has witnessed odd classifications of areas to improve funding opportunities. For example, the City of Adelaide was classified as rural and regional to make it eligible for funding. Another example would be Geelong which has been classified as rural and regional when obviously the vast expanse of Geelong is predominately an urban environment most similar to places in Melbourne or Sydney.

Therefore EDA believes that future funding programs should allow participation from stakeholders within urban areas and within regional areas and believes that rather than having initiatives branded as “Regional Development”, they should simply be considered and described as “Local Economic Development”. This is particularly pertinent as the nature of industry and the dynamics of doing business are ever evolving. Our economy is transforming with the effects of globalisation and as such location is becoming less important, particularly when we are experiencing an ‘unbundling’ of the production chain (i.e. the A-Z of a product / service is increasingly not happening in one location). In other words, funding a project in a metropolitan area will provide some work for skilled professionals in rural areas (e.g. advanced business services ‘mobile’ skilled professionals seeking lifestyle advantages).

As previously stated, a second component is that all funding proposals should reflect local strategies that have been adopted by Council or at least by regional economic development boards.

An additional means by which future funding of regional programs could be improved is to attempt to coordinate the funds that have been or will be spent by local government, State and Federal government in the area of regional development. This is going to give a far better outcome for the community and for business.

Finally, there must be consideration given to funding individuals as employees for local economic development initiatives. In the past there was the opportunity to fund people rather than consultants. This has been moved away from by both the state and federal government over the past five to ten years. There are many advantages



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in funding people to retain corporate memory and also provide continuity in dealing with key stakeholders. Regional communities and urban communities find it difficult when it is explained to the community that the consultants will come in and undertake specific activities and then leave. This makes consultation much harder and it really does threaten the level of community participation that can be achieved.

It should also be noted that in some regional areas, there are very few consultants and a significant percentage of the funds end up being expended on travel and accommodation costs for the consultants.

It is a recommendation of Economic Development Australia that provision be given to fund individuals to undertake specific activities for period of up to three years rather than the immediate employment of consultants.

EDA is also of the view that the review should also take into account funding associated with the recurrent costs of capital projects funded. In particular, EDA stresses the need to capture upfront the 'life-cycle' costs of a physical asset (e.g. a business incubator). Rather than the auspice body (e.g. Council) having to meet these in perpetuity post launch of project, it would be prudent, as part of this review, to consider that the Federal Government, and other funding parties, make provision for true ongoing recurrent capital costs in their funding for projects. If this means that fewer projects are funded, then so be it. It will result in more sustainable assets and a lasting legacy.

There is strong demand for relationship building and partnership commitment at an operational level between local, state and federal government in pursuing effective economic and regional development. Funded positions to work between these three layers with regional objectives in mind and to navigate the myriad of regional agencies, boards, organisations of councils, LG Associations and business support and development agencies are needed. I agree that this is the only way to build those links and networks in a sustainable way and to have real ownership of the project and commitment to long term outcomes. Consultants have their place in the market, however, directly employed staff build lasting relationships and become a part of an organisation's planning and policy making.

### *Case Study*

*An example is the Local Economic Development Liaison partnership between Queensland Government DTRDI and the Local Government Association Queensland – providing a funded liaison point for LG within their trusted membership organisation and a direct link to DTRDI programs and activities. The Queensland Government will cease to fund this position in September 2008, This partnership model goes a long way toward facilitating information sharing across regions and between layers of government and to aid the joint development of ED strategy at an LG and regional level, reflecting agreed regional priorities. Without this Economic Development capacity building and networking facilitation, LG relies increasingly on consultants and diverse relationships to deliver positive community and economic outcomes.*

*Furthermore, in Queensland, the impact and associated cost of local government reform has limited LG ability and priority to invest in this key area. Funded positions with a regional focus and strong links to policy development and funding administration are the key to successful and sustainable regional development.*

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## Summary

Economic Development Australia welcomes the opportunity to become involved in this important Inquiry. Economic Development Australia looks forward to an active involvement with the Committee and would be prepared to have a number of Directors meet with representatives of the Committee.

Yours sincerely





DAVID KEENAN  
CHAIRPERSON  
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AUSTRALIA  
[www.edaustralia.com.au](http://www.edaustralia.com.au)  
0448 324 116  
[davidk@hume.vic.gov.au](mailto:davidk@hume.vic.gov.au)

**Att.**

# ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION INTO THE INQUIRY ON REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

## EDA Pre Budget Submission on Regional Partnership Program

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30th January 2008

Rt Hon Anthony Albanese MP  
Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

### Economic Development Australia – Pre Budget Submission Department of Infrastructure's Regional Partnership Program

Economic Development Australia [EDA] was established in late 2006 to represent economic development practitioners in local, regional and State Governments across Australia. Currently there are 440 members [60% from rural Australia] from the aforementioned organisations plus Area Consultative Committees (ACCs) and private businesses.

The installation of a new Federal Government provides the opportunity for economic development practitioners to focus on new levels of innovation and entrepreneurship that will instigate new potential levels of prosperity for communities through new funding programs.

It is clear from the review of the Regional Partnerships program that the methodology previously utilised for assessing whether specific projects receive funding, was flawed. It should be noted however that in many situations State Government funding was directly tied to Federal Government funding so there must have been a recognition or general support for some of the initiatives funded at a local, state and federal level.

Economic Development Australia believes that there is a real opportunity for a better funding system to be established that meets the needs of local communities, as well as the political imperatives of the various levels of government.

Members of Economic Development Australia have welcomed the Auditor General's Audit Report and believes that this establishes a strong platform for review.

Some suggestions for improvements for funding to local government authorities or regional economic development organisations are as follows:

- Funding only to be forthcoming if the organisation has an adopted an economic development or tourism strategy or the like. Other adopted or incorporated strategic documentation would be highly regarded.
- Funding for projects or initiatives should not be reliant or dependent on matching funding from State and local government. The previous 30% from each partner has not been a successful methodology and has been difficult to implement given the staggering of budgets.
- Clear timelines must be established and maintained. These timelines need to reflect the importance of the project or initiative within a strict timeframe. There cannot be unreasonable timeframes in which applications are delayed due to the discretion of the Minister, pending media announcements.
- There is no point in differentiating between rural (or regional) and metropolitan areas. Unemployment levels, skill shortages, inadequate infrastructure, industry attraction and retention are all issues that impact equally on metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. Access to appropriate levels of funding should not be determined by geography, but rather by meeting a defined set of criteria that are equally applicable to metropolitan, interface, regional and remote areas.
- Applications in the past have had to focus on and refer to Regional Plans, often developed by Area Consultative Committees. These plans whilst beneficial at a broad regional level provide minimal support at a local or micro level. Often these plans are also out of date and lack a high level of rigour. It is suggested that reference to and reliance upon these plans be reduced and that more emphasis be given to the adopted documentation of those organisations.
- It is suggested that an informal application process has not necessarily served the funding applicants well. It may be beneficial to consider a rolling application process for the year and regular monthly/bimonthly announcements of successful programs.
- Previously funding has been limited in its scope. There is a clear and defined need to expand how and what funding can be expended upon. Feedback from practitioners indicates that funding should have the potential to be spent on the following activities:
  - Employment of staff (up to three years)
  - Infrastructure, including matching or supplementary funding for capital works
  - Promotional material
  - Training and Professional Development

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- It is suggested that the new funding programs be developed with recognition of the budget timeframes of the various local and state governments. It is pointless having a program that cannot be accessed by local government or other organisations if it is announced after budgets have been adopted.
- The new programs need to contain a five year vision, rather than a three year vision.
- There is a need to bring policy makers from State, Federal and local government together to work out effective mechanisms for funding.
- The application paper work under Regional Partnerships was complex and unnecessary, this needs to be modified.
- There is a need to highlight successful programs and initiatives and use these as best practice examples.
- The level of reporting has the opportunity to be more effective both financially and in terms of the result of the project.
- Projects that involve infrastructure implementation should have all necessary development or planning approvals in place prior to funding being approved.
- Outcomes of the project should determine whether or not an organisation receives funding again.
- An independent panel with EDA representation should be established to make recommendations to the Minister.

We look forward to a Budget in 2008 that takes into account the issues and suggestions submitted by EDA above.

Yours sincerely

Richard Walker,  
Executive Director