



MORETON BAY  
COAST & COUNTRY

AREA CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE



20 July 2008

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

### **Submission to the Inquiry into a New Regional Development Funding Program**

Over the four year course of the *Regional Partnerships* (RP) program, the Moreton Bay Coast & Country ACC has helped 16 local organisations secure \$3,298,204 in RP funding, or \$10,881,450 including co-funding. These projects have provided substantial economic, social and employment benefits, and we consider the development of a replacement regional development program to be vital to the long-term growth and success of our region.

We have consulted widely with previous RP applicants (both successful and unsuccessful) and other stakeholders who have had relevant experience, and offer comments on five key issues in relation to the RP program, and how they might be addressed in any future scheme.

#### **Issue 1: Poorly worded and inconsistently applied guidelines.**

The use of “government-speak” in the *Regional Partnerships* guidelines and supporting marketing material (eg “stimulate growth in regions by providing opportunities for economic and social participation”) meant that guidelines were open to varying interpretations, and seemed to be inconsistently applied by the Department over the course of the program. The goal posts were always shifting, particularly following a change of Minister. Vague terms used in describing the objectives of the program such as “cultural and environmental support services”, “support for children and youth” or “facilitation of regional cooperation to improve coordinated service delivery” served to confuse potential applicants or provide false impressions about what could actually be funded.

***Recommendation: Guidelines need to be simply worded, allowing small community groups to understand the guidelines and fill out application forms.***

## **Issue 2: Unrealistic expectations regarding the resources of the not-for-profit sector**

The vast majority of not-for-profit groups that the ACC has dealt with over the past 10 years have been staffed primarily by volunteers. The Government, however, demanded a standard of application impossible for most not-for-profit groups to meet without expensive professional help, and as such, the ACC routinely wrote or rewrote applications to ensure that these applicants withstood a chance. There was also an equally unrealistic expectation by the Government regarding how much co-funding small organisations such as these could provide to the overall cost of the project. Ferreting out other sources of funding, such as Council and State government programs or private sector sponsorship was crucial to the success of an application, and this was done by the ACC, not the applicant, as we had the necessary knowledge and networks.

***Recommendation: A new program should allocate resources to assist smaller groups compete with larger groups by, for example, the RDA providing the administration assistance in the formation of the application.***

## **Issue 3: Lack of funding rounds, selection criteria and transparency**

The abandonment of funding rounds used previously for grant schemes such as the Regional Assistance Program (RAP) and Dairy RAP, meant that submitted RP applications were not routinely assessed against each other, or it seems, against any clearly defined, publicly available selection criteria. The inherent structure of RP as a discretionary, rather than a competitive grants program meant that the success of an application seemed to be more of matter of chance, Ministerial whim or political expediency, than a reflection of the quality of the application or its expected outcomes for the region. The shifting of responsibility for assessment from the Department's State Offices to the National Office during the course of the program also meant that the nuances of local situations were often lost; applications were no longer assessed in the context of local imperatives.

Some community groups in our area have expressed a preference for future programs to still be assessed continuously, but we have come to the conclusion that funding rounds are necessary to ensure that applications are assessed on a competitive basis, and that the process is absolutely transparent. One of our major regional stakeholders has suggested that initial assessment of applications could be made not by the Department, but by independent grants committees which meet regularly and are at arms length to the Minister, and we consider this idea to have merit.

***Recommendation: Funding rounds should be reinstated, at least quarterly. Funding parameters should be developed on a region by region basis according to needs and priorities (this should be a function of the RDA). Applications need to be assessed against clearly defined selection criteria and ranked appropriately. Members of the committee should be selected on the basis of expertise in areas such as transport,***

#### **Issue 4: Lack of timelines, communication and accountability in the approval process**

The single biggest problem that both the ACC and RP applicants faced was a long and highly variable wait for approval, and lack of communication from the Department on the progress of applications. The Government's stated aim was to assess applications within 12 weeks of submission, but reality was some applications took between six months and (in at least one case in our area) two years to wind their way through the process. The application form required that proponents submit highly detailed timelines for their projects, but these were almost always rendered meaningless by the long waits. Also, we found that the Department did not treat applications which had time-critical components with any more urgency than those that did not; there was a lack of accountability in this regard. In our region, one of our proponents lost \$100,000 in co-funding which was to be provided by the Jupiters Casino Community Benefit Fund pending RP approval, because the Department were unable to make a decision within a reasonable time-frame. The not-for-profit group, which provides services to the intellectually disabled, was forced to take out a bank loan to make up the shortfall.

#### **Recommendation: It is vital that for each funding round, the Government:**

- ***works out a realistic timetable for each stage of the application process;***
- ***makes this timetable public and commits to it;***
- ***resources the program accordingly;***
- ***ensures that applicants have access to monitor the process; and,***
- ***aligns funding timelines to State, Federal and Community funding programs.***

#### **Issue 5: The need to fund both micro vs macro projects**

One positive aspect of the *Regional Partnerships* program was that it funded small projects addressing immediate issues or needs in the community, as well as larger infrastructure or business projects contributing to the long-term growth of a region. We believe that both types of projects contribute to regional development, and any new funding program needs to be structured accordingly. To give an example of the impact smaller projects can have, in our region RP funded the development of a "community farm" on the Woodford P-10 school campus which has had positive and far-reaching effects on the social fabric of the community. Woodford, a small rural town, wanted to help its young people to become responsible, engaged, productive and active members of the community. A sense of alienation from the older generations and a general malaise and lack of hope for the future characterised many youth in the area at the time. *Regional Partnerships* funding was used to develop a community farm project at the local school where students could gain skills relevant to the economy of their region, and even more importantly, develop their self-confidence under the guidance of mentors drawn from the community. The project provided an excellent opportunity for older people to become more closely involved with the youth of the area, helping both groups to gain each others respect. In


another RP project on Bribie Island, just \$22,000 was needed to help build a workshop to house a community training and rehabilitation program. The Church-run initiative helps unemployed locals – in trouble with the law and undergoing community service orders - to develop work skills and a sense of self-worth, with training given in areas such as woodwork, metalwork, furniture restoration, landscaping and general maintenance. The new workshop helped the church to double its intake of participants and the program has been such a success at turning lives around (and keeping people from reoffending) that they are now seeking help to build a second facility. These types of small, but extremely worthwhile projects would be lost if the focus of a new regional development program is only on larger infrastructure projects.

**Recommendation:**

***The new regional development program should fund both micro projects which address immediate needs or issues (eg social problems or disadvantage for particular groups) as well as macro infrastructure projects which address long-term growth needs. Both are important, but in the interests of fairness, different assessment levels and selection criteria need to apply.***

We trust this feedback will be of use to the Standing Committee and look forward with interest to the outcomes of the enquiry.

Yours sincerely



Mick Claffey  
ACC Chair