

The Secretary
Joint Committee on the National Broadband Network
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Chair: Mr Robert Oakeshott MP
Deputy Chair: Mr Rob Mitchell MP

Dear Committee members,

Re: Inclusion of Esperance in the Fourth Rollout of the National Broadband Network.

As consideration is given to communities which shall benefit from inclusion in the next rollout of the National Broadband Network, I ask this committee to reflect on the importance of such technology to isolated places like Esperance, which need every assistance that they can be given in order to embrace the conveniences and efficiencies enjoyed by those in places which are not as isolated.

Residents of Esperance have expressed their disappointment that the area has not been included as part of the three year rollout of the National Broadband Network (NBN). As a significantly sized town in regional Western Australia, they feel that it was overlooked by the Federal Government. Due to its remote location, it already faces a number of challenges in obtaining communication infrastructure and services.

The Shire of Esperance is located on Western Australia's southeast coast about 725 kilometres from Perth by road, and is regarded by its residents as one of the most progressive and modern country communities to be found anywhere in Australia. The nearest regional centres are Kalgoorlie (over 300km away) and Albany (400km away). Employment and business opportunities are excellent, with a local population of over 14,000 supported by a wide variety of industries, from agriculture to fishing, general business and tourism. Since its development in the 1890s to export gold, the town's port has evolved into what is now the deepest port in Southern Australia exporting nickel concentrates, handling bulk imports, and it is also a major grain-exporting hub.

Esperance is known for its active arts scene, plus a wide range of outdoor and sporting activities. Outstanding community facilities combined with a unique semi-rural lifestyle, and an unspoiled coastal environment, make Esperance a popular choice when seeking the perfect balance between family, work and play.

The Shire has an area of 44,336 square kilometres. It extends from Munglinup to Israelite Bay and north to the Daniell rail siding. It includes over 400 kilometres of coastline, ranging from gently undulating bays and the picturesque islands of the Recherche Archipelago to the spectacular cliffs of the Great Australian Bight.

The stage appears to be set for growth in the area, and Esperance's potential was recognised by the State Government when on May 31 2012, Premier Colin Barnett and Minister for Regional Development Brendon Grylls flew into the town to announce the funding that Esperance would be receiving under the State Government's Royalties for Regions SuperTowns program: \$13.2 million.

To qualify as a SuperTown, the location has to demonstrate strong potential for economic growth, a cooperative and positive attitude on the part of the local government and people, and the ability to share in the population expansion predicted for Western Australia.

Projects to be funded in under the Esperance SuperTown project include redevelopment of the waterfront to construct a seawall on the town site foreshore and a headland around Tanker Jetty (\$12.65million); development of a Town Centre Revitalisation Masterplan (\$380,000) and a project to investigate expanding employment opportunities to achieve a population target of 29,000 people over the next 30-40 years (\$193,350).

However, given the Supertowns funding is intended to help transform Esperance into a vibrant regional hub; its residents feel this development is of little value---unless adequate communication technology is also provided to Esperance to ensure businesses can fulfil their potential.

It was with great disappointment that I learnt of the decision to exclude the town of Esperance and the surrounding South-East coastal communities from the third National Broadband Network Rollout. The community had developed a NBN Working Group to facilitate the introduction, whose members possess the skills and commitment to ensure the introduction is a success.

The Port of Esperance is a significant loading point for commodities across a range of industries. The Commonwealth and Western Australian Governments have recently recognised the importance of the location to the region and the nation in the allocation of funds to improve the capacity and safety of transport access to the Port. The people and businesses which support that activity and that increased infrastructure need to be able to operate on an international platform.

Local industries such as retailing and tourism, whose development is imperative if as a nation we are to not waste the wealth of West Australian commodity exports, are more profoundly affected. Despite the very good efforts of major internet providers, current broadband availability is inconsistent. At times of high network use, local on-line businesses relying on mobile broadband connections, cannot maintain websites and lose customers. Regional communities need these businesses to diversify their economic base.

As the Perth metropolitan area feels the pressure of urban sprawl and high demand on resources such as water and electricity, the economic base of communities may be diversified further if they are seen as a very attractive location for people to work from home or establish on-line businesses. This can only happen with reliable and effective communications systems that enable businesses in the area to meet the demands and expectations which will be placed on them in an international workplace.

Local and State Government research indicates that available medical services will be further stretched by the population growth expected to coincide with the major infrastructure and mining developments in and around the town in the near future. Viable, reliable broadband services must be in place to enable the provision of efficient, effective and modern health services. Working families and Esperance's significant retiree population are particularly vulnerable, owing to the extensive travel required by alternatives.

Already, the regions farmers are operating their businesses in an international context, and I am aware of two incidents in the last six months where they have been unable to trade on the commodity markets or secure sales because of failures in existing communications systems. It is ridiculous for us to expect multi-million dollar businesses to operate in a complex and dynamic market without the technology which will enable them to do so effectively.

The State Government, under the Southern Inland Health Initiative has allocated over half a billion dollars to improving health services in the southern regional areas of WA, with a very strong focus on the use of telehealth technology. Esperance will be one of the bases for telehealth which will be strongly enhanced with access to NBN services.

Young people are also disadvantaged by the inability to access affordable broadband services. Already high school education in Esperance is carried out via internet hook-up with teachers in the Perth metropolitan area. It is a practice that can only be sustained and extended with adequate broadband services. Furthermore, access to social networks and the success of on-line wellbeing and mental health services aimed at 16 – 24 year olds all require reliable internet access.

I therefore ask the committee to prioritise Esperance when it considers the fourth rollout of the National Broadband Network. No amount of planning by business, or individuals intent on making their lives in this region, can overcome the problems posed by inadequate communications systems.

At a time when people need to be attracted to the area and retained, it is contradictory to the intent of the Supertowns philosophy to have them driven away by the inability of communications systems to satisfy their personal, business or academic requirements.

Yours sincerely,

Hon Wendy Duncan MLC
Member for Mining and Pastoral