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8 July 2008

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local
Government
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/ Madam

**RE: WHITSUNDAY REGIONAL COUNCIL SUBMISSION – INQUIRY INTO A NEW
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT FUNDING PROGRAM**

Whitsunday Regional Council makes this submission to the Inquiry into a New Regional Development Funding Program in response to an invitation from the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government.

Whitsunday Regional Council, like many non-metropolitan coastal local government areas is experiencing rapid residential population growth coupled with the additional impacts and pressures from tourism and industry, specifically the mining sector. In short the combination of these social impacts is significant and has detrimental impacts on the coastal and marine environments, viability of agricultural production and the general sustainability of local communities.

Rapid resident population growth in association with the added pressure and impact of industry, tourists and other visitors such as transient and construction related workers to the area is placing a significant impact on the sustainability and liveability of local communities and creating a community infrastructure deficit and burden. Rapid population growth and associated pressure has placed enormous strain on local governments to keep pace in the provision of fundamental and appropriate community services and infrastructure to adequately cater for increase population growth and patronage from residential and non residential sources. Generally there is significant lag time between identification of essential community infrastructure and service requirements and the implementation of the necessary facilities. This issue is further compounded by the inadequate resource base and capacity of Councils to fund essential infrastructure. Significant backlog in demand for community facilities and services associated with substantial gaps in provision is unacceptable and creates communities that cannot continue to operate self sufficiently, and

therefore became reliant on major regional centres for essential social services and infrastructure provisions, which are generally saturated and already operating at capacity.

Local Governments in regional areas have limited resources and capacity to effectively adapt to rapid population growth and negate and manage the increased pressure from competing land uses.

A collaborative approach between all tiers of government is urgently required to ensure essential social infrastructure and services are provided in regional areas, in a timely and efficient manner, especially those regions experiencing rapid population growth coupled with tourism pressure and transient workforces.

Whitsunday Regional Council, wish to make recommendations on two of the terms of reference for the inquiry, being:

- Provide advice on future funding of regional programs in order to invest in genuine and accountable community infrastructure projects.
- Examine ways to minimise administrative costs and duplication for taxpayers; and

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

It is imperative that the Commonwealth Government continue to commit and invest in the future of regional Australia, to ensure communities residing in these areas have equitable access to essential and basic community services and facilities enjoyed by metropolitan areas. Without strong commitment from the Commonwealth, regional communities will struggle to attain self sufficient, liveable and sustainable communities.

As highlighted above, regional coastal communities are facing rapid population growth coupled with tourism and transient populations which are placing enormous pressure on community infrastructure and services. Many local governments are struggling to adequately identify infrastructure and service gaps, appropriately plan and implement strategies and programs to address infrastructure requirements and finally fund the capital and community works required to merely keep pace with population changes, let alone plan for future community requirements.

In short regional coastal communities rely heavily on the Commonwealth and State governments to assist with building local communities capacity and resilience to manage and survive rapid population growth and the competing demands and requirements from tourism, business and industrial land uses. Local Government lacks the capacity to resource and finance infrastructure shortfalls through existing revenue sources, and/or effectively coordinate larger projects with a sub regional focus.

The Commonwealth Government must commit to the continuation of regional development funding programs to assist regional areas in achieving sustainable and strong communities.

2. Examine ways to minimise administrative costs and duplication for taxpayers

In order to minimise administrative costs and duplication it is imperative that all three tiers of government work collaboratively together. This requires a coordinated approach in which all levels of government commit to the process and work together so as to achieve liveable and sustainable regional communities, especially those under immense pressure associated with rapid population growth and competing land use demands.

Generally smaller non metropolitan regional communities struggle with adapting to rapid population growth due to limited resources and infrastructure base. It is these regions and areas that require urgent attention and significant levels of assistance with economic development and community infrastructure investment.

Currently there is no coordinated or standardised approach on how to deal with the issues of rapid population growth and associated infrastructure management, even though the issue is of national concern. On the surface it appears that communities and local government are struggling to grapple with the issues of population growth and associated pressures on infrastructure demand in isolation and on an ad hoc basis. A whole of government approach or focus is urgently required to adequately address the issues currently being faced by regional areas and provide valuable coordination, assistance and support.

The following strategies could be implemented to minimise potential for duplication and administrative costs.

- Highlighting the issue of population growth and infrastructure servicing and management of regional areas and making it a priority on the national agenda. This could be achieved by firstly obtaining a COAG commitment to the issue.
- Establishing a Regional Strategy approach to consider regional development and community infrastructure issues in a standardised format. This may incorporate the preparation of Regional Strategies for high growth areas. Strategies can address issues of population growth, infrastructure servicing requirements, economic development and environmental constraints and opportunities. Regional strategies are a potential mechanism for driving and delivering planning studies and information required to effectively deliver community infrastructure requirements. Base information would include infrastructure audits and needs analysis all developed on an agreed methodology.

It is essential that Regional Strategies are adequately resourced and funded as the strategies and recommendations developed can be implemented in appropriate timeframes.

Whitsunday Regional Council take this opportunity to thank the House Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government for the opportunity to present a submission on this pertinent issue.

Non-metropolitan coastal communities are grappling with the momentum of coastal development driven by rapid population growth and strong demand for tourism, economic and industrial land requirements. In order to effectively manage growth and associated pressures sustainably, a collaboratively commitment between local, State and Commonwealth governments must be developed.

Without collaboration between all tiers of government and the commitment to accurately identify and address regional issues by the provision of adequate resources and funds for regional community infrastructure projects, the sustainability of regional communities and their surrounding coastal and marine environments will decline.

Yours faithfully

Peter Button
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