

Our ref: KH:kn
Your ref: nil

February 17, 2014

Dr Bill Pender
Committee Secretary
Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Dr Pender

Re: Cook Shire Council Submission: Northern Australia White Paper

Cook Shire Council spans across over 100,000km² of the Cape York Peninsula. As the Local Government Area representing 80% of Cape York it is imperative that our submission and submissions from our key partners are taken into consideration for this important piece of research.

Cook Shire has representation on a number of key member organisations including The Far North Queensland Regional Organisation of Councils (FNQROC), Cape York and Torres Regional Organisation of Councils (CYTROC), Advance Cairns and Regional Development Australia Far North Queensland and Torres Strait.

While Cook Shire Council forms part of the submission feedback from these groups we welcome the opportunity to submit our top priorities directly.

General Comments

Cook Shire and Cape York are perfectly positioned to support economic growth and liveability in Northern Australia. Our region provides:

- Fully sealed road access to Cooktown, Laura and Lakeland
- Local aerodromes
- Investment-friendly locations
- An abundance of land primed for development
- A great political environment
- Growing Indigenous Shires and communities
- Choice of quality education campuses
- A lifestyle economy to support tourism, recreational fishing and adventure
- An attractive new home to young families

This submission operates at a high level and further details are available in the attached Cook Shire Council documents: Road Blocks to Local Government, Economic Priorities and the Cook Shire Economic Development Plan.

Strong Local Government

Local Government and governance is imperative to offering strong, democratic representation for the Cape and its people. There is no question that the elected representatives of Cape York; those who live and work in the communities, are best placed to make informed decisions for the communities they represent.

Empowering leaders in Cook Shire and Cape York, especially Aboriginal leaders, will ultimately strengthen relationships and communication within the region, as well as with higher levels of State and Federal Government. We live in a unique time where small communities are working in a diverse, multi-cultural environment; one which respects and utilises the skills and knowledge of its members.

It is important that the current method of decision-making in Cape York remain, in order to grow our open and dynamic economies through well-considered and locally driven incentives. Local ownership equals local capacity.

Water Security

More than 65% of runoff in Australia comes from far northern Australia and coastal Queensland (source: Aust. Govt. National Water commission).

Our region faces a number of challenges in relation to water and agricultural resources. Future planning with regard to the creation of additional water resources, such as dams, is an essential step to ensure opportunities of achieving successful economic growth in Cape York, such as: irrigated agriculture, industry development, mining and hydro generated power.

Energy

Cook Shire is on the fringe of the National Electricity Market and most of the Shire does not have the benefit of being grid connected. Presently, the electricity we use is heavily subsidised by the State Government and has to travel long distances, resulting in significant transmission losses and ridiculous costs. Large renewable energy infrastructure installations will alleviate this burden on the State and enhance our own sustainability.

Council is actively supporting the installation of a 24MW grid connected to Solar PV technology by Lyon Infrastructure that will feed directly into the power supply. Along with solar, Cook Shire Council is proactively supporting wind and hydro generation projects and is committed to reducing our overall energy use.

These types of developments will support our regional power supply, reduce costs for our State Government and shore up our aim of utilising and promoting renewable energy.

Liveability

Most recently, Council welcomed the arrival of a State Government hub building in Cooktown, relocating and retaining a number of Queensland Government departments in our region. Cooktown has the capacity to further enhance its 'hub' status. A welcoming place for the surrounding Cape communities with existing services and infrastructure, Cooktown is investment-ready for essential facility upgrades and implementation of new regional services.

Regionalisation and the improvement of our local infrastructure base, would be a catalyst to boost the attraction and retention of new residents and ultimately provide a more sustainable economy. Cook Shire Council are currently working on a number of large infrastructure projects to support this goal, most prominently, the Cooktown Foreshore Revitalisation.

Incentive Programs

Living remotely poses a number of unique challenges and high costs. In order to promote liveability, tourism and business growth within the region, incentives are required to offset these challenges and support growth in regional and remote Australia.

Carrying out business remotely is much more expensive when compared to regional centres. Higher than normal transport and shipping costs, attracting skilled workers, availability of products and services, professional support, unexpected and lengthy delays and the pressure to compete with online companies, are just some of the challenges regional and remote businesses face.

Tax offsets and/or financial incentives are a much needed and critical tool to encourage investors, entrepreneurs and new residents to support our region and add to our local economy. Cook Shire would like to see an increase to tax offset zone allowances and increase the first home owners grant for regional and remote property owners.

Infrastructure

Telecommunication

Mobile telecommunication and high speed internet is vital for this region to grow. Cooktown is no longer listed in the NBN Roll out and this significantly impedes our ability to expand. The general unavailability and/or poor access of digital and telecommunication access has a direct impact on our ability to attract new investment and more importantly, poses great risks in regards to safety for residents and visitors.

With Cooktown as the regional hub of Cape York, we need to ensure immediate and reliable access to connect with primary health and education services, such as TeleHealth services and online education portals.

Modern telecommunication is vital for economic growth across all industries, from agriculture and farming to work-from-home and lifestyle businesses.

A significant number of mobile black-spots exist with Cook Shire. Council are currently surveying the community and a submission is being developed to highlight and address these issues.

Telecommunication and high speed broadband infrastructure needs to be treated as an essential service. Without adequate access we are denied the ability to transact nationally and internationally. Cook Shire Council also propose a deregulation of current monopolies, allowing competitive providers into Cape York.

Transport

The Peninsula Development Road (PDR) is in no doubt the foremost road upgrade required to support the growth and development of our region and has been on the agenda for some time. Communities of Cape York are dependent on the PDR to maintain local businesses and provide access at all times of the year. Unfortunately a small to moderate weather event is all it takes to cut this access for any number of days or weeks every year.

As the region grows so will the pressure on the major roads to Cooktown and Cape York.

Land Tenure

Current Land and Tenure arrangements are a major challenge for Cook Shire and require immediate attention around land uses and Native Title legislation to support the Queensland Government's rationalisation process.

Council would like to see Government owned land opened up for commercial use and allow leasehold land and Trustee reserves to be used for other productive purposes.

A number of submissions have recently been made regarding Native Title and Land Tenure, including those to the Cape York Regional Plan.

Biosecurity

Northern Australia is the front line to manage biosecurity issues.

Cape York is not equipped to stop a potential epidemic. Long term vision and investment in the region is required to determine the impacts a biosecurity threat on the region and the provision of a facility to successfully alleviate these threats with modern techniques and equipment.

Specific boundaries of National Parks and restricted areas within the Cape York Regional Plan need to be defined on scientific and cultural facts, rather than 'green' fundamentalism. Excessive and unnecessary boundaries preclude potential agricultural, pastoral and mining opportunities impacting our ability to support economic development and growth.

Catalyst Projects / Initiatives

- Encourage population growth
- Provide employment and business diversity
- Build logically/strategically sited northern border defence bases
- Build / enhance port capacity to service Asian markets
- Provide tourism infrastructure to support our current growth levels

Summary

Cook Shire is committed to the goals of 'regionalisation' and recognises that economic growth is key to the long term viability of Northern Australia.

Strong and focused Local Governments that are supported by other tiers of Government, will provide ambitious but realistic initiatives to improve the liveability of Cape York and in turn, will draw suitably qualified workers and families to the region.

Much focus has been placed on Northern Australia through a number of reports including the Cape York Regional Plan. This submission has sought to highlight issues in addition and specific to Cook Shire Council: Strong Local Government, Water Security, Energy, Liveability, Incentive Programs, Infrastructure, Biosecurity and Catalyst Projects / Initiatives.

Cook Shire welcomes the opportunity to discuss this submission through the Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia.

Yours sincerely,

Peter Scott
Mayor