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17 February 2014

Dr Bill Pender
Inquiry Secretary
Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia
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Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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Dear Dr Pender

RE: New Inquiry – Development of Northern Australia

Thank you for your letter dated 8 January 2014 providing the opportunity for the City of Palmerston to present a submission to the Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia. I apologise for the fact that this submission may reach you after the due date of 17 February 2014.

The submission below is in response to the Terms of Reference provided by the Committee.

Introduction

The City of Palmerston represents the current and future growth corridor for residential development in the Top End of the Northern Territory. With the geographic centre for population in the Greater Darwin area currently positioned around Berrimah, this will rapidly move south towards Palmerston.

Palmerston is a young and vibrant city with a current population of 32,000 which will increase to around 46,000 over the next 10 years. Based on information contained within the "Towards A Darwin Regional Land Use Plan 2014", it is quite likely that the city will expand across the Stuart Highway and eventually grow into a city of 70,000 plus residents.

The residential growth of Palmerston is underpinned by an expanding industrial / commercial base along with key facilities on our urban fringe including Robertson Barracks, Holtze Prison, Inpex Workers Camp / Onshore Processing Facility and the Wickham Point Detention Facility.

This is further reinforced with the imminent commencement of the \$300m Gateway Shopping Centre and the \$150m Palmerston Hospital.

The City of Palmerston is available to contribute to any future public hearings in the Top End to enable our vision for the future, in particular the development of our Central Business District, to be shared.



1. Examine the potential for development of the region's mineral, energy, agricultural, tourism, defence and other industries.

Council is supportive of growing the region's mineral, energy, agricultural, tourism, defence and other industries. Although many of these industries are located outside our council boundaries, the provision of housing to accommodate an expanding workforce will be critical to the success of any expansion.

Defence is a major employer of Palmerston residents and the expansion of Robertson Barracks to accommodate the American Marine contingent has been viewed positively. Any development of Northern Australia will affect the existing defence forces established here.

Council adopted a City Centre Master Plan in February 2012 to guide the future development of the CBD and is currently reviewing this plan to incorporate urban design and landscape guidelines. This will cater for a number of mixed use developments within our CBD including commercial, retail, residential and carparking facilities.

Implementation of this Plan has already commenced with the redevelopment of Goyder Square and the proposed realignment of 'The Boulevard' to create a main street focus in Palmerston. Vacant land currently owned by the NT Government and the City of Palmerston in the CBD has been identified and will be offered for development shortly.

The Inquiry needs to consider the creation of job opportunities for young school leavers, in particular for local indigenous children who can develop self-esteem and confidence from working and living within their community.

Hotel developments and the creation of apartments / units in the CBD to cater for residential living will also assist in supporting the expansion of industries and business.

To support industry growth, key infrastructure such as the Darwin Port Facility, Darwin Airport and road corridors will need to be reviewed and upgraded where necessary.

2. Provide recommendations to:

- **Enhance trade and other investment links with the Asia-Pacific;**

The City of Palmerston has a strong cultural identity with many individuals and families moving from overseas to start a new life in the Top End. A significant increase in Citizenship Ceremonies has shown that Palmerston is a welcoming community and a great place to live, work and play.

The City of Palmerston recently became the first location in the Northern Territory to make a declaration as a '*Refugee Friendly City*'. This is supported through the large number of cultural events and opportunities which are provided through programs developed by the City of Palmerston. These programs could be further enhanced by additional resources being made available.

Significant overseas interest has been shown in the City Centre Master Plan and presentations have been held with overseas delegations on the opportunities available for investment into our CBD.

- **Establish a conducive regulatory, taxation and economic environment;**

Contact has previously been made with all NT Federal politicians regarding a possible review of the Zone Taxation Rebates that are currently in place for people working in remote areas. The existing rebates are minimal and do not come close to offsetting the additional costs associated with living in the Top End.

There must be taxation incentives for both business and individuals to isolate themselves from the rest of Australia to contribute to a growing economy. The transient nature of workers in the Top End is an impediment to any business seeking to establish or expand its operations.

There are many opportunities for business in Northern Australia; however the economic environment must be conducive to attracting and retaining these businesses. Taxation reform including Stamp Duty, Payroll Tax, Company Tax, Fringe Benefits Tax and personal tax rates should all be reviewed to create the right 'economic environment'.

- **Address impediments to growth;**

Without doubt, the cost of living is the major dis-incentive and impediment to growth in the Northern Territory. The cost of housing and rental accommodation is exacerbated through major projects which places upwards pressure on prices. Many unskilled workers simply cannot afford to live in the Top End and whilst they may like the environment, they simply cannot afford to live here.

This needs to be addressed by the Inquiry as low income earners cannot cope in this environment. Added to this, the cost of fuel, education, utilities and basic living costs are forcing people to leave the area.

In many regards, the Top End is simply not competitive when compared to the cost of living in other states. Working conditions (climate) are some of the harshest in the country and workers put in a lot to survive in this environment.

In Palmerston, the focus has been on residential growth, sometimes at the expense of social infrastructure which is critical in any community. Child Care Centres, libraries, community and sporting facilities can be overlooked.

The cost of providing new infrastructure in the Northern Territory can also be an impediment to growth. Roads, buildings and other infrastructure costs substantially more due to higher wages, material costs, contractor's charges and construction specifications.

- **Set conditions for private investment and innovation;**

With the Territory and Australian Governments dealing with sizeable debts, it is imperative that private investment and innovation is facilitated and supported. The Government alone cannot fund the development of Northern Australia, therefore private and overseas investment needs to be a focus for the Inquiry.

The Northern Territory has relied on ad-hoc major projects to stimulate economic growth to this point. To ensure its sustainability, there needs to be ongoing private investment to eliminate the highs and lows of its economic cycle. Major projects need to become the norm, rather than the exception.

The majority of vacant land in the Northern Territory is owned by either the NT or Federal Government and this provides an excellent opportunity to facilitate projects across the Top End which will also benefit regional communities.

3. Identify the critical economic and social infrastructure needed to support the long term growth of the region, and ways to support planning and investment in that infrastructure.

There appears to be considerable potential for industrial expansion of minerals, energy and agriculture in the Northern Territory. A second port facility which deals with heavy industry may be required in the future to cater for this growth.

The provision of affordable housing is the key to supporting the long term growth of the region. If the current situation does not change, sustainable growth within the region will be difficult to achieve.

Education and training facilities need to be available and affordable for the unemployed to develop skills and knowledge to prepare them for entering the workforce.

Social infrastructure including retirement homes, aged care facilities, youth facilities, walking trails, town halls, aquatic facilities etc need to be planned and implemented to support expected growth,

Yours faithfully,

Ricki Bruhn
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER