

Submission by the Warren Blackwood Strategic Alliance: 9th July 2008.

1. The Warren Blackwood Strategic Alliance

Based in the South West of Western Australia, the Warren Blackwood Strategic Alliance (the Alliance) is an association of the Shires of Boyup Brook, Bridgetown-Greenbushes, Manjimup and Nannup supported by the South West Development Commission. Its Board Members also include representatives from the community. The Alliance’s objective is to be a voice for the Warren Blackwood region and to promote activity which will benefit the community, by means of lobbying and persuasion. It is in this context that we make this submission.

This submission has been approved by the Board of the Warren Blackwood Strategic Alliance

2. The importance of the Regional Partnerships Programme (RPP) to the Warren Blackwood area.

The Warren Blackwood area (comprising the Shires of Boyup Brook, Bridgetown-Greenbushes, Manjimup and Nannup) gains only peripheral benefit from the significant growth in population and business which has recently taken place in the coastal areas of the South West Region of Western Australia. This growth has occurred principally in the City of Bunbury and the towns of Busselton, Dunsborough and Margaret River and is projected to continue over the next few years. As a result of this growth the population of the South West Region of Western Australia increased by 29.1% from 1996 to 2006. In this ten year period the population of the Warren Blackwood decreased by 5.6%.

At the time of the 2006 Census the population of the Warren Blackwood (16,243) comprised 11.2% of the population of the South West Region of Western Australia (145,308).

In addition, a significant part of the land in the Warren Blackwood area is State Forest, which is not rateable.

Area	Percentage of land not rateable
Shire of Boyup Brook	22.8
Shire of Bridgetown-Greenbushes	45.8
Shire of Manjimup	82.6
Shire of Nannup	83.1
Warren Blackwood	67.4

Commercial activity on this land, such as logging, does not generate any additional income for the Shires. The ability of the Shires to raise development funds through rates is severely constrained as a result. Consequently the Warren Blackwood cannot rely on locally generated funds to create economic and social development opportunities. A range of Federal, State and other funding programs (such as Lottery) has been successfully used over a number of years.

In the period 2003 to 2007, 39 Regional Partnerships Programme Grants were approved in the area covered by the Western Australian South West Area Consultative Committee (SWACC). 21 of these projects were based in the Warren Blackwood.

The 39 projects supported by RPP had total costs of \$19,575,995.89 of which \$5,378,905.98 (27.5%) was from RPP. The 21 grants within the Warren Blackwood had total project costs of \$9,759,932.50 of which \$2,769,134.00 (28.4%) was from RPP.

It will be seen from the above figures that the RPP has played a major role in economic and social development in the Warren Blackwood. **Consequently the Alliance submits that a similar or equivalent Program is necessary for continued local development.**

3. Accessibility of funding.

Unlike many funding programmes, the RPP did not have “rounds of funding”, and applications could be made at any time. This allowed RPP to be used when needed in collaboration with other funding programmes which did have fixed funding rounds. This flexibility was an important benefit of RPP, which would have been more difficult to access, and use, if it had been limited to funding rounds which may not have concurred with other programmes.

The Alliance submits that a new Regional Development Funding Program should retain the

4. Eligible applicants.

The Projects in the Warren Blackwood which were supported by RPP were submitted by a variety of organisations:-

- Local Shires
- Local businesses
- Local associations organising festivals, and
- Community support organisations.

The availability of local businesses to access RPP has been particularly crucial since it has allowed them to introduce new products, and new production methods, which will ensure the continuation and growth of that business generating significant improvements to the local economy and additional "spin-off" social benefits also.

We understand that a new "Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program" is to be launched in the 2009-2010 Budget in place of RPP.

The Alliance submits that private businesses should be eligible applicants for this new program.

5. Flexibility of supported activity.

Unlike many support programs RPP had little prescription in the range of activity which it could support. This had both strategic and operational benefits.

Strategically the flexibility in which RPP grant could be used encouraged both **Vision** and **Boldness** in applications, increasing the likelihood that projects would be truly individual and of high impact.

Operationally the flexibility allowed for simpler "packaging" of a number of funding sources since the RPP element could be applied to activity for which other funds could, often, not be used. We believe that, without this flexibility some ground-breaking projects, which are already demonstrating their ability to have significant benefits on their communities, would not have gone ahead.

We acknowledge that such a flexible program can be more difficult to administer, and that this may result in a more complex and costly approval process.

Nevertheless, the Alliance submits that the replacement program should retain significant flexibilities on the use of funds.

6. Reference to Local and Regional Strategic Plans.

All levels of Government, Shire, State and Commonwealth, draw up Strategic Plans for their areas.

Although these reflect the differing priorities of their "owners", in the main there is a significant amount of congruence between the plans. These plans inform the community of what it can expect from the Shire, (State) Development Commission and (Commonwealth) Regional Development Australia (formerly the Area Consultative Committee).

The Alliance submits that the new program should require nominated projects to be consistent with (and preferably mentioned within) the Strategic Plans of the Shire, Regional Development Australia and Development Commission (ie the three levels of government).

7. Support from the three levels of Government and the community.

The community expect the three levels of government to work conjunctively for the betterment of the community and this is best demonstrated when each contributes financially. The Alliance believes that the new program should encourage a financial contribution by the State Government and from the local community.

Depending on the nature of the applicant organisation the local contribution could come either from the Local Government, or the applicant organisation, or both. This will help to ensure that organisations considering a bid are aware from the start of the need to secure wide ranging support, and any financial contribution they may be required to make.

The Alliance submits that the new programme should encourage funding from State Government, and a contribution from within the local community

8. Program administration.

In our view the administration of funding programs has a number of functions including:-

- a) **Promotion of the program**, including briefing potential applicants on the desired outcomes and criteria for success.
- b) **Support for applicants**, particularly small, volunteer based organizations or businesses without experience.
- c) **Initial checking** of developing and submitted applications to ensure they meet the program criteria.
- d) **Evaluation of applications** against local conditions and strategies, and the preparation of advice to the decision makers.
- e) **Consideration**, at national level, of competing bids, and the advice given at the stage above, leading to
- f) **Decisions** on the projects to be supported.
- g) **Feedback to applicants**, whether successful or not.
- h) **Monitoring/support** as projects are implemented.

For Commonwealth programs it is vital that many of these functions are carried out regionally in order that applicants and local communities are aware that decisions on "their" projects are significantly influenced by people with accurate and detailed knowledge of the particular circumstances of their communities. It is important that the Local Regional Development Australia Boards which begin operation on 1st January 2009 have the necessary standing and resources to undertake these functions. A number of successful applicants for RPP in the Warren Blackwood, from the private business and volunteer based groups, have stressed the effectiveness by which the staff of the former South West WA Area Consultative Committee assisted them through the process of refining their initial proposals and preparing their successful applications. There is no doubt that this can appear to be expensive and that, at times, there may be some duplication with similar services provided by State Governments in relation to their own development programs. Nevertheless, such operations are one of the means by which the Commonwealth Government can improve its engagement with regional communities.

The Alliance submits that a strong regional presence, able to undertake functions "a" to "d" and "g" to "h" above, is essential to the administration of a successful, national program.

