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Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development & Local Government
PO Box 6021
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra, ACT 2600

July 10, 2008

Dear Secretary,

Re: Submissions into the inquiry regarding the Regional Partnerships Program

For the past twenty-five years or so I have had the pleasure of working on some wonderful and challenging projects, on a volunteer basis, with some very dedicated community groups seeking to improve the infrastructure within their communities. The projects vary greatly in their aims, scope and expectations, ranging from museum development, large aircraft restorations, and heritage registration programs to the construction of a state of the art aquatic centre. For the most part my work has centred upon project development from concept to inception. In every instance a major component of the program was sourcing funds from corporate sources and all levels of government.

Almost without exception I find that within all regional communities there is a need for a Regional Partnerships Program that is directed towards the enhancement of communities especially in the refurbishment of existing infrastructure or the development of new facilities. Regional and rural communities have a long history of initiating the planning, development and ultimately the construction of local infrastructure. In a great many instances the availability of grant funding through Federal Government programs, such as RPP has driven the enthusiasm of small community groups to take up the challenge of developing programs and projects within their communities that commercial industry see no profit value in and local government for a variety of reasons cannot bring them in under their umbrella.

Much of the infrastructure within regional communities is aging and in need of replacement. For the most part the individuals that first initiated and built these vital pieces of infrastructure are also aging and in need of the very services they built as volunteers working within their communities.

Experience shows that a funding source separated from local and state government for programs that are specific to a communities needs are more readily taken up by a group or groups within a community that identify a particular need and are prepared to invest the time and effort in acquiring it.

In general the aims and criteria of the original RPP in its early form were good and for the most part delivered a clear understanding of the methodology and pathways required to prepare an application. One of the better aspects of the application was that once an application had been accepted for assessment an organisation could be sure that they had applied due diligence in thinking through their project realistically, their costings were appropriately researched and prepared in a concise manner.

However, as time went on and changes within DOTARS and the ACC led to a shifting of responsibility for the assessment of applications the time frames for assessment and review lengthened to unacceptable levels. It is understood that staff must take leave and promotions do force change but the reeducation of staff within the government ranks should not be the providence of the organisation making the application. Retraining adds significantly to the time taken to assess an application. Almost without exception community groups are

Volunteer based and the time given over to implement, develop and build a program has a value and it needs to be recognised within the government departments concerned that volunteers do not have unlimited time at their disposal and every delay adds significantly to their contribution of time and money to any program in which they are involved. In many instances one must travel significant distances to an ACC or regional government office for meetings adding difficulty to what is already a complex and often stressful procedure. We must bear in mind that the lead up to the preparation of any application may have taken hundreds or even thousands of hours of valuable volunteer and professional time to arrive at the application point.

Over time the assessment process became so bureaucratically unwieldy and long winded that a locally based community group irregardless of the skills held within the group were faced with the prospect of finding days perhaps weeks in a busy working life to prepare an application or face the prospect of expending significant sums of money to enlist the services of a professionally trained or experienced grant writer. There appeared to be little regard for the wealth of skills, professional and otherwise that resides in regional communities.

Few community groups are adept at dealing with bureaucracy and many do feel intimidated by those handling an application. This is by no means limited to the RPP process; in more recent times any contact with any branch of government at any level tends to lead to the same feelings of intimidation. "It takes one to know one" is often how an individual may feel soon after leaving a meeting with government representatives. Towards the end of the present Regional Partnerships Program it became more and more apparent that unless the application was couched and delivered in bureaucratic terms it was unlikely to succeed.

In my experience the vast majority of community groups I have dealt with are very practical people who deal daily with a broad range of everyday difficulties and in almost all cases they are resolved using practical means. For many the complexity of the application leaves them Nonplussed and at a loss as to how to reconcile what is required by a panel in Canberra and the practical world in which they live.

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