



ALBANY BRIDGE CLUB Inc

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The Secretary  
Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local  
Government  
House of Representatives, Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600  
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Dear Sir

Submission to the **Inquiry into a new regional development funding program**

As the Secretary of the Albany Bridge Club in receipt of a Regional Partnerships grant referenced by the Department as RP project 3291, I make this submission to the Inquiry to serve two purposes:

- (1) To defend the integrity of our organization, our executive and our membership, and
- (2) to provide our experience with Regional Partnerships as information that hopefully will serve to convince the Australian Government that failing to retain Regional Partnerships is a serious case of “the baby being thrown out with the bath water” and a very questionable policy decision.

The Australian Government, through its Terms of Reference for this Inquiry, seeks “advice on future funding of regional programs in order to invest **in genuine and accountable** community infrastructure projects”. By implication, because the Albany Bridge Club is in receipt of a Regional Partnerships grant, it would appear that the Australian Government deems that our organization has not been “genuine nor accountable”. That cannot be left unchallenged.

Our project is to expand the existing Albany Bridge Club facilities by adding a reception area, extending the existing kitchen area, providing storage space for equipment and providing an additional outside area for social gatherings.

Our Club serves as a social support hub for members, meeting individual member's pastoral and social needs by providing opportunities ranging from access to regular socialization networks, especially for those who may have lost their partner for example, to filling an extended "family" networks role for seniors, many of whose children are not in Albany, having to seek employment and/or education opportunities for their own children outside Albany. We are in effect a de facto extended family for our 138 members, aged between 39 and 93 years.

The majority of our members may be seniors, but they are proud to organize and host one of the best professionally run tournament in country Western Australia. That achievement is of course reflected in the confidence in us by the Australian Bridge Federation by their offer of a low interest loan towards the cost of the project.

Our need for Regional Partnerships arose from the fact that, while we had initiated a futures building fund from the time we'd had paid off our new premises in 2001, we found that the escalating costs of construction and of construction materials was rising at a rate faster than our capacity to save for the proposed extension.

The urgency to get the planned extensions completed was brought to a head by the growth in our membership. This situation coincided fortuitously with us having within our membership, a retired builder and a retired former government project development manager. They were prepared to organize the volunteer team to get the project done. Their volunteer contribution to the project to date has been worth \$19,386

We then began securing the necessary funds for the extension to augment our own Club savings. From our membership, there were individuals who offered private donations to the extension project as well as a number of business and commercial companies.

An approach was made to the West Australian Department of Sport and Recreation which elicited the response that we were ineligible for funding from their programs. The reasons given were that Bridge is not considered a sport nor was it an "active" recreation.

Lotterywest was prepared to fund the \$10,000 air conditioning system for the project and the City of Albany contributed \$10,000 from their Community Fund to the general building fund. The City of Albany owns the land which we lease at a peppercorn rental. The Australian Bridge Federation offered us a \$30,000 low interest loan. Obviously we were "genuine and accountable" for these funders purposes.

We had a shortfall of approximately \$ 25,000 and were advised to contact the Great Southern Area Consultative Committee office to find other sources to fund that shortfall. The staff there advised that the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal guidelines excluded our project because of Albany's population size (FRRR only funds projects in

communities with less than 10,000 people). But given the size of Albany's Seniors population, currently 16% of the total population of 31,580 people, the staff at the Great Southern Area Consultative Committee suggested that we consider the Regional Partnerships program.

It was the contribution Bridge offers to providing potential savings to the Health budget by keeping people mentally alert and socially engaged and supported by a strong social network that was central to the decision to commit by the staff of the Great Southern Area Consultative Committee. With that support, together we developed our application through to the stage for a full review by the 20 member Board of the Great Southern Area Consultative Committee. (The research used as part of our application to the Great Southern Area Consultative Committee is attached.)

The process for progressing our Regional Partnerships program was the most rigorous (and at times seemingly the most cumbersome) that any of us on the project steering committee can remember in, in our collective working lives in farming, project management and local government. Without the support of Great Southern Area Consultative Committee staff to guide us, I doubt that we could have persevered with the process. That process involved:

- (i) Developing the application with the support of the Great Southern Area Consultative Committee staff. A series of meetings and phone calls and email exchanges occurred over the period from the 6<sup>th</sup> February to the 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2007.
- (ii) Then formally submitting the application to the full committee of the Great Southern Area Consultative Committee at one of their monthly meetings on the 2<sup>nd</sup> March. For us, on this occasion, it meant making our presentation to their regional meeting in the Mt Barker at the Local Government Chambers, 50 km from Albany).
- (iii) Then modifying the application to respond to feedback and clarifications sought from that Great Southern Area Consultative Committee. That took approximately 3 weeks.
- (iv) Then submitting the completed draft to the DOTARS office in Perth for review. From the staff at the Great Southern Area Consultative Committee, we understood that this was not an assessment but a review of the application form only, in light of the Perth officers' experiences with Regional Partnerships. The review was completed by those officers the same day, the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2007, a very commendable achievement.
- (v) A final application was produced to the satisfaction of both ourselves and the Great Southern Area Consultative Committee staff. We submitted our application to the Canberra DOTARS office on 27<sup>th</sup> March 2007 and subsequently received a letter from the Canberra office advising that we could expect a decision by the 18<sup>th</sup> of May 2007.
- (vi) We were asked further clarifying questions over a period from approximately the 19<sup>th</sup> April to the 10<sup>th</sup> May 2007 by DOTARS Canberra staff. After that we heard nothing more until the 30<sup>th</sup> May, when the same officer from Canberra

DOTARS wrote to say that we could expect a delay in the decision making process.

- (vii) Finally on 27 July 2007 we received advice from our local member that our application was successful. It then took till 21 September 2007 to negotiate our contract with DOTARS.

It must be said here that the time taken with the various stages reflects the fact that our Albany Bridge Club Committee is made up of volunteer members where many demands are made on our time as active voluntary community members. The capacity for the Regional Partnerships process to respect that, and within reason to incorporate that consideration into their project process, is a valuable element of the Regional Partnerships program.

We received the first payment instalment when we signed the contract with the Perth DOTARS manager. We are required to submit 3 progress reports to acquit these staged payments and then provide a final acquittal report to receive the final payment of \$2,000, of a \$24, 530 grant. It beggars belief to see how Regional Partnerships can be “more accountable”. (We have attached a copy of the report form for your information.) But it must also be reiterated that this has not been an easy process, and there were times in that process that we, as a Club committee, wondered if all this ‘thoroughness’ was worth the effort. But with the assistance and encouragement of the staff of the Great Southern Area Consultative Committee, we did persevere and are getting through the process. The support of the staff of the Great Southern Area Consultative Committee has been invaluable.

We believe that it is not an exaggeration to say that the project has produced an asset to Albany’s community infrastructure. Further, we make our rooms available to other small groups at a notional hire charge, for their meetings – a need in our community that is in short supply.

All this then makes it all the more galling to be tarred with the Minister’s “rorts brush” and to have our project, and by inference, the members of our Club tainted by the questioning of the genuineness and accountability of our project.

In conclusion, I can only commend the manner in which Regional Partnerships has been managed. Critical to the progress through our project has been the support of our Great Southern Area Consultative Committee staff and the preparedness of our Perth DOTARS officers to consider requests for variations to our original contracted arrangements as circumstances indicated.

We would argue that the volume and frequency of milestone reporting for a \$24,530 grant that we have had to undertake seems to be unusually onerous for a grant of this size. But if that was the accountability standard for all funded projects, then I can only contend that this Government has indeed “thrown out the baby with the bath water”, for reasons known only to them!

While we have not made ourselves aware of the circumstances that has given rise to this Inquiry, our Club would recommend that the "baby" be retained and be reintroduced immediately for all those existing worthy community projects that were not as fortunate as ours to be considered for funding.

Yours sincerely

Ross Anderson  
Secretary  
ALBANY BRIDGE CLUB

1 July 2008

