

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO A NEW REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT FUNDING PROGRAM

ARARAT ALP BRANCH 6 July 2008

BACKGROUND

Members of the Ararat branch of the ALP are aware of a number of projects carried out across the region by the Greater Green Triangle Area Consultative Committee and the Central Highlands Area Consultative Committee over recent years. These projects were not characterised by the poor accountability found in marginal seats in other regions across the country. The projects in this region demonstrated strong partnerships between State and Federal Governments, local government and communities. This may have been the result of the quality of local ACC staff, the fact that Wannon was not a marginal seat and the quality and connectedness of the local Federal Ballarat MP.

This submission will deal primarily with the first and second terms of reference:

- Provide advice on future funding of regional programs in order to invest in genuine and accountable community infrastructure projects;
- Examine ways to minimize administrative costs and duplication for taxpayers;

A NEW PROGRAM

Branch members believe that a new regional partnerships program should be characterised by the following features.

Program structure

The new regional partnerships program could be developed with four streams including infrastructure, community/business activities, youth participation and communities in transition (rural adjustment).

- The infrastructure stream could include community/sporting/arts/tourism facilities, the development of multi purpose community hubs, streetscapes for rural towns etc. Where appropriate, funds could be provided from departments with specific responsibilities ensuring a more holistic approach by government eg arts, sport
- The community/business activities stream could assist with the development of services to small business, field days, business/community expos and projects to develop business organisations This stream could assist in filling the void left with the end of the Small Business Field Officer Program. A small discretionary fund could be provided to RDA committees to help fund small events eg include projects such as business awards, community run events, 'back to' days (to attract people back to rural towns),
- The youth participation stream would focus on youth engagement and retention and could include infrastructure projects and activity based projects. Many rural towns have few youth specific spaces and it is now recognised that

young people need to have positive experiences in rural and regional Australia if they are to remain in, or return to regional areas. Action research projects that engage young people could be a particular feature of this stream and would be welcomed by those working with young people in rural and regional Australia..

- The communities in transition stream would focus on how communities might respond to climate change and changing demographics in rural and regional areas. Projects to plan locally for change and to establish innovative infrastructure projects could be features of this stream.
- Funding should be made available for the first stage of a project where the project will initially require a feasibility study or the development of a proposal. Funding is often difficult to access to ensure that the evidence exists to support a project proposal.
- Projects should include both small and large community based projects. Federal funding helps these communities to leverage state, local government and philanthropic funding and enables them to turn a small community project into a substantial project with significant economic and social benefit. Local examples include the Goldfields Recreation Reserve in Beaufort, the Wickliffe Common and the Creswick Interpretive Centre.

Cooperation across the three tiers of government

- The three tiers of government – local, state and federal – should work cooperatively to ensure the best outcomes from the program. Processes need to be aligned across all levels of government to avoid confusing communities and to ensure as seamless an approach as possible. This is a real challenge but can be achieved if successful examples of this approach are considered and if we apply innovative thinking. Improved cooperation would help to minimise administrative costs and duplication for taxpayers. A system that reflects existing regional boundaries in the states would also assist in the delivery of the new program.
- Applications should have similar formats and processes for all streams of the new program.

Private sector participation

- Private sector participation in the program should receive very careful consideration. Issues around conflict of interest and competitive advantage need to be considered and processes would need to be developed to ensure that adequate accountability measures were in place.

Local government projects

- A new program should encourage local government to think beyond their borders and to develop cooperative projects for the greater good of their regions. Projects should also demonstrate strong community consultation.
- The program needs to be clear about the projects that can be undertaken in cooperation with local government. If councils seek support for what might be considered council ‘core’ business then government should consider the

implications and whether there might be other, more appropriate, ways of providing such support.

Volunteers

- A management component could be included in all projects to alleviate the ever growing strain on volunteers. An additional 5 to 10% of the total project cost could be added to the grant provided by government. This would cover some of the out of pocket expenses usually met by volunteers and ensure that disadvantaged groups can engage in project implementation without facing an additional financial burden.

Improved Processes

- Communities found the Regional Partnership application and assessment process slow, cumbersome and convoluted. Some communities have waited up to 18 months for a response on applications.
- The regional Development Victoria process should be considered. This process requires the development of an initial project proposal – a 1 to 2 page document worked up with RDV staff that is considered by the RDV senior management group. The community is then asked to provide further information or a full application. The assessment and the application are considered by senior management and a recommendation is made to the Minister responsible. If the project does not meet the criteria for funding the applicant is often aware of this in the early stages of project development and applicants are not put through a time consuming and unnecessary application process. RIDF projects, and RIDF sub programs, are considered by an interdepartmental committee.
- RDA should refer applicants to more appropriate sources of funding where appropriate. RDA staff can have a filtering role so that only the projects that best meet the guidelines progress to the next stage. This would avoid putting applicants through a time consuming process when they have little hope of success.
- It should be noted that Victoria's establishment of the RIDF as a trust has meant that the fund is not impacted by the budget cycle.

THE ROLE OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AUSTRALIA

Although the inquiry has not asked for comments on the establishment of RDA the branch would like to make the following points as they could help to ensure that RDA is a dynamic and effective organisation.

A brokerage role

RDA can be a broker and a conduit, helping communities find their way through the maze of government departments and programs. Staff should aim to be the public 'face' of the Federal Government. Most Federal Government staff in regional areas have very specific roles and cannot help people in a joined up government way. RDA staff could fill this role assisting community members to access programs across government.

Local knowledge

RDA staff and their volunteer committees (if they continue) can be an excellent source of local knowledge and information. They can provide feedback to government on local issues and the new programs that might be needed in rural and regional areas. This role should not be underestimated.

RDA coverage

Clarification is needed regarding the coverage of RDA. It is unclear as to whether RDA will specifically focus on rural and regional Australia. The current set up of ACCs covers metropolitan areas as well as rural and regional areas. The branch would strongly support a specific rural and regional focus. Other government departments are well placed to provide programs for metropolitan Australia.

The Message

The Victorian Premier has had great success with the message that it's all about productivity, sustainability and liveability. This is a powerful message and could be a complementary federal message.

Infrastructure Australia

Communities are seeking some clarification regarding the role of Infrastructure and Australia and Regional Development Australia.

A Culture of accessibility

A professional development program should be established for RDA staff to encourage them to develop a culture where they see their role as helping people to access government in a community friendly manner. We don't necessarily need one stop shops – rather each public servant needs to operate as a one stop shop helping the community find their way into government.

For further information please contact:

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