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From: Candice Laidlaw Thompson

Sent: Monday, 27 August 2007 9:28 AM

To: Committee, FPA (SEN)

Subject: Submission for the Senate Inquiry into the CEA Bill 2007

Dear Committee Secretariat,

Regarding the call for submissions to support the Senate Inquiry into the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Democratic Plebiscites) Bill 2007 please see the attached Joint Submission which Crows Nest Shire Council and Rosalie Shire Council submitted to the QLD Local Government Reform Commission.

Regards,

Candice Laidlaw Thompson

Community Liaison Officer for Local Government Reform



**ROSALIE SHIRE
COUNCIL**

Productive and Peaceful

JOINT SUBMISSION

to the

Queensland Local Government Reform
Commission

by

**CROWS NEST SHIRE COUNCIL
AND
ROSALIE SHIRE COUNCIL**

May 2007

*“The proposed **Northern Downs Shire** builds on the strength of both Local Governments. It will provide a vibrant, financially viable entity while maintaining our community identity, social fabric and natural resource management focus – sustaining and reinforcing the lifestyle that differentiates us from metropolitan areas.”*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- background** This submission is made jointly by Crows Nest Shire Council and Rosalie Shire Council. Both Local Governments recognise the need for reform and propose the formation of a **Northern Downs Shire** by merging the two existing Shires. The new entity would have an initial population of 25,000 and grow to 50,000 by 2026 (average 3.5% growth rate).
- SSS** In August 2006 both Councils unanimously agreed to participate in the SSS process. Mr Noel Playford was appointed as Independent Review Facilitator and Mr David Spearritt of Orion Consulting Network engaged to carry out financial modelling. Their SSS Final Report recommendation was that the Councils request the Minister for Local Government, Planning and Sport to proceed with the amalgamation of the two Shires.
- Extensive community engagement was undertaken and a telephone poll conducted by Market Facts (Qld) Pty Ltd. There was broad community support for the merger. Both Councils unanimously adopted the recommendations of the Independent Review Facilitator.
- Following the April 2007 decision of the Queensland State Government to appoint a Local Government Reform Commission both Councils decided unanimously to make a submission based on the Size, Shape and Sustainability recommendation. It is submitted that the formation of a **Northern Downs Shire** will meet all of the objectives and desired outcomes identified in the reform process.
- community of interest** Feedback from public information sessions, petitions and submissions has been strong and consistent. The predominant desire of our residents is to preserve our *sense of community*. This transcends other concerns in regard to economies of scale and efficiency of service delivery. It is the reason people have come to live in our Shire and wish to be part of the social fabric of a less metropolitan area.
- good planning** The formation of Northern Downs Shire will allow for consistent planning across *like communities* including infrastructure and social elements. This new Shire will provide significant participation in the regional planning process while maintaining a local planning focus.
- natural resources** Similar natural resource management challenges exist across both Shires; both have well developed natural resource management capabilities with particular skills in rural and peri-urban landcare which will be further strengthened by the combination of these operations as Northern Downs Shire.

**financial
viability**

Both Councils are financially viable with a Financial Sustainability Review rating of *moderate/developing* for Crows Nest Shire Council and *weak/positive* for Rosalie Shire Council.

These ratings were adversely affected by the possibility of a Military Base (Borneo Barracks) being relocated and Rosalie's low rates (third lowest in the State).

The Independent Reviewers concluded in the Final SSS Report:

- *a new Council with a bigger resource base will be financially stronger than the current Councils, better able to manage and sustain infrastructure assets, meet the service level expectations of the community, and attract and retain quality staff in key positions*
- *savings from rationalisation of operating assets including plant and equipment, depots and workshops, and administration centres. Potential savings exist in the area of plant costs where it is anticipated approximately \$500,000 per annum through integrated works management, improved plant utilisation and reduced external plant hire*
- *application of some of the savings will allow the key issues of risk management and internal control to be addressed*
- *the merger should reduce the extent of rate increases which would ordinarily be required to*
- *be implemented financial issues, but would allow the increases to be phased in over a longer period of time*
(Size, Shape and Sustainability Final Report 2007, page 22)

simplicity

In regard to the Terms of Reference "*including all of the existing Local Government areas...*" creating a Northern Downs Shire represents a practical undertaking, achieving reasonable economies of scale while not incurring unnecessary transitional costs.

services

Both of our Shires already provide a diverse range of services in keeping with our semi-rural nature - from twenty-six public halls, five libraries, three aged persons complexes, two children's centres to three conveniently located Council service centres. We have been prepared to act as entrepreneurs where gaps in our social fabric have dictated – providing facilities from medical centres to industrial estates.

The Northern Downs Shire will benefit from the joint operation and management of delivery of these similar services.

community feeling

Since the announcement of the reform process, public feedback has been strong and consistent showing –

- overwhelming support of a Northern Downs Shire; and
- no support for a “super Shire” concept.

This can be attested to by the 3,800 petition feedback forms, the several hundred submissions made by community groups, business and private individuals and the unreserved support of The Honourable Kerry Shine MP, Attorney-General and Minister for Justice and Minister Assisting the Premier in Western Queensland and State Member for Toowoomba North.

options

Alternative options for the Crows Nest and Rosalie Shires by other Local Governments do not meet the reform objectives in that they –

- fragment communities of interest;
- include rural towns but exclude the rural areas they serve;
- reduce representation to undesirable levels;
- erode social fabric by diluting the support provided by a more remote Local Government.

Options of forming a Local Government based on amalgamation of water supply infrastructure – dams, Acland Coal Mine (user of recycled water waste) and all towns served by the reticulated supply are unjustified. Management of water supplies are best carried out by Water Boards able to operate on a commercial basis and in a non-political framework.

In contrast the **Northern Downs Shire** meets all of the desired objectives and outcomes of the reform process.

Formation of the merged Shire is consistent with our regional framework and is considered in a regional context in the attached map. Such a **reduction** in the number of Darling Downs Shires from **thirteen to** say **five** meets the consolidation aims of the reform process.

conclusion

We submit that our proposal –

- conforms with our SSS outcome and recommendations;
- combines like communities of interest;
- addresses regional planning objectives and natural resource management issues;
- provides financial stability and viability;
- provides a practical outcome;
- supports a high level of service;
- received overwhelming support in our communities; and
- aligns with the Reform Commission’s Terms of Reference.

We request the Local Government Reform Commission’s support in recommending the establishment of –
Northern Downs Shire ... a leading Local Government for the future.

1. INTRODUCTION

This submission is made jointly by Crows Nest Shire Council and Rosalie Shire Council. It proposes the formation of a **Northern Downs Shire** by merging Crows Nest Shire Council and Rosalie Shire Council. A map showing the proposed Shire is enclosed as Appendix A.

The proposal has the support of **all** Councillors of both Shires, senior management and staff and most significantly the vast majority of residents of both our Shires.

Northern Downs Shire will have a population of approximately 25,000 by March 2008 and on current growth trends will grow to 50,000 before 2026. This will result in a stable and sustainable Local Government, financially viable and able to provide a wide range of locally accessible services to our residents.

Our Councils recognise the need for reform in local government and are meeting the objectives of the reform process with this proposal.

- The size and shape of Northern Downs Shire together with the specialised skills of our workforce allows for the optimum delivery of services while maintaining local access.
- The wide range of vibrant rural and mining industries will receive the infrastructure, planning and social support needed for them to continue to be a significant contributor to the Queensland economy.
- Our economic environmental and social planning has resulted in significant growth and received recognition State wide. Combining our resources and talents in this area can only lead to an even stronger capability.
- As one of a small number of Darling Downs Councils, Northern Downs Shire will play a major role in regional planning and maintain our excellent working relationships with a wide range of State Government Departments.

2. BACKGROUND

In August 2006, at an historic meeting of both Shire Councils, the potential for establishing a 'best practice' Local Government was recognised when it was agreed unanimously to form a review group and participate in the Size, Shape and Sustainability process. Subsequently Mr Noel Playford was appointed as the Independent Review Facilitator. Mr Playford has extensive Local Government experience - as Mayor of Noosa Shire and a past President of the Queensland Local Government Association.

The Size, Shape and Sustainability guidelines were followed rigorously and frequent discussion with the Department of Local Government, Planning, Sport and Recreation and the Local Government Association of Queensland Inc were held to further develop the process. Community engagement was extensive with public information forums, numerous feedback options, regular newsletters, an interactive website and an independent telephone survey.

Financial Sustainability Reports were prepared by Queensland Treasury Corporation for both Councils.

The Final SSS Report (Appendix B) was completed in April 2007 and adopted by both Councils with unanimous votes of all Councillors (see Appendix C).

The major recommendation is that Rosalie and Crows Nest Shire Councils request the Minister for Local Government, Sport, and Recreation to amalgamate the two Shires and create a new Council named Northern Downs Shire Council with 10 Councillors and no electoral divisions.

Crows Nest and Rosalie Shire Councils were the only Local Governments in Queensland to have completed the SSS process and were about to petition the Minister for Local Government, Planning and Sport to conduct the necessary referendum in July/August 2007.

3. SSS OUTCOME

The proposed Northern Downs Shire builds on the strength of both Local Governments. It will provide a vibrant, financially viable entity while maintaining our strong social fabric, natural resource management focus and community identity whilst reinforcing the lifestyle that differentiates us from metropolitan areas.

The north-south boundary separating the Crows Nest and Rosalie Shires is entirely artificial.

In the southern parts of our Shires, towns such as Highfields, Gowrie, East and West Meringandan, Kingsthorpe and Cabarlah have the same needs and face the same challenges.

Similarly in the central part of our Shires are semi-rural towns such as Goombungee and Crows Nest. Our rural areas are also similar with many rural property holdings spanning the existing Shire boundary.

More detailed consideration of matters to be addressed under the Commission's Terms of Reference are provided later in this document.

In summary, both of our Shires -

- showed unmatched commitment to the SSS process;
- made an extraordinary effort to achieve an outcome in the time frame allocated;
- achieved a robust and sustainable plan fully supported by our Independent review facilitator;
- achieved united support for the merger from both communities, elected representatives and Shire staff;
- identified the best way forward – providing a model for a dynamic “best practice” merged Shire in tune with the needs of our diverse community.

4. GROUPING OF LIKE COMMUNITIES

The Northern Downs proposal addresses this aim in the most positive way. One of the most common remarks during consultation was –

“I came to live in Highfields / Gowrie / Meringandan because I don’t want to be part of a City.”

This *sense of place* while hard to define is the very reason people come to live in our Shires. This community spirit is why we have had one of Queensland’s highest growth rates over the past 10 years and why community sentiment is so strongly opposed to ‘super shire’ suggestions.

There are numerous points of similarity across the Crows Nest and Rosalie communities – the same wants and desires. The social fabric of these communities built up over decades is a precious and irreplaceable commodity that defines the very essence of our lifestyle. This fabric is reflected in the large number of local organisations, clubs and groups with participation rates that far exceed metropolitan figures.

These *communities of interest* unite our Shires but differentiate us from metropolitan areas. Our shows, events, festivals, pubs and clubs, sporting activities and social pursuits are all interwoven but share little with city living. All these activities are supported by our Local Councils to an extent not found in major population centres. There is considerable concern that much of this would be lost if local government ceases to be local.

Options with boundaries that skirt existing towns would result in a situation where residents in close proximity would need to travel considerable distances to access Council services.

*The predominant desire of our community is to preserve our **sense of identity**. This transcends other concerns in regard to economies of scale and efficiency of service delivery.*

5. PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

Crows Nest Shire has a gazetted Integrated Planning Act Planning Scheme while the Rosalie Scheme was forwarded to the Minister, ready for gazetting some months ago. Our two Shires employ three professional town planners and other allied para-professional staff giving them the ability to deal with the day-to-day planning enquiries and development applications as well as addressing the strategic needs of the merged Shire.

A joint project has been underway for some months to prepare Infrastructure Charges and Priority Infrastructure Plans and Schedules as required under IPA. This combined approach has been the hallmark for co-operation between the two Shires and allows for cross boundary matters to be addressed within appropriate timeframes and ensure the efficient construction of infrastructure for growing areas.

We are also working together with the Office of Urban Management and Toowoomba City Council to establish a Local Growth Management Strategy, which will identify “urban footprints” and protect “inter-urban breaks”. This process will provide a regional framework for our future growth.

Currently an inter-urban break exists between Toowoomba City and the town of Highfields. This principle emphasised in the South East Queensland Regional Plan of providing a buffer between the urban areas is considered to be good planning policy.

The Northern Downs proposal will enhance service delivery and infrastructure provision. There is a little distance between the towns of Highfields, Gowrie Junction and Meringandan West. Current development patterns mean these areas are likely to become joined over the next 20 years and the ability to plan for this eventuality allows for the efficient and timely provision of both hard and soft infrastructure.

Planning for the Gowrie to Granchester railway line and the second range crossing road projects are well under way. Land has been acquired by the State Government securing the necessary corridors. When constructed (road expected 2009-2013; rail expected 2020) these two major infrastructure items will form a physical and visual barrier separating Toowoomba City from Northern Downs Shire.

Both Councils are active in the *Eastern Downs Regional Planning Advisory Council* process recognising that regional planning is essential. Such bodies are well placed to provide regional planning eliminating the need for regional Local Government to address such issues.

Detailed local planning is also under way. As an example, the Highfields Town Centre Structure Plan is being prepared in conjunction with a recognised expert in Town Centre design and traffic modelling across both Shires is being conducted by leading traffic engineering consultants.

A map showing the make up of the current DDROC region is included as Appendix D.

*Northern Downs Shire will build on the **sustainable lifestyle** currently attracting strong population growth. It will guide the co-ordinated development of like communities - providing a united voice to our regional planning body.*

6. NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT ISSUES

The predominant catchment in the two Shires is the Murray-Darling. There is a portion in Crows Nest Shire and the Yarraman end of the Rosalie Shire that lie in the Brisbane River catchment. For much of its length, the New England Highway acts as a water catchment boundary through the area. Water to the west of the highway runs into the Murray - Darling system and to the east runs into the Brisbane River system. There is no logic in adopting the catchment boundary as a local government boundary - this would split numerous towns and communities in two.

The current boundary between Rosalie and Nanango Shires runs along the watershed between the Brisbane and Burnett River catchments. It is considered logical that the Yarraman region remain in the new Northern Downs Shire with the potential to add the Blackbutt area to the Shire, due to where it sits in the Brisbane catchment.

Both Shires operate extensive Natural Resource Management programmes and challenges across our boundaries are similar. We have won numerous awards including –

- Water Excellence Awards 2005 (Trevean Gardens) – Institute of Public Works Engineering – Queensland Water Directorate
- Landcare Australian Local Government Award – Queensland Landcare Awards –Gympie 2003
- National Awards for Local Government – Natural Resource Management: Partnerships for Biodiversity Conservation Project ‘Green Nest’ – Highly Commended – Environment
- 2003 Queensland Landcare Awards – Winner
- 1995 Queensland Landcare Awards – Runner Up

The existing water supply dams – Cressbrook, Cooby and Perseverance, together with the potential Emu Creek Dam, are all located within Crows Nest Shire. Consolidation of all regional water supply assets by creating a “super shire” does not recognise the potential of a *Water Board* to operate the region’s water supplies in a commercial, non-political environment.

*Both Shires have well developed **natural resource management** capabilities with particular skills in rural and peri-urban landcare. These will be further strengthened by the combination of these operations as Northern Downs Shire.*

7. FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Since the commencement of the SSS process financial consultants and staff have been engaged on research into the operational aspects of each organisation.

Both Rosalie and Crows Nest Shire Councils have undertaken the Queensland Treasury Corporation – Financial Sustainability Review (QTC-FSR). These reports are included as Appendix E. The respective ratings are as follows:

Crows Nest Shire Council

Rating: *Moderate*
Outlook: *Developing*

Rating:
Very strong
STRONG
Moderate
Weak
Very Weak
Distressed
Outlook:
Positive
Negative
Neutral
DEVELOPING

Rosalie Shire Council

Rating: *Weak*
Outlook: *Positive*

Rating:
Very strong
Strong
Moderate
WEAK
Very Weak
Distressed
Outlook:
POSITIVE
Negative
Neutral
Developing

Crows Nest:

As is evidenced by the above illustration taken from the QTC – FSR Report December 2006, Crows Nest was initially rated as ‘Strong’ in terms of financial sustainability, but was subsequently downgraded as a result of the uncertainty associated with the possible relocation of the Borneo Barrack military facility to South Australia. Such an eventuality will with proper planning result in a positive financial and social benefit from alternative developments.

The published Crows Nest Shire Council financial sustainability rating was ‘**Moderate**’ with a ‘**Developing**’ outlook.

According to the Queensland Treasury Corporation the ‘moderate’ rating primarily reflects Council’s ability to meet all its financial obligations whilst strengthening its cash position. Crows Nest Shire Council has maintained and improved its existing services to ratepayers whilst providing critical social infrastructure to encourage ongoing growth and facilitate community cohesiveness.

Rosalie:

QTC has given Rosalie Shire Council a financial sustainability rating of 'Weak' with a 'positive' outlook. While a weak rating has been assigned, the QTC acknowledges that the Council's financial position is a borderline Moderate.

QTC stated: "The rating outcome has been primarily constrained by insufficient rates revenue (general rates charges rank the third lowest in Queensland) to recoup all of Council's operating expenses (including depreciation). In addition, Council has experienced a reduction in its General Purpose - Financial Assistance Grants. The combination of the above has led to an increased dependence on external revenue sources to support Council's operations. This has reduced its financial flexibility and impacted upon Council's ability to invest and maintain its infrastructure in a timely manner."

Acknowledgement of Risks

Whilst it is recognised a large number of synergies exist between the Crows Nest and Rosalie Shire Councils, both parties acknowledge the potential risks of combining into one entity. The experience of mergers throughout Australia indicate that there is a risk that service levels and associated expenses may increase due to community pressure to equalise services to the highest current standard.

Complementary Financial Sustainability Skills and Expertise

Whilst both Councils have specific issues relating to their respective financial sustainability, both organisations believe that their strengths and weakness complement each other and can be used as a means to bolster financial performance.

Both organisations believe having the 'hands on' knowledge and local experience to manage growth and the financial pressures associated with increased critical infrastructure requirements and community expectations will be a significant advantage to the proposed merged entity.

Some of the existing key strengths include:-

- Strategic planning – physical and social infrastructure and development controls;
- Financial modelling including sensitivity analysis and demand management;
- Onground competencies in the areas of design and construction and delivering outcomes;
- Proven ability to succeed in competitive environments.

Critical Infrastructure Asset Sustainability and Intergenerational Equity

Whilst a significant proportion of the financial sustainability reviews undertaken by the Queensland Treasury Corporation is focussed on considerations surrounding operational, liquidity and infrastructure funding decisions, of considerable importance are issues associated with 'critical' infrastructure asset sustainability and intergenerational equity issues. Both Rosalie and Crows Nest Shire Councils have geographical and topographical similarities which provide opportunities to develop efficient systems and practices which have the potential to give rise to new technologies associated with critical infrastructure management.

The independent review of the proposed Northern Downs Shire Council also highlighted significant strengths of the merger to include:

- *a new Council with a bigger resource base will be financially stronger than the current Councils, better able to manage and sustain infrastructure assets, meet the service level expectations of the community, and attract and retain quality staff in key positions*
- *savings from rationalisation of operating assets including plant and equipment, depots and workshops, and administration centres. Potential savings exist in the area of plant costs where it is anticipated approximately \$500,000 per annum through integrated works management, improved plant utilisation and reduced external plant hire*
- *application of some of the savings will allow the key issues of risk management and internal control to be addressed*
- *the merger should reduce the extent of rate increases which would ordinarily be required to be implemented financial issues, but would allow the increases to be phased in over a longer period of time*
- *coordinated planning and infrastructure delivery across growth areas*

“A single larger organisation will also have a deeper staffing structure for most functions, which will address the issue of a current lack of middle management staff at a modest cost relative to the potential savings from amalgamation. An amalgamated Council will also have additional capacity to address the key resource base and governance issues that were identified in the review’s initial phase as a threat to local government sustainability in the area. They are:

- *the capacity to manage and sustain infrastructure assets (asset sustainability)*
- *the capacity to supply and match the level of service provided by assets with the expectations of the community (service levels)*
- *the ability to attract and retain qualified staff in key positions (human resourcing)*
- *the need for improved risk management and internal control (governance arrangements)”*

“An amalgamation will also best address the key issue of coordinated planning and provision and management of infrastructure in the adjacent growth areas of the two Shires. The result will be better management of growth and more efficient infrastructure coordination, without the complexities of joint arrangements as an alternative solution.”

(Size, Shape and Sustainability Final Report 2007; page 25)

*The proposed Northern Downs Council with an “increased resource base will be **financially stronger** than the current Councils, better able to manage and sustain infrastructure assets, meet the service level expectations of the community, and attract and retain quality staff in key positions.”*

(Size, Shape and Sustainability Final Report 2007, page 22)

8. WHOLE OF SHIRE MERGER

The merger of Crows Nest and Rosalie Shires addresses the requirement for the Local Government Reform Commission to “*give preference, to the extent practicable, to including all of the existing local government areas in the new area rather than parts of the existing areas.*” This statement reinforces the logic embodied in the Northern Downs proposal which would see the whole of the Shires of Rosalie and Crows Nest included in the one Local Government area. It provides a seamless transition from two entities to one ensuring services provided to the residents of the new Northern Downs Shire continues to grow.

Such a merger eliminates the necessity for the division of assets and liabilities with all the inherent problems associated with question of equity, fairness and affordability. It also prevents the fragmentation of workforces which can have a negative effect on morale and culture with the rebuilding of team spirit taking many years.

The merger builds on the many synergies of two like sized Shires. A few examples of this are:-

- similar differential rating systems;
- same computer systems;
- like enterprise bargaining agreements;
- similar staffing positions;
- like community concerns;
- compatible plant and equipment;
- very similar local laws.

*Creating a Northern Downs Shire represents a **practical undertaking**, achieving reasonable economies of scale while not incurring unnecessary transitional costs.*

9. SERVICE PROVISION

The Shires of Rosalie and Crows Nest provide a wide range of services to our communities in keeping with the demands of residents of large rural Shires. Both Councils have been entrepreneurial where necessary in supplying demands not satisfied by commercial operators.

In addition to providing the normal roads, rates and waste basics, the nature of a rural residential Shire requires a different range of services with a different emphasis to a metropolitan area. Some examples are listed below:-

- three conveniently located Council service centres;
- twenty-six public halls;
- four showgrounds;
- two community banks;
- five static and one mobile library;
- ten cemeteries;
- twelve water supplies;
- three sewerage schemes;
- three aged person complexes;
- multiple indoor and outdoor sporting venues;
- six skate parks;
- two art galleries;
- two cultural centres;
- hundreds of hectares of park;
- three medical centres;
- two child care centres;
- five swimming pools/aquatic centres;
- three visitor information centres;
- numerous refuse and recycling facilities.

Both of our Councils have built industrial estates, medical centres and children centres to ensure that sections of our community did not go without these services. In a number of cases our Councils are the operators of these facilities. The provision of all these services requires a special set of management and operational skills from noxious weed inspectors to art gallery directors and cemetery managers. Our Councils have developed and enhanced these skills over an extended period.

It would be difficult to imagine the ability of a much larger “super shire” being able to provide such a range of services because of the question of equity across diverse communities.

*Because of the similar nature of our communities, the Northern Downs Shire will benefit from the **joint operation and management** of delivery of these similar services providing the specialist skills needed.*

10. COMMUNITY REPRESENTATION

The recommendations of the Final SSS Report by the Independent Review Facilitator proposed a merged Shire called Northern Downs with ten Councillors plus a Mayor and no Divisions. It was considered that the number of Councillors could reduce to eight at a future date. This would reduce representation from eighteen to eleven and is considered realistic.

Under the alternative option outlined above, the original Crows Nest Shire Council and Rosalie Shire Council areas would be fortunate to retain one member each based on proportional representation. This loss of representation has been consistently raised as a major concern at community forums. Our residents consider that one of the major differences between State and Local Government is easy access to Local Government representatives.

Currently residents expect and enjoy access to Councillors on the basis of one Councillor per 1,250 residents. In some areas this level of representation is considered high. It is seen in the community, however, as being reasonable and partly why Local Government exists. Representation is an important element in the local democratic process of the Crows Nest and Rosalie Shires and as stated above an area that received considerable discussion through the SSS process. The proposed Northern Downs Shire Council would have representation levels half those currently in play with the possibility of further decreased levels depending on the decision of the Councillors elected in future elections. At a population level of 50,000 and eight elected members, Councillors would represent 6,250 residents.

The suggestion of much larger Shires brings with it dramatically decreased representation levels which is not considered acceptable to the residents of the Rosalie and Crows Nest communities. Given the physical area involved and the dispersed nature of the population, elected representative numbers need to be held at reasonable levels to ensure adequate access to representation.

*Northern Downs Shire provides a reasonable level of representation consistent with **keeping Local Government “local”** while maintaining reasonable costs.*

11. COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

Extensive community engagement in accordance with the IAP2 model was conducted as part of the SSS process. Results are documented in the Final SSS Report. These show a high level of acceptance of a merged Shire entity.

A community attitude survey conducted by an independent marketing research company involved 600 households. The report is attached as Appendix F. It showed that the community was accepting of the proposal to the extent of 70% (high for any referendum in Australia) provided further information was provided. It also showed that an extremely high 92% were aware of the process and what it was intending to achieve. Approximately 80% of the survey group did not wish to be included in the Toowoomba City boundaries.

During the SSS process the community of both Shires was consulted continually. Fact sheets were prepared and distributed to each and every household to provide both basic and more detailed information. A web site was set up to allow access any time of day to the information being accumulated. Public meetings were held throughout the two Shires to allow access to the Independent Review Facilitator, Councillors and Senior Managers of the two Shires to ensure all questions asked were answered. This process proved to be extremely popular and there were requests for the meetings to be held in other locations. In some instances this was agreed to following representations from the public.

Over 250 copies of the SSS Preliminary Report were distributed to various community groups and community members. Further involvement was sought when the SSS Draft Final Report was released. This report was also widely distributed. Letters of support and encouragement copies of which are included as Appendix G were received from –

- The Honourable Andrew Fraser MP, Minister for Local Government, Planning and Sport;
- Michael Kinnane ESM FAIM, Director-General, Department of Local Government, Planning, Sport and Recreation; and
- Cr Dianne Thorley, Mayor of Toowoomba City Council.

Community consultation up to this point was based on a Northern Downs Shire as an alternative to Crows Nest and Rosalie Shires being maintained. With the announcement by the State Government of the formation of the Local Government Reform Commission there was acceptance that amalgamation in some form would occur. Public information sessions held since have shown an almost universal preference for a Northern Downs Shire over other options.

Numerous submissions have been made by community groups, business and residents. A sample of these is included as Appendix H. In addition over three thousand eight hundred petition forms or e-petitions have been lodged. These are presented to the Commission with this joint submission.

We have also received full support from our local State Member of Parliament, The Honourable Kerry Shine MP, Attorney-General and Minister for Justice and Minister Assisting the Premier in Western Queensland and Member for Toowoomba North, for the Northern Downs Shire proposal.

There is **overwhelming community support** for a Northern Downs Shire in preference to a “super shire” proposal.

12. SHARED SERVICES AND JOINT ARRANGEMENTS

Both Shires have been heavily involved in joint regional arrangements. These have included the *Road Alliance* (Appendix I), *Connect DD* broadband provision and sharing of plant, equipment and staff. Both Shires operate the same major information technology systems - *Practical* financial, *Mapinfo* and *Dataworks* electronic data management systems and sharing of expertise in these areas is ongoing. In 2002 Crows Nest Shire Council expertise in these areas was recognised when they received the National Award for Local Government for Information Technology for our *Smart Community Strategy*.

A broad range of sporting, educational, medical and shopping services are available within our Shires and these are expanding daily. At a regional level specialised medical, educational and retail services are provided by the City of Toowoomba which benefits significantly from the financial contribution made by our residents.

Post merger, the need will still exist to maintain and expand joint arrangements across boundaries. The provision of water and sewerage regionally by a Water Board would achieve significant economies of scale and allow these operations to be run with a commercial focus. Expansion of the responsibilities of our regional body *Eastern Downs Regional Planning Advisory Council* could also be beneficial.

The Final Report from the Northern Downs Review Group of Councils contains recommendations which refer to resource sharing and service agreements. Resource sharing between both Shires has been a major factor in the operations of both organisations to date. Arrangements with bordering Shires have also been put in place from time to time.

Northern Downs Shire will continue the practice of its parent Shires in active participation in shared service and joint arrangement where cost savings and service improvements can be achieved.

13. OPTIONS

As part of the SSS process and this review process a number of alternative boundary change options have been proposed by various parties. A number of these are considered briefly below:–

ALTERNATIVE OPTION I

Regional Super Shire

This would reduce the Darling Downs to the “greater” Toowoomba, “greater” Warwick and “greater” Dalby with all rural and semi-rural areas being incorporated with these towns.

This groups together disparate communities and would amount to Regional Government sacrificing the local accessibility associated with Local Government.

Representation of less populated communities would be reduced.

The areas of Crows Nest Shire Council and Rosalie Shire Council would on a proportional representation basis have one representative.

This option may also have the effect of eroding the inter-urban breaks between urban footprints which our planning schemes have to date successfully preserved. If the Crows Nest/Toowoomba boundary is removed it will be far more difficult to prevent urban sprawl eroding these buffers.

ALTERNATIVE OPTION II

Toowoomba Statistical District

This area would include Blue Mountain Heights, Gowrie, Kingsthorpe, Highfields, Cabarlah, East and West Meringandan in a greatly expanded Toowoomba City Council.

In addition to all of the matters mentioned in Option I this would have the additional impact of leaving a balance area of Crows Nest Shire and Rosalie Shire that would be unviable. The balance area remaining would have a population of about 8,000.

ALTERNATIVE OPTION III

Western Shire

A number of scenarios consider the combination of Shires to the west of Toowoomba with parts of Rosalie and Crows Nest included.

This proposal would not seem to address community of interest or preference for including all of a local government area.

Many *unlike* communities would be combined with no cultural or historic connection.

Like Option II the balance area would not result in a sustainable entity.

ALTERNATIVE OPTION IV

South Burnett Variation

This would add to the north of the Northern Downs Shire areas which are in the Upper Brisbane catchment – adding Electoral Division 4 of Nanango Shire which consists of the towns of Blackbutt and Benarkin.

It is felt that the existing communities of interest should be maintained.

OVERVIEW OF OPTIONS I - IV

With the exception of Option IV, all of the above options result in significant fragmentation of communities of interest and dilution of Council services. Unlike municipal areas, rural towns exist to service their rural communities and provide a heart to their social fabric. Boundaries that include towns but exclude much of the rural area they serve do not satisfy the objectives of the reform process. Residents to the north of Crows Nest town could find themselves having to travel to Kingaroy to access Council services. Similarly residents to the west of Goombungee may need to travel to Dalby.

NORTHERN DOWNS SOLUTION

The formation of a Northern Downs Shire overcomes all expressed concerns. The Darling Downs is renowned as a rural powerhouse. Having two or three larger rural Shires in addition to Toowoomba, Warwick and Dalby maintains the rural nature of the region and preserves the social fabric. It also provides an equitable level of representation reaching 6,000 residents per elected member over the next 20 years. This solution also allows for good planning outcomes with co-ordination of like communities.

A similar rationalisation across the Downs will result in say five remaining Shires from the current thirteen thereby meeting the Commission's brief for reasonable consolidation. This rationalisation will allow for better and more co-ordinated regional planning, shared services and joint arrangements.

An attached map (Appendix J) shows how Northern Downs Shire could fit into a regional context.

*The Northern Downs Proposal **complies with the objectives** and addresses the terms of reference of the reform process – ensuring the Darling Downs remains rural in nature.*

14. CONCLUSION

The proposed Northern Downs Shire will provide a financially strong, modern Local Government responsive to the wishes of its residents. It will be a “best practice” model of an engaged population maintaining communities of interest and preserving the existing social fabric that makes our Shires so special to us.

We submit that the Northern Downs Shire proposal meets all of the **objectives** of the reform process:–

- optimising service delivery by combining like service demands;
- providing an environment for our industries to flourish;
- establishes a significant community of interest with the planning skills to participate regionally;
- demonstrating sustainable financial future as identified by our independent review with the capacity to work together with other levels of government.

We further submit that the Northern Downs Shire proposal addresses the **desired outcomes** identified in the Commission’s *Terms of Reference*:-

- conforming with our SSS outcome;
- combining like communities of interest;
- addressing regional planning objectives and natural resource management issues;
- providing financial stability and viability;
- providing a practical outcome;
- supporting a high level of service; and
- receiving overwhelming support in our communities.

We request the Local Government Reform Commission’s support in recommending the establishment of –
Northern Downs Shire ...a leading Local Government for the future.

APPENDIX A

PROPOSED NORTHERN DOWNS SHIRE MAP

APPENDIX B

FINAL SIZE, SHAPE & SUSTAINABILITY REPORT

PROPOSED NORTHERN DOWNS SHIRE

APPENDIX C

COUNCIL RESOLUTIONS

CROWS NEST SHIRE COUNCIL AND ROSALIE SHIRE COUNCIL

APPENDIX D

DDROC MAP

APPENDIX E

QUEENSLAND TREASURY CORPORATION FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY REPORTS

CROWS NEST SHIRE COUNCIL AND ROSALIE SHIRE COUNCIL

APPENDIX F

TELEPHONE SURVEY REPORT BY MARKET FACTS (QLD) PTY LTD

APPENDIX G

LETTERS OF SUPPORT FROM

**HON KERRY SHINE MP
ATTORNEY-GENERAL AND MINISTER FOR JUSTICE AND
MINISTER ASSISTING THE PREMIER IN WESTERN QUEENSLAND
MEMBER FOR TOOWOOMBA NORTH**

**HON ANDREW FRASER MP
DEPARTMENT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT, PLANNING AND SPORT**

**MICHAEL KINNANE ESM FAIM
DIRECTOR-GENERAL
DEPARTMENT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT, PLANNING,
SPORT AND RECREATION**

**CR DIANNE THORLEY
MAYOR OF TOOWOOMBA CITY COUNCIL**

APPENDIX H

SAMPLE OF SUBMISSIONS

APPENDIX I

EASTERN DOWNS REGIONAL ROAD GROUP MAP

APPENDIX J

PROPOSED NORTHERN DOWNS REGION MAP