

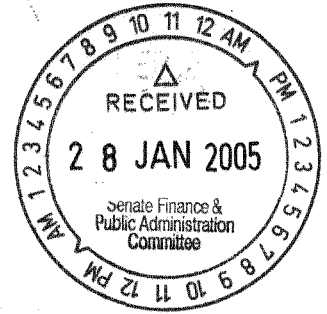
CENTRAL HIGHLANDS AREA CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE INC

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Inquiry into Regional Partnerships Program

1. Response

Party to the Response

This response is made on behalf of the Central Highlands Area Consultative Committee Inc by Executive Officer Ms. Gerrie Carr-MacFie

Central Highlands Area Consultative Committee Inc (CHACC) is a member of the Australian Government's key regional development network. CHACC works within Victoria and covers the municipal areas of City of Ballarat, Hepburn Shire, Moorabool Shire and Pyrenees Shire.

CHACC seeks to foster partnerships between business, government and community that build an understanding of the economic and community imperatives that drive growth within the Central Highlands region. CHACC is committed to searching out strategic advantages that offer opportunity for social cohesiveness and resilience within local communities, and generate sustainable economic growth within the region.

The region serviced by CHACC includes two Federal electorates, Ballarat and Wannon.

Scope of Response

The Response is made in regard to Items (a), (b), (c) of the Terms of reference of the Inquiry into Regional Partnerships Program.

The response relates to the experience of CHACC in initiating and responding to local and regional development issues, working with stakeholders and all levels of government, and complying with contractual obligations and administrative directions of the Department of Transport and Regional Services in regard to the Funding Contract that CHACC chooses to enter into with the Australian Government.

2. Background to Central Highlands Region.

Central Highlands region has sound structural underpinnings. This is supported by:

- positive prospects for population growth in three of the four municipal areas,
- a continued reduction in overall unemployment evidenced through Australian Bureau of Statistics Census over the period 1996-2001,
- a strong 'old production zone' in the City of Ballarat that is moving to higher technology and knowledge-based production driven through a fledgling IT sector
- and export of education and business services.

Central Highlands region is therefore a key contributor to Victoria's export strength through particularly through agriculture and manufacturing sectors. The region has actively adapted to economic change within these industry sectors through the development of more diverse and productive primary and secondary industries.

The strength and continued development of tertiary industries such as education, tourist, health and business services places the region in a sound position to grow. This has been recognised

with City of Ballarat lauded as the centre with best growth potential in the State of the Regions Report 0304 prepared by National Economics**

Central Highlands region has many competitive advantages for residential growth, industry development and lifestyle. These include:

- access to quality training and education with three university campuses in the region,
- a strongly established TAFE and post-compulsory education sector,
- a diverse resource base inclusive of agriculture and mining;
- quality lifestyle and climate which encompasses ex-urban growth stemming from Melbourne's Western suburbs in Moorabool Shire, to tree-change growth centres around Daylesford in Hepburn Shire, and the issues attached to small town survival in the rural located Pyrenees Shire. City of Ballarat is noted as a premier provincial centre with high prospects for growth and increase in overall prosperity ;
- cost-competitive land;
- extensive infrastructure networks.

There are challenges in attracting jobs and skilled employees across the region, and in maintaining an appropriate range of high-quality services outside the provincial centre of Ballarat.

On a less than positive note, the region is affected by social disengagement evident in factors such as exceptionally high levels of unemployment in the youth* and the Indigenous cohort and in the Indigenous cohort, higher than average morbidity rates, and low income per household statistics across the majority of the rural areas.

3. Background to CHACC

The Central Highlands Area Consultative Committee enjoys a solid reputation throughout the region as a supportive and proactive regional development agency.

CHACC works on many initiatives with local government and other regional agencies. This includes a raft of strategic interventions aimed at supporting growth in various industry and community sectors. This work extends far beyond the development of strong funding applications pursuant to the Regional Partnerships Programme. Local Government across the region has been a key supporter and advocate of the quality, diversity and strength of the work undertaken by CHACC.

Committee Expertise/Membership

The CHACC Committee membership is indicative of the depth of knowledge, commitment and networks utilised by CHACC in undertaking our work. It is a skill-based committee with members selected for the depth of knowledge and information they can bring to the development of projects that seek to strengthen the region across economic, community and cultural sectors.

* State of the Regions 2003-National Economics/Australian Local Government Association-Table 8.11

* Youth Unemployment assessed as 21.4% in the DEWR December Quarter 2004

Professional Field	NAME/Position	ORGANISATION
Organisational Management (Chair) Local Government / Retired CEO	<i>Mr Eugene Kneebone</i> <i>Chair</i>	CHACC Inc. Community Member
Compact Commercial Law	<i>Ms Virginia Wise</i> <i>Deputy Chair</i>	Solicitor
Organisational Management Community/Health Sector/ Women's Health	<i>Ms Robyn Mason</i> <i>Co-Deputy Chair</i>	Centre Against Sexual Assault
Local Government Chief Executive Officer	<i>Mr Stephen Cornish</i> <i>Treasurer</i>	Pyrenees Shire Council
Regional Manager-Disability Services	<i>Ms Karen Robinson</i>	EW Tipping Foundation
Local Government Chief Executive Officer	<i>Mr Robert Dobrynzski</i>	Moorabool Shire Council
Business Management Manufacturing Sector	<i>Ms Kay Macaulay</i>	Australian Industry Group
Local Government Chief Executive Officer	<i>Mr. Richard Hancock</i>	City of Ballarat
Local Government Chief Executive Officer	<i>Mr Victor Szwed</i>	Hepburn Shire Council
Aboriginal Education Officer	<i>Ms Jasmine Morrison</i>	University of Ballarat
Owner/Operator	<i>Ms Heidi Jarvis</i>	Organised Success
Agricultural Industry/Environment	<i>Mr David Clark</i>	Farmer/Board Member Conservation for Volunteers
Business Operations / Farm Enterprise Agriculture /Export Sector	<i>Mr John Ronan</i>	Self-employed
Ballan Chamber of Commerce/ Retail and Trades	<i>Mr John Cutler</i>	Ballan
Water Board Chairman	<i>Mr John Barnes</i>	Central Highlands Water
Community and Heritage/Cultural and Education Sector	<i>Mrs Liz Sheedy</i>	Ballarat-Variou Committees/Ex Councillor City of Ballarat/Qualified Teacher

4. CHACC Comments

4.1 Response Item 1(a) decisions to fund or not to fund particular projects;

CHACC sees benefit in playing an integral role in the development of projects and in feedback to government on projects inclusive of but not restricted to Regional Partnerships Program. As such CHACC acts as an information rich resource in developing solutions and funding applications across a range of agencies, various levels of government and philanthropic trusts.

CHACC does interface with successful and non-successful proponents throughout the assessment process and post-assessment period. Overall feedback from our proponents on decisions to fund or not fund have more to do with the time between electronic lodgement and notification of decision.

Overall CHACC can confirm that decisions on projects throughout the Central Highlands region that have received High Priority endorsement through the CHACC have been granted. An exception in recent times has been the Labyrinth at Wendouree Centre for Performing Arts.

CHACC notes this application was credited as not having sufficient evidence of economic benefit. This project was supported by CHACC on the basis of high contribution to the wider cultural life of the region and economic grounds.

However, CHACC makes the point that decisions to fund may be stymied as proponents can be influenced not to submit an application that doesn't comply with Regional Partnerships published material.

CHACC advises that all projects recommended by CHACC comply with the published Guidelines for the Regional Partnerships Programme.

Where a proponent may wish to go outside published Guidelines discussion with DoTaRS would be undertaken by CHACC.

CHACC note recent controversy over commitments announced in the election period.

CHACC would suggest if Guidelines are to be used in a discretionary manner information material in the public domain should make that point.

Projects from the Central Highlands region have been advanced and assessed by CHACC under the influence of the Guidelines and stated policy and informal advice of DoTaRS.

If flexibility exists to extend funding significantly outside the informed Guidelines then some statement on this needs to be in the public domain.

In regards to going outside advised Guidelines CHACC raised the issue of dollar for dollar matching funding with Mrs DeAnne Kelly in her former role as Delegate for the Regional Partnership program. CHACC was concerned that in rural drought affected communities of our region it is difficult for local government and community associations to raise capital. Mrs Kelly responded in writing that dollar for dollar matching funding was a flexible requirement and all requests for consideration would be assessed on merit.

CHACC welcomed the response but notes that generally in our local communities it is perceived that the Guidelines are prescribed and absolute requirements.

CHACC suggests the Inquiry Panel might consider the information and marketing of Regional Partnership Guidelines and the advice given by Regional Office liaison personnel from DoTaRS in respect of applications outside stated Guidelines.

4.2 Item 1(b) the recommendations of area consultative committees

CHACC Recommendations are based on rigorous assessment processes. The skills based committee play a significant role and bring significant expertise to the assessment process and therefore to the Final Recommendation. In the case of CHACC a measure of this expertise can be gauged by reviewing the composition of the committee. The committee views the assessment role as the core function and primary motivator for continuing membership.

Better recognition of the assessment process that informs the recommendation of the ACC needs to be given. This issue is exacerbated by the restrictions around the electronic form that is the tool used by DoTaRS in the assessment process. It is difficult to advise the processes employed by ACC's and the expertise utilised in forming the recommendation and submitting on the TRAX system.

4.3 Item 1(c) the recommendations of departmental officers and recommendations from any other sources including from other agencies or other levels of government

Overall CHACC has formed a solid working relationship with Departmental operatives and seeks frank and open dialogue around the issues pertaining to assessment processes and recommendations on all project applications.

CHACC considers that the assessment process cannot be divorced from the recommendation process.

The time factor involved in Departmental assessment is negatively viewed by proponents and it is our experience that a one-size-fits-all approach to substantiation and supporting information is adopted by the Department in preparing applications for consideration by the Delegate.

CHACC believes that significant partnership funding commitment by other levels of government should be highly regarded as a recommendation for a project.

CHACC asserts that instances where a project proponent is local government and the proposal is strongly supported by committed significant State and Local Government funding, and has high priority status recommended by the ACC, it should receive some form of 'fast-tracking'.

DoTaRS advise that applications may in special circumstances be fast-tracked, but this is not the experience of CHACC.

Eg.

(1) The Daylesford Recreation Centre grant application was lodged in December 2003 and granted in August 2004.

The Australian Government funding component was \$132,000 in an overall budget of \$1.1M.

Whilst Planning Permits were not finalised at the time of lodgement there was confirmation of State Government support.

In view of this a conditional grant notification to the proponents may have allayed fears of budget shortfalls and pushed the project closer to commencement.

(2) The Violet Grove Community Business Precinct application was lodged in June 2004 and granted late December 2003.

This project prescribed purchase of a property and a 'priority' process to speed assessment would have benefited all stakeholders.

In many instances DoTaRS request substantiation and supporting evidence that is onerous on the proponent, costly and causes assessment delays because the same requirements apply to large and small scale projects.

The inordinate amount of time taken to assess strongly supported projects reflects poorly on the Programme.

A lengthy assessment process was attached to a project that had commitment of \$7.18M State Government contribution. The request from Regional Partnerships was \$500,000 to value-add to disability access and entranceways.

It would seem that in such cases DoTaRS duplicates due diligence inquiries and financial management assessments undertaken by State government.

Therefore the experience of CHACC in regard to 'recommendation from any other sources' is that insufficient weight is given to State Government and Local Government funding in the assessment process which lengthens the assessment time. Recommendation of projects by other levels of government is evidenced in the contribution of these partners.

Summary

Overall CHACC has worked within the Regional Partnership Guidelines and to the information provided by Department of Transport and Regional Services in articulating regional development outcomes across the Central Highlands region through the Regional Partnerships program.

CHACC positively views the recommendations for funding of projects pursuant to the Regional Partnerships program. CHACC values the ability of the program to consider a diverse range of projects including projects that benefit smaller rural based communities in social and cultural terms, to large scale initiatives providing support in larger provincial centres such as City of Ballarat that generate wide economic gain.

It is the overall economic well-being of our entire region that will ensure we achieve the CHACC vision of promoting partnerships that grow a sustainable, prosperous, innovative and populous region.

Regional Partnership funding has played a vital role in achieving outcomes related to this vision.

CHACC looks to a future where Australian Government funding continues to support large and small scale interventions in our region

Gerrie Carr-MacFie
Executive Officer
CHACC Inc.