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Dear Dr Pender

**RE: New Inquiry development of Northern Australia**

The Roper Gulf Regional Council considers themselves as a major stakeholder in the development of about a third of the Northern portion of the NT. Our Council Plan 2013-14 provides a snap shot of the towns serviced by our local government.

Recent changes to the Northern Territory Government's Local Government Act have resulted in a name change from Shire Council to Regional Council, this may create some confusion as we move through the transition of the reform.

Our Annual Plan represents the needs of our main urban centres and relates to core local government services, agency services and requests for advocacy.

**Development of regional mines**

Recent mining developments in our region have highlighted the lack of roads infrastructure to service this high needs industry. Local residents are currently at great risk travelling on the various secondary highways which are one lane bitumen or gravel roads.

There seems to be very little attention given to the social and environmental impacts of mining in this riverine country. The increase in royalties to local people has had an impact on anti-social behaviour and the rivers of grog continue to flow despite the federal government's restriction of alcohol on Aboriginal land.

Mines of 10 – 20 production years should be distributing a proportion of funds into community benefit trusts so that all residents of nearby towns benefit and have some sustainable developments occurring in their communities.



### **Energy**

There is a great opportunity to reduce the use of fossil fuels and develop alternative energy source in remote towns totally reliant of diesel generated power. Our partners at the Charles Darwin University suggested to the Council that climate change extremes are not the issue of great challenge it will be the cost of diesel with the price rising to \$10/litre in the next 10 years. Solar, wind and water could be investigated for power supplies.

### **Agriculture**

In line with the potential rise in fuel costs a correlation can be drawn to the cost of food. Fresh and staple foods are expensive and food security is of grave concern to our remote towns. The Council has been involved in small horticulture activities over the years and these experiences could equate to large viable food productions systems options. In the 60s the production systems in the region were numerous broad scale operations. The agricultural industry needs to invest in joint ventures and provide drivers for this industry for a few generations so that locals can engage in this industry.

### **Pastoral**

Beef and other exotic species such as buffalo, horse, donkey and pigs can be found in large numbers with traditional owners keen to develop and utilize these resources. Small local abattoirs, trapping and loading infrastructure is limited reducing the opportunities for a diversified industry currently limited to live shipments. The pastoral industry is weakened by its reluctance to diversify and puts all its eggs in the one basket.

The increase numbers of these feral animals have caused community safety issues. These large wild animals are attracted to our towns grass and water supplies in the dry season and we have had several incidents where community members were put at risk.

### **Tourism**

The tourism industry is largely unserviceable in all towns. The regions receive very little promotion except for that of the Savannah Way. Every one of our towns has the potential to offer pioneer type tourism experience again with local Traditional Owners wanting to enter the market. However it is difficult, limited accommodation is an issue although couple of Aboriginal Corporations have recently invested in motel type accommodation. Building such infrastructure and associated auxiliary services is expensive in the bush and greater support and incentive is required. Again roads, boat landings and airstrips need to be upgraded to be able to service a growth in this industry. The festivals of each township and region are also worth promoting and supporting as they provide a window into ancient and contemporary art as well as a rich historical story to be experienced.



### **Defence**

The gulf airstrips and coastlines have identified terrorism as part of their risk management particularly at Numbulwar. It is important that town residents are continued to be engaged in the Army Reserves and other military operations. A remote military academy would service as an alternative to boarding schools in Darwin and Alice Springs. Young men in particular are very active in the reserves. The Defence could house a military academy in the Gulf, providing education and training for local youth as well as having a communications and monitoring point in this isolated area. The training site could also be used to train all defence forces in the extreme conditions of the north.

### **Housing**

Public housing investment will never meet the needs of our growing populations. Land release and private investment is necessary to overcome these shortfalls. As governments devolve trades service to private industry the lack of land for staff housing and workshops means that a majority of the funding set aside for trade services goes towards mobilization costs particularly in the housing repairs and maintenance fields. The Council is trying to do what it can to increase trade training employment and training programs however it remains a fly in fly out industry currently.

Local Indigenous Corporations could benefit from grants to establish government employee housing and rental properties. The recent SIHIP program saw houses of mediocre characteristics plonked on poor roads and drainage infrastructure. No attention was placed on this linear infrastructure in these housing estates developments. Council now has to foot the bill to improve the amenity and associated infrastructure without the developers contributing. In any other regional centre the developer would have been responsible for some contribution to upgrade services to new housing estates. No such respect or allowances were made in the instance of regional remote housing.

Planning measures need to be urgently put into place to ensure that any developments in the future comply to basic planning regimes experienced everywhere else so that the desertion of old public assets by government and the development of new assets do not have a cost shift onto local government.

### **Taxation**



Council supports the return to tax incentives for development and working in the region. It has pledged its support of the Mt Isa Town Council recently to support this government initiative.

### **Economic development**

Programs in the past have not worked a single officer employed to point prospective business ideas in the right direction is not enough. Viability consultations have costs millions over the years with next to no industry development. Government needs to find the successful model to support and assist small business in our towns.

### **Indigenous Employment**

Council currently has an Indigenous employment rate of around 70% out of a 350 strong workforce. The Indigenous population within the Roper Gulf Regional Council area is around 90% and most are working age between the ages of 15 – 45. However, most have low literacy and numeracy levels making it difficult for those who want to advance into higher level jobs. Training for job readiness is vital to overcome these barriers; however it is preferable that any training needs to be aligned with job opportunities. Indigenous people represent around 30% of the total NT population. The development of Northern Australia needs to capitalise on this valuable resource by designing and developing innovative solutions that focus on business activities, large and small in the remote regions of the NT.

### **Impediments to growth**

- Land release in all regional towns
- Navigating the native titles legislation for land release
- Roads, boat, barge and airport infrastructure
- Unskilled labour, poor numeracy literacy rates
- Lack of housing

### **Infrastructure Short Falls**

Creek and major river crossings are seasonally inundated during the wet season reducing standard services to a minimum including, freight, Australia post and general traffic flows to remote towns. All industries are also drawn to a halt because of weight limits on major arterial roads.

### **Critical economic and social infrastructure**

Urban design or a lack of requires great investment to address stormwater, local roads, pedestrian access and the like that all other urban Centres take for granted. This lack of linear infrastructure puts regional towns beyond further development as it spends all it's time and resources re-designing poorly laid out towns annually inflicted by floods and other natural disasters. Planning regimes need to established and promoted in all towns. Large towns have had this work done to some extent as part of the previous federal



government intervention. All towns need these planning regimes to insure Government investment is viable and sustainable.

Council requests the parliamentary enquiry visit our regional capitals Ngukurr, Numbulwar and Borroloola and experience these growth centres first hand. The tyranny of distance although extensive does not detract from the ample development opportunities and resources in the north. We encourage the committee to access the Councils annual Council Plan and annual report at [www.ropergulf.nt.gov.au](http://www.ropergulf.nt.gov.au) where this issues for the region are highlighted.

Our Council would be happy to host your committee and provide logical support and advice.

Yours sincerely

**Sharon Hillen**  
**Director of Infrastructure and Technical services**  
**Roper Gulf Regional Council**

14<sup>TH</sup> February 2014