



HIDDEN TREASURES of the Great Southern

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Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Infrastructure Transport
Regional Development and Local Government.
PO Box 6021
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra
ATC 2600

7th July 2008

Re: Regional Development Funding Program Submission

Dear Secretary

I'm writing on behalf of our group known as the Hidden Treasures of the Great Southern, our group is community driven and a Shire supported partnership- incorporating 7 Local Governments and their 11 associated rural communities. We have also been past recipient of Regional Partnership funding.

Firstly I'd like to apologise if this submission is not articulately written. As a community volunteer in Regional rural WA, the understanding of political problems associated with the Regional Partnership, Government decision making or even the intricacies of the do's and don't of writing an important submission such as this is limited. However I will endeavour to express our concerns and views on the past and future of Regional Development funding.

Our group feels ripped off, disappointed and are very concerned about the future of Regional Development funding and also what looks like the demise of yet another important regionally based Federal Government support agency. Regional Partnership and our Area Consultative Committee have been key supporters and contributors to the Hidden Treasures successful development and existence, like many other regional communities across Australia.

Many of our rural communities are under extreme pressure, through drought, high input costs and the general economic rural environment. But more importantly our infrastructure, built, social and cultural, the local and regional support networks that go with sustainable communities are being threatened by gradually erosion.

Development, growth and support seem to us to be things we are no longer entitled to, unless you happen to have a population over 10,000; a mineral deposit or a beach on your doorstep.

The first Terms of Reference indicates to us that Government feels regional Australian people and support agencies have not been genuine or honest in their development needs and are not responsible planners, developers of their own or regional future destination or direction.

What is a genuine and accountable community infrastructure project?

Our recommendation is for Government to look at all projects as genuine and taken on their merits.

There would be very few communities, Local Governments or groups who seek Federal funding of any type that are not genuine. The regional ACCs play an important role in being the link between Government and applicants, they have Regional understanding of our needs and the Governments expectation. Australia has many innovative projects that did not turn out the way they originally where planned, for a multitude of different reasons, including lack of funding support.

In our view the successes however would, far out way the failures and these should be looked at more closely to learn from the negatives. What may not have worked also does not mean that the project was not genuine or accountable and would not work in future. If all projects are not looked at as genuine, Government will run the risk of stifling regional development and growth.

How can Government decide what is a genuine and accountable community project? Government cannot expect objective or appropriate decisions to be made by a person/s sitting in a office thousands of km away, who hasn't a clue about the needs or how individual communities function. As a past recipient of Regional Partnerships funding we found (thanks to our ACC) the process of application, reporting and acquittal relatively easy.

However obviously there has been issues, hence the Inquiry. If a new form of Regional Development funding is to be initiated, then it needs to be kept a reasonably simple process, to help minimize administrative costs. It needs to be kept in mind that many regional groups applying for funding do not have the financial capacity to 'employ a lawyer' to decipher all the current technical jargon associated with Federal funding applications and contracts. The more technical an application processes is, the more likelihood of over sights, misunderstanding and errors to occur.

The thought maybe that bodies like the WA State Development Commissions can take on the support and decision making role, we strongly feel this won't work either. State Governments all have different development policies, strategies, funding programs and direction. More often or not, groups seeking funding for major projects seek State funding first then Federal funding such as Regional Partnerships or visa versa. The Development Commissions or similar should not be expected to make

objective or informed funding decisions for the Federal Government, it opens the way for potential conflict of interest issues.

The Development Commissions & Area Consultative Committees can and do work together very successfully, but their roles should remain totally separate. It would help ensure there are two accountability mechanisms in place, in the event of any new Regional Development schemes been introduced for both Federal and State which could help to minimise the potential risk of a project failing. *(e.g. One maybe more objective or see a potential 'Red Light' in a project earlier and alert the other)*

Government is no longer grass roots it seems to be all about \$\$\$\$ and not support. Our services, which were once local then regionally available are now been centralise to the cities with little consultation or input from those it may affect. Financial support programs associated with those services continue to also decrease or become more difficult to acquire.

Cutting or abolishing schemes such as the Regional Partnerships or the support of our regional Area Consultative Committees is just another kick in the teeth for many of our already struggling regional Australian communities. The recent decision to put a hold on Regional Partnership funding in effect has cost, already struggling regional communities, millions of dollars, which may never be recouped and valuable recourses have been wasted. We wonder how the Committee would feel if put in the same position as these communities place?

In closing, the Inquiry committee is to make recommendations to the new Government on how it can re-invent or invent a new Regional Development funding program (if any!!), we know it's not about the ACC but both are inter-related and very important to regional Australia, in our view.

We live in rural regional WA and at the moment this Inquiry to us looks a bit like this. A farmer (the Government) has just bought a new farm and with that purchase came a very reliable and faithful tractor (ACC). He's keen to improve his new purchase but he needs to do it economically. On examining the tractor he notices one of its wheels (Regional Partnerships) isn't working very well. So he goes to the local mechanic and asks for advice. If you were the mechanic, would it make good economical sense to fix the wheel or just throw away the tractor and get a contractor in? To us from experience it's more economical, in the long run to examine the offending wheel, fix it or get a new wheel and making sure the tractor had stronger support in future.

Yours truly

Di Holly
Chairperson of the
Hidden Treasures of the Great Southern