

The Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local
Government
PO Box 6021
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Subject: Inquiry into a New Regional Development Funding Program

Dear Sir or Madam,

I wish to put to you a short submission regarding the value of an appropriate Regional Development Funding Program, particularly as it relates to remote country communities of low population with subsequent limited ability to raise finance to fund the worthwhile projects that they need.

In an effort to highlight my view of the importance and absolute necessity of developing and sustaining a Regional Grants Program, on behalf of the Cootamundra Mens Shed Inc, I respectfully submit the following information:

1. Why Regional Funding?

Many regional communities look for ways to improve the well-being and lifestyles of their residents and to provide the necessary infrastructure to achieve those goals. No doubt there are many and varied projects falling into this category that require significant financial assistance if they are to be achieved. Without such assistance, particularly in areas of low density population, the acquiring of the necessary funds can sometimes pose an insurmountable problem, resulting in the status quo remaining and a vital community project having to be abandoned, or alternatively, provided over an unrealistic time span which ultimately makes the project more expensive to complete. The worst scenario is that small regional groups can be totally disadvantaged in relation to their city counterparts simply on the inability of small population communities to raise the necessary funding for projects. This is particularly emphasized at present with the tightening of expenditure by people in the drought areas of the country, some now into their sixth year.

Sustainable programs are in the main, long term continuing projects aimed at providing improved facilities and lifestyles to their recipients. A prime example of such projects is the Mens Shed movement, which offers, apart from anything else, ongoing health benefits to its Members, as well as other services to the community. These benefits will be expanded on later in this submission

2. An Example of Funding Benefits:

The simplest way to look at the validity and need for a Funding Program is to concentrate on facts established by a project that has in fact been funded in this way. As an example, the Cootamundra Mens Shed (and the Mens Shed Movement in general) can give a clear insight into an operation that improves the sustainability and livability of Regional Australia and provides a long overdue remedy to a shortcoming in our society that has seen men of advancing age left alone to cope with the ravages of loneliness, depression, general poor health and sometimes suicide (the rate being 5 times that of women of similar age).

Without recounting a lengthy history of the establishment of the Cootamundra Mens Shed Inc, it will suffice to say that, without Regional and Local Council funding and support, it would not be the meeting place, educational facility and network support instrument to older men that it is today.

In looking at the funding of Mens Sheds as an example, one needs to provide clear evidence of their viability and need in the community, thereby meeting the needs of “genuine regional economic development and community infrastructure with the aim of enhancing the sustainability and livability of Australia’s regions”. Of course, appropriate evidence needs to be provided by any organization seeking support, and there are following examples of what one might expect is needed to support applications.

From the point of view of Mens Sheds, the available information is readily available to substantiate and justify funding to such a program- eg:

- “A Profile of Mens Sheds in Australia”: Associate Professor Barry Golding, School of Education, University of Ballarat.
- Various Publications by Rick Hayes, A.Sc(General Studies) Mohegan, BSc (Psych) NY, M.Div (Hons) Denver, Doctoral Candidate, School of Public Health, La Trobe University.
- Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency

3. Why Regional Projects that meet the Criteria?

The value of Mens Sheds and like programs to local communities has been the subject of a great deal of research from quite a range of Professionals and organizations. Amongst that research, there are a number of factors remedied by Mens Sheds that constantly receive recognition and discussion:-

- The remedying of loneliness and isolation felt by widowers, single men who have been retrenched or retired, those of ill health,.
- The relief of depression by providing a new start in life, making new friends and learning new skills or revisiting old ones long put aside.
- Mixing with a group who have similar problems, desires and needs.
- Generally improving mental health by providing a new sense of self worth and acceptance and feeling like part of a team.

Without funding to assist with many regional enterprises and innovations, local communities will, over time, suffer loss of quality of life in comparison to City neighbours and the further that those proposals are neglected for lack of finance, the more difficult and expensive it becomes to resolve the problems by the belated introduction of remedies.

It must be remembered that, in many smaller country communities, previously provided Government and private facilities are being removed and centralized, usually resulting in added expense and time in traveling in order to access those services. Accordingly, where it is possible to provide a sustainable alternative or remedy by Regional funding combined with local community funding input and ongoing management, those losses can be adequately met and compensated for.

4. Conclusions:

- Assisted funding to Regional Communities helps to provide quality of life projects that would otherwise fail to be achieved
- Jointly funded projects where community management is involved provide a sense of ownership by the community that guarantees ongoing sustainability.
- The initial setting of appropriate guidelines for Regional funding support will, in itself, minimize administrative costs in the medium to long term and avoid duplications.
- Appropriate guidelines for such funding should be determined with full input from residents of Regional Communities . Those selected residents should be those whose experience and ability is such that their input and ongoing support of such programs will be positive and embrace the overall need rather than just their own particular needs.

It is hoped that the information provided has some form of relevance to the inquiry and encourages the planning to maintain adequate Regional Development Funding.

John Ashcroft

John Ashcroft
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Cootamundra Mens Shed Inc

