



Submission to the Australian Senate Inquiry into “The future role and contribution of regional capitals to Australia”

Horsham Rural City Council (HRCC) wishes to submit to Australian Senate Inquiry into “The future role and contribution of regional capitals to Australia”. This submission covers a number of issues we believe the review should consider. It does not attempt to cover all the points raised.

Governance Framework

HRCC recognise the importance of good governance and leadership by Councils of regional capitals to ensure strong and sustainable regional and rural areas. This includes having: a pro-active stance on development; effective regional advocacy; strong community engagement; embracing innovation and new technology; good strategic planning for sustainable growth; willingness to take a leadership role in major projects; sharing of resources with smaller councils, and importantly managing response to natural disasters -minimising impact and maximising recovery efforts.

We consider that the size of the regional capital is irrelevant. The important role the regional capital plays in the regional economy and provision of vital services to the hinterland, which would otherwise not be provided, is the key factor regardless of size.

Horsham Rural City is part of the Wimmera Southern Mallee region of Victoria and works co-operatively for economic development and strong regional and rural communities with the other five councils of the region – Hindmarsh, Yarriambiack, West Wimmera, Northern Grampians and on occasions, the Buloke Shire Council. There is an effective formal regional collaboration structure in place led through the Wimmera Development Association, Wimmera CEO’s group, Wimmera Mayors Group and planning mechanisms such as the Wimmera-Southern Mallee Regional Strategic Plan, the Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Growth Plan and the Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Investment Plan. Wimmera regional councils also hold an annual forum where a number of current issues relevant to Local Government and economic development are considered.

Horsham Rural City Council notes the importance of Regional Cities Victoria and the role it plays in coordinating and researching issues of importance to the regional capitals in Victoria.

Industry and Exports

The significant economic activity of our region is based on agriculture and agricultural support industries. The Wimmera continues to have a high productivity per head of population. However the increasing mechanisation and aggregation in agriculture continues to contribute to overall population decline within the region

The Wimmera Development Association and the five regional Councils have worked on broadening the economic base of the region, largely concentrating on adding value to agriculture and improving the efficiency of agriculture. The main aspects of this are improvements to on-farm productivity, freight and logistics improvements, both within and from the region, research into broad-acre cropping, encouraging value-adding to product and agricultural education at secondary and tertiary levels. In all these areas successive State Governments have either led or supported improvement.

The advantage of regional capitals is that they are close to their products i.e. tourism, wheat, lentils and are a key element of the supply chain in getting the product to market both domestically and as exports. Large ports and good regional infrastructure are an important element of this – roads, rail, intermodal freight hubs, and air services. Government support for investment to expand industry around these is important i.e. having suitable industrial land ‘ready to go’.

Horsham Rural City Council believes that continued work to develop Asian markets is essential. We must, however, recognise that Victoria is not able to produce the bulk quantities required to satisfy the Asian market, but needs to work on high quality niche products that produce a high value return to Australia.

Regional capitals can easily identify and are well placed to have good professional relationships with major developers and business in the region, and can be key drivers of future economic growth.

Transportation

Improving transport in all forms is the key to building a more sustainable and growing regional Victoria. Horsham’s role as the regional capital of the Wimmera is based firmly upon the national road and rail links between Melbourne and Adelaide. These links provide access to markets for our regional industries and tourism. The development of the \$16million Wimmera Intermodal Freight Terminal (WIFT) in 2012 was a collaborative project between local, state and federal governments, and private industry. Horsham Rural City Council was the key driver of this project which has created a strong logistics chain for the Wimmera Region for the next 10-20 years. Government strategies and funding are needed to support the development of industrial estates at the WIFT in the short to medium term.

On a broader level, there needs to be a strong commitment at the State and National level to maintain and improve transport networks and regional connectivity to capital cities and major ports.

An improvement in public transport is also required. The Councils of the South West and the Wimmera believe that the return of passenger rail is a significant economic driver, a key factor in providing increased employment opportunities and has an important social aspect for our communities to provide access to services in Melbourne and Ballarat. Connectivity to regional capitals and state capitals improves the attractiveness of our region to live, work and invest.

Strong government policy and funding for major and minor road networks in regional Victoria is also essential to ensure easy and safe travel within rural areas and when commuting to regional capitals or Melbourne.

Education and Training

Educational attainment levels for the Wimmera-Southern Mallee are the lowest in Victoria, which is of considerable concern for the future. Our area is generally characterised by low unemployment as people tend to leave the region if they are unable to gain employment and rarely return.

State and Federal Government need to support regional capitals through the development and implementation of policies (and funding) to support job creation that will attract and retain professional workers in our region. Access to high quality education at all levels is essential to attract and retain people in our region. Strong government support of tertiary institutions (i.e. Federation University in Horsham) is essential to ensure that people can undertake undergraduate

tertiary studies in key workforce shortage areas i.e. nursing and education. This is not being seen at the moment. Locally trained professionals are overwhelmingly the ones that choose to stay, live and work in our region. At the same time, promotion of work placements in regional capitals as part of tertiary studies is another policy and funding area that needs to be developed by all levels of government. Sampling rural living and benefits of our lifestyle is a key factor in people choosing to live and work in regional Victoria on a permanent basis.

There is a need for continuing focus on vocational training in our region, in particular, VET in schools programs and post-secondary vocational training. The success of Longerenong College in providing an Advanced Diploma in Agriculture showcases the potential and need for increased vocational education training and degree level agricultural courses which can feed into the strong agricultural research industry that exists in the Wimmera.

Financing of Infrastructure

Investment in regional infrastructure is a key to supporting the 'liveability' of regional capitals: to attracting business investment and to providing high standard health/education/social services. Budget restraints and future rates capping, combined with a growing need for infrastructure renewal is placing considerable strain on regional capitals. Local examples of key projects to support the liveability of our region include the \$19.6million Horsham Performing Arts Centre and the \$1.1million Wimmera River Pedestrian bridge.

Regional Capitals are aware that they must strongly support projects that not only strengthen the regional capital but the surrounding region.

Critical infrastructure projects identified for our region include:

- Western Highway duplication and upgrades
- Improvement in mobile phone coverage
- Standardisation of rail freight to increase freight efficiency, reduce travel time and rail costs and reduce the number of large trucks on the Western Highway
- Improved Weather Forecasting for Wimmera Southern Mallee farmers – Doppler Radar

Information and computer technology (ICT)

Importance of NBN to regional cities. NBN offers significant opportunities to regional communities in terms of increased speed and capacity for business.

Increasing use of ICT demands a greater access to broadband capacity and the use of mobile data in agriculture, creating a need for better mobile phone coverage not only for voice but also for data. Widening dependence on digital service delivery has the potential to seriously disadvantage regional and rural areas. The importance of NBN to regional cities cannot be understated.

Innovation

Entrepreneurship and innovation are recognised as important assets a regional capital must have to grow, to build regional competitiveness, diversification and new products. Australian regional capitals could look to the lead of other international cities and focus on creating good recreation and physical activities and space, and being well connected in terms of both public transport and on-line resources. This is essential to attract and retain young creative professionals to our regional cities.

Innovation in agriculture is well established in our region, with Horsham the centre of grains research and innovation. This is a particular area of strength for our local economy that we will continue to grow in the future.

Government Regional Development Organisations

Our Council acknowledges the important collaborative and co-operative role that Regional Development Victoria regional office staff (i.e. Grampians Region) play in assisting our regions to grow and develop. Excellent communication and 'face-to-face' contact have assisted the development of a number of high priority projects for our region. Our regional RDV staff have provided an excellent resource whenever needed.

Moving forward, our Council would like to see Commonwealth funding for regional development be more closely integrated with state bodies, event to the extent of providing the funding to be allocated to State bodies with clear guidelines for funding. This would maximise the local knowledge and existing partnerships that state regional development teams have with regional Australia.

Where should the government be focusing future strategy and resources

- The Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Investment Plan (March 2015) focuses on 4 key areas of growth for Horsham and surrounding rural areas. Government and private investment needs to be focused on creating jobs, increasing business investment, increasing exports from our region and increasing opportunities through innovation and diversification. Horsham as the regional capital of the Wimmera has the capacity to accommodate more people and attract new businesses.
- Rail, air and road freight and passenger networks between regional capitals and state capitals are vital and government investment should look to improve these over the next 10 years.
- Policies and investment that lift farm profitability will assist regional capitals to grow and prosper.
- Enhancement of education opportunities in regional cities is the key to having a well trained professional workforce. Government investment in maintaining and developing regional TAFE's and Universities is essential.
- To promote the retention of young people and professionals, enhance the "liveability" of our regional capitals and assist them to build on their individual "points of attraction".