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WINTON SHIRE COUNCIL

The following information is provided for the consideration of the Environment and Communications Legislation Committee's inquiry into the Broadcasting Legislation Amendment (Digital Dividend and Other Measures) Bill 2011.

As a result of our dealings with the Government on the matter of digital television, both as an individual council and as a member of the Remote Area Planning and Development Board (RAPAD), the Winton Shire Council would like to express the following concerns with the present digital migration policy.

- From the outset, there has been a lack of consultation regarding the digital TV policy exhibited by the Government's eschewing of remote and regional area issues
- In his April 2010 letter, Senator Stephen Conroy invited existing rebroadcasters to consider alternatives to the proposed VAST system; however, precious little time or resources have been provided to allow councils to effectively explore alternative solutions. Exploring options for terrestrial retransmission of the VAST signal has only been possible since the VAST platform was finalised in late 2010, making the February 2011 deadline for self-help licensees incredibly unrealistic. The ability for Councils to effectively test alternative solutions during this short timeframe was further complicated by the Government's unwillingness to provide the necessary resources to facilitate the successful rebroadcast of the VAST signal.
- No recognition by the government of the social and economic considerations for remote businesses and government and council owned facilities (such as libraries, schools and hospitals) by omitting any such premises from the Satellite Subsidy Scheme.
- There has been little consideration given to the viability of rebroadcasting in MPEG4 in remote and regional areas. MPEG4 retransmission is technically superior and more cost effective (since it would eliminate the extra process of transcoding the MPEG4 VAST streams to reduced quality MPEG2 streams) when compared to MPEG2 retransmission. As there has previously existed little or no transmission of digital television in remote and regional areas, there is not the preponderance of legacy MPEG2-only hardware that exists in more populated areas that have been receiving digital transmissions for some years.

- The Government has clearly indicated through their actions, or lack thereof, that their preference is for councils to abandon self-help retransmission and migrate to VAST. It is our belief that this is not necessarily in the best interests of the people, nor does it provide a 'metropolitan-equivalent' service. We believe terrestrial transmission of digital television, be it MPEG4 or MPEG2, is far more versatile and more user-friendly than VAST (in its current closed format) and allows the viewer to better experience the benefits of digital television. VAST can only be accessed by using the basic UEC decoder, whereas there are numerous decoders available for terrestrial transmissions that include more advanced features, in particular, the ability to time-shift digital transmissions in their native broadcast format (i.e. the ability to record an episode of a television show and watch it at a later date in its original broadcast quality).

Regards,

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