



Submission to Inquiry into Rural Australia

**by the House of Representatives Select
Committee on Regional Australia**

November 2019

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1. Executive Summary

A continued focus on, and promotion of the development of regional centres, cities, towns and districts is critical to support the long-term sustainability of regional communities and manage Australia's population effectively.

There are almost always competitive advantages for businesses in the regions and these need to be actively promoted. By way of example, in the case of East Gippsland advantages include significant opportunities for growth in the aged care and health sectors, proximity to suppliers for food manufacturing and an enviable lifestyle opportunity for employees.

Assistance and support for master planning of regional development is also critical. Master planning for regional towns and smaller communities ensures that growth is appropriate; that the things that make these areas special are preserved; and that strong and resilient economies and regional communities result. Unfortunately, the nature of the task is such that it is often beyond the ability of smaller Local Government areas to deliver without assistance.

Ongoing investment in infrastructure planning and delivery is essential to the development of regional cities and communities. Before regional settlements can thrive, major barriers to business and industry need to be addressed. In general terms, these barriers include inadequate access to:

- a reliable water source;
- freight transport that provides efficient connection between regional settlements and their key markets;
- education and training opportunities that align to businesses and industries in the region;
- high speed and high bandwidth telecommunications infrastructure; and
- clean, reliable energy sources including solar, wind and waste energy harvesting.

To encourage people to settle in the regions a quality lifestyle must be able to be offered. Regional settlements need investment and, in some areas, regulatory support to be able to deliver high quality health, education, industry-specific training and other professional services comparable to metropolitan areas.

Access to inclusive, affordable transport options is also required, to foster healthy, connected and integrated communities. In addition to flexible public transport options for residents of all abilities and stages of life, other attractive and viable mobility options need to be available, such as walking and cycling tracks.

Long-term investment and support from state and federal governments is required not only to ensure existing businesses in the region can continue to develop and grow, but also to open up new opportunities for private sector investment. In East Gippsland, adventure and eco-tourism are prime examples for development, given the region's wealth of natural assets.

Finally, financial support for, and promotion of the development of resource-efficient waste, wastewater management and recycling infrastructure and systems is essential. Recycling and re-use of natural resources must be optimised in accordance with best practice and in a way that ensures no further pressure is placed on existing metropolitan systems.

2. Introduction

This submission has been prepared by East Gippsland Shire Council in response to an invitation by the Select Committee on Regional Australia to contribute our insights and experience about:

- the contribution regional Australia makes to the nation's identity, economy and environment; and
- the effectiveness of existing programs to develop and promote regional centres, cities, towns and districts.

Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry and would welcome any additional opportunities to add value to the work of the Select Committee.

2.1 About East Gippsland

Council's vision for East Gippsland is that it is the most liveable region in Australia - a place of natural beauty, enviable lifestyles, and opportunities.

Covering 20,931 square kilometres, East Gippsland is the second largest municipality in Victoria. To the east it is bordered by New South Wales and to the north, the Victorian Local Government councils of Towong and Alpine. Wellington Shire Council, Victoria's third largest municipality, sits immediately to our west.

East Gippsland is home to the major residential and commercial centre of Bairnsdale (est. population 14,887) located to the west of the shire. There are seven other towns throughout the municipality, including Mallacoota (est. population 1,063) in the far east (three hours travel from Bairnsdale) and Omeo to the north (est. population 406). Other significant towns include Lakes Entrance (est. population 4,810) and Paynesville (est. population 3,480)¹. In total, East Gippsland has more than 40 separate communities.

Approximately 75% of land in East Gippsland is in public ownership, mainly as state forests, national and coastal parks, and marine national parks. Because it is owned by the Crown, this land is unrateable. Land in private ownership comprises approximately 17% of the region.

The region features a number of significant natural assets including declared 'heritage' rivers, Ramsar² listed wetlands, pristine beaches and many national parks and reserves.

Our people

The population of East Gippsland is approximately 47,000³ and is estimated to have grown at a rate of 1.0% per year compared to a national population growth rate of 1.04% per year over the same period. The population is projected to grow at a similar rate through to 2021.

Other statistics⁴ about East Gippsland that are worthy of note include that:

¹ All population figures from 2016 Census

² A **Ramsar** site is a wetland site designated to be of international importance under the **Ramsar** Convention. The Convention on Wetlands, known as the **Ramsar** Convention, is an intergovernmental environmental treaty established in 1971 by UNESCO, which came into force in 1975.

³ Population of 45,040 returned through 2016 Census

⁴ Department of Health, Modelling, GIS and Planning Products Unit, 2012 is the main source of these data, with additional figures from id consulting and ABS.

- Our population is considerably older than the Victorian average, with more than 50% of residents aged 45 years or older, and nearly 23% aged 65 years or older.
- We have the fourth highest proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents (1,332 people) in Victoria.
- In the March 2019 quarter, the unemployment rate in East Gippsland Shire was 6.07%, compared to 7.76% at the same time in 2017. This is higher than the unemployment rate for Victoria (4.7%) and the wider Gippsland region (4.68%).
- The level of cultural diversity in East Gippsland is low, with only 4.7% born in a non-English speaking country, and 3.4% speaking a language other than English at home.
- Median household income is well below the Victorian average, and there is a higher than average percentage of low-income individuals.

Our economy

As at 30 June 2018, East Gippsland's Gross Regional Product (GRP) was valued at \$2.04 billion⁵ which represents 0.5% of Victoria's Gross State Product (GSP).

There were 4,451 local businesses, who offered employment in 18,759 jobs.

Health Care and Social Assistance was the largest employer, making up 15.6% of total employment. Other major employers were Retail (12.1%), Accommodation and Food Services (9.2%), Education and Training (9.1%), Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing (9.0%) and Manufacturing (8.0%).

Total output in East Gippsland was estimated at \$4,695.680 million, with the major contributors being Manufacturing (15.8%), Construction (13.5%) and Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing (12.2%).

Our future

As we move into the future, East Gippslanders want to retain all that is special about our region. We want to be informed, effective and responsive to meet the challenges ahead.

The past 30 years has seen East Gippsland evolve from its traditional rural origins to a diverse economy that includes the manufacturing, tourism, retail, construction and trades, agriculture, fisheries and education sectors.

The region has kept its identity and sense of place as it has grown. In partnership with its communities, Council seeks to enrich East Gippsland's lifestyle appeal and boost growth by becoming Australia's most liveable regional area. We envisage a dynamic and thriving economy, a region that is a responsible steward of its environment and a region that is resilient against unexpected events, both natural and human-driven.

A 2017 study of community values and liveability undertaken by Ipsos (a global market research company), the top five attributes that make somewhere a good place live are:

- Feeling safe – 74%
- Affordable housing – 56%
- High quality health services – 47%
- Access to the natural environment – 42%
- Reliable and efficient public transport – 36%.

⁵ <https://economy.id.com.au/east-gippsland>

The importance of these attributes is echoed in Council's *Long-term Community Vision 2030 - Shaping the Future*, which identifies a wide range of priorities for East Gippslanders that are considered essential to the region's continued growth and prosperity. These include:

- Increasingly flexible and innovative delivery of health and community services at the local level to meet the needs of all East Gippsland residents.
- Availability of services and facilities that will support East Gippsland's retirement community and ageing population.
- Provision and upgrade of high-quality infrastructure that responds effectively to population growth and changes in the demographic makeup of the community.
- The region's road, rail, air and water transport infrastructure meet the future needs of the community and its businesses, industries and visitors.
- Availability of alternative and innovative forms of public transport that support community and business activity in a cost-effective and sustainable way.
- High quality communications networks need to be expanded to enable all businesses and services in the Shire to access new sources of information and take advantage of advances in electronic commerce.
All learning centres – including individual homes and workplaces – have access to the best communications technologies possible.
- Dependence on electricity and solid fuel is reduced through investigation and implementation of alternative and distributed forms of energy for our towns.

2.2 Focus of this submission

Rather than address each of the enquiry's Terms of Reference, this submission focuses on those aspects of the enquiry on which it is considered Council's perspective may differ from that of many other Local Government entities.

The specific Terms of Reference addressed in this submission are:

- c) Promoting the development of regional centres, cities, towns and districts including promoting master planning of regional communities.
- f) Promoting the competitive advantages of regional location for businesses.
- k) Identifying the infrastructure requirements for reliable and affordable health, education, transport, telecommunications, clean energy, water and waste in a new settlement of reasonable size, located away from existing infrastructure.

3. Responses to Terms of Reference

3.1 Term of Reference (c): **Promoting the development of regional centres, cities, towns and districts including promoting master planning of regional communities**

Continued focus on and promotion of the development of regional centres, cities, towns and districts is critical to supporting the long-term sustainability of regional communities and managing Australia's population effectively.

To date, much of the focus of state and federal governments has been on the large regional cities and there are significant success stories from this work. Now, it is important that the support extend to the next tier of regional towns and smaller regional communities, so they are not left behind. At a certain point, regional cities begin to develop their own momentum for development and growth.

Many East Gippsland towns are small (<1000 population or <5000 population). The economic benefit of job creation in these towns is between 12.75 and 31.72 times that for large regional cities (>100,000 population)⁶. Clearly, investment in supporting small rural communities can deliver significant benefits, not only for that local community but also more generally. As well, there are the broader social benefits that flow from purposeful and targeted investment in developing regions.

Master planning for regional towns and smaller communities is critical to ensure that growth is appropriate; that the things that make these areas special are not compromised; and that strong and resilient economies and regional communities result.

Also critical is assistance and support for master planning, given the nature of the task and the typically more limited resources of regional local governments that have the lead in such planning. This is particularly the case where townships may be affected by complex issues such as bushfire risk or coastal erosion and inundation.

Regional economies are often more vulnerable to change in one or more industry sectors. In regional settlements, it is not unusual for a small number of large companies to employ significant numbers of people. Changes to these businesses have the potential to result in broad impacts, including to other industries and businesses that are partly reliant on them. Also, the nature of many of the roles offered by these companies can mean that they are difficult to transition, as evidenced by what is occurring in the Latrobe Valley, where less than half of the participants in a scheme set up to help former workers at the Hazelwood power station are in full-time work, more than two years after the coal-fired plant's closure.

Therefore, it is critical to both support key industries such as this, and plan for the longer term and particularly for diversification and resilience in the regional economy. This includes planning

⁶ <https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/dutchmedia-static-ruralcvcic/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/07124549/RCV-Economic-Impacts-Assessment-report.pdf>

for changes that may be triggered or exacerbated by changes in the climate (e.g. in agricultural production).

Parts of East Gippsland have seen the economic and social impacts of an economy lacking diversity. Some towns have struggled with the transition away from traditional industries such as forestry, while other communities see a future based on tourism and the natural environment. The transition to a tourism-focused economy for some parts of the shire is proving challenging in respect to attracting investment from outside the region, reskilling the workforce and providing new infrastructure to promote the tourism market in a nature-based environment.

The economic benefit of job creation (refer previous page) is particularly important for some smaller communities in East Gippsland, including those that have been impacted adversely by reductions in the timber industry. Council believes that investment to support nature-based tourism in and around the state forests, national and coastal parks, and marine national parks that make up approximately 75% of East Gippsland is a prime opportunity to optimise these benefits. Long-term investment and support from state and federal governments is required to support the transition to this tourism market but also importantly, to open opportunities for private sector investment to make the most of the natural assets East Gippsland has in abundance ('glamping', beach experiences).

It is important that education and training is provided that aligns with the needs of the key industries that employ people and deliver economic benefits to the regions now and into the future. In East Gippsland, examples include the health, food and agriculture, and visitor economies.

There are also opportunities to provide reskilling programs that are targeted to growth sectors, as well as more generalised programs. By way of example, currently the fishing industry in Lakes Entrance is experiencing change and there would be an opportunity to transition some of this workforce into potential growth areas of the East Gippsland economy.

Mining is another key opportunity for regional development, provided it is subject to careful planning and control to ensure that the environment, and other values enjoyed by local residents that form part of why they live where they do, are not compromised. This is a key challenge. Another is that mining projects can involve a significant scale up of jobs and requirements for community infrastructure for a relatively short period of time. Again, careful planning is required to ensure such developments leave a positive legacy.

As discussed in more detail at clause 3.3 of this submission, infrastructure planning and delivery is a critical part of promoting the development of regional cities. Access to water, energy, transport and telecommunications are critical enablers of development. Transport improvements that reduce travel time for freight or people between Bairnsdale and key markets are a key enabler of economic development and growth in population.

Similarly, education - particularly post-secondary education - is a key enabler and driver of regional development. Continued investment in delivery of post-secondary education in regional areas is important, from the perspective of encouraging people to stay in regional communities, providing educational opportunities that otherwise would not be available for some people and for other investment that is triggered as an offshoot of such educational opportunities.

3.2 **Term of Reference (f): Promoting the competitive advantages of regional location for businesses**

The Invest Gippsland campaign⁷ makes the case for business investment in East Gippsland and Gippsland more generally.

Access to land and transport connections are advantages for business, as are the lifestyle opportunities for employees. These advantages are not well understood and so there is a need to continue to promote them. One example of this is the document, *Head East – A Guide to Living, Working & Investing in East Gippsland*⁸.

This region is ideally located halfway between Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney and should be promoted as a location for value-adding facilities or manufacturing businesses that can build on its existing industry strengths, most notably food and agriculture. Similarly, this location provides significant opportunities in the tourism sector.

For some industry sectors there are also advantages that come from proximity to suppliers. In the case of East Gippsland, this applies to food manufacturing, which equates to a \$1.452 billion industry for the local economy. Similarly, the opportunities for growth in the aged care and health sectors are significant.

Realising these advantages also relies in investment to ensure that any barriers to businesses and employees locating regionally are addressed. Again, these relate to transport infrastructure, telecommunications, energy, water, education and health services.

There is a continuing need to attract professional services to regional areas to support local communities and economies. Being able to deliver high quality services comparable to metropolitan areas makes regional areas more attractive to investment and is a major factor in attracting professional employees and their partners.

Similarly, improving transport and telecommunications infrastructure are enabling professional services to be delivered from regional areas, with employees enjoying the benefits of a regional lifestyle.

The Invest Gippsland campaign is a good example of promoting the competitive advantage of Gippsland as a desirable location for business investment, putting the case for business investment based on a:

- vibrant and growing region;
- pro-business environment;
- myriad of different business and investment opportunities; and
- strong workforce and attractive lifestyle.

⁷ <https://www.investgippsland.com.au/>

⁸ http://www.eastgippsland.vic.gov.au/files/1dd5edc4-dd82-4018-9013-a07d00ba4aa6/head_east_web_version.pdf

Initiatives such as this have been able to effectively promote and open up the greater Gippsland region to potential opportunities that exist through the Victorian Government's Trade partners in the Asia Pacific to attract medium to large business investment to Gippsland due to the growing demand for Food and Fibre. East Gippsland is currently well placed to take advantage of these opportunities because of its clean, green environment and established export businesses.

There is also a need to support existing local and regional businesses to continue to grow, particularly where there are opportunities to compete in national and international markets where location is less critical. Often businesses that have grown up in a regional location are keen to stay and grow if the conditions are right. Ensuring barriers to businesses doing so are addressed (e.g. transport infrastructure, access to energy, access to skilled workers) is an important step.

The current arrangements for skilled migration that provide incentives for migrant workers to locate to regional Australia should be retained. Proposals to change the classification of larger settlements such as Perth and Gold Coast so they are no longer regarded as major cities for migration purposes⁹ is strongly opposed, on the grounds that this would undermine the intent of the scheme to provide much-needed support to regional Australia. It is considered unlikely that regional Australia would be able to compete with Perth and the Gold Coast to attract the skilled workers it needs and therefore, the proposed change will disadvantage regional industries and their communities further.

⁹ <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/perth-gold-coast-dump-major-cities-tag-to-attract-more-regional-migrants-international-students?cid=newsapp:socialshare:email>

3.3 **Term of Reference (k): Identifying the infrastructure requirements for reliable and affordable health, education, transport, telecommunications, clean energy, water and waste in a new settlement of reasonable size, located away from existing infrastructure**

A self-sufficient regional settlement must have access to excellent **health** facilities that cater for the full cross-section of the region's demographic makeup. This is critical for the wellbeing of the resident and visiting populations and to ensure that new and expanding regional populations do not place increased demand on metropolitan facilities and transport networks.

Regional health facilities need to cater for most general and specialist needs. Where acute or specialist patient care can be provided only in metropolitan facilities, access to transport options, including rapid transport, needs to be provided.

Although tele-health has been mooted as the solution to many 'tyranny of distance' health issues, poor **telecommunications** connectivity has often restricted or prevented take up of tele-health opportunities. As such, mortality rates for diseases such as cancer remain higher in regional areas.

When governments are considering decentralisation and incentivising relocation of both industry and workforce, consideration should also be given to investing in areas with **existing health and education services** that could be expanded to meet the needs of an expanding population base. The cost of expanding an existing service is significantly less than introducing new services and has the added advantage of supporting the needs of the existing community as well as the new / increased population. Towns with these services and facilities should be considered the 'next tier' for investment, after regional and sub-regional centres.

Continued investment in high-speed and high-band width telecommunications infrastructure is therefore critical to ensuring appropriate health services can be accessed remotely by regional communities.

Key to **education** and retaining students in regional areas is a broad range of tertiary options, supported by infrastructure designed to provide access to and take advantage of the opportunities created by emerging technologies.

Centralised education facilities, supporting delivery of a broad range of courses from various providers, would facilitate efficient utilisation of excellent facilities within regional settlement areas. Shared facilities would enable and encourage resource sharing and greater levels of support for students.

Mixed-mode education utilising modern, technologically advanced facilities and online content delivery would provide greater choice and opportunity for regional students, as an alternative to campus-based study at a single institution.

It is also important that education facilities and opportunities within regional settlements align with the commercial and industrial strengths and opportunities that exist within the region, to encourage the retention of students within the area. Education hubs such as the one developing in Bairnsdale have the potential to add significant value for regional students because of the opportunity they provide for students to congregate physically, support each other and have access to a higher education experience as part of their traditional and e-learning.

Integrated **transport** networks for regional settlements must be highly efficient and accessible, to offer a viable alternative to the current, common dependence by residents of regional settlements on personal vehicles.

Transport infrastructure design should also consider efficient and safe transport options that encourage walking and cycling between local destinations. Creating attractive and inclusive travel and transport alternatives for users of all abilities is a key contributor to good social, environmental and health outcomes.

Well-designed local **public transport** networks are needed, to provide connection between activity nodes within settlement areas and connection to inter-region public transport hubs. This is critical to the quality of life for regional populations.

Regional settlement areas must be linked to metropolitan areas and other regional settlements via an efficient network of inter-connected routes catering for a mix of transport modes.

The tourism industry, which brings new investment and spending to the region, is heavily dependent on transport infrastructure.

Also critical for this region is efficient **freight transport** that is strongly aligned to industrial opportunities within the area. By way of illustration, the majority of output from East Gippsland's manufacturing, agriculture, forestry and fishing sectors (see 'Our Economy' above) is exported from the region and therefore, transport links are particularly critical.

The mix of infrastructure needs to consider transport by road, rail, air and sea and transport hubs should provide efficient connection between alternate transport modes. Efficient connection between the regions and metropolitan areas is critical to capitalise on the economic opportunities within regional areas.

Transport infrastructure within settlement areas also needs to accommodate and capitalise on opportunities arising from advances in vehicle energy sources such as electricity and hydrogen. Integration of the infrastructure required to respond to and support these new technologies, including the right mix and location of rapid, fast and slow recharging or refueling options to cater for local and transient needs, would be a major advantage for regional areas.

Innovation supported by changes to regulation should be pursued to consider and potentially support more Uber-style transport nodes, where door to door services could be provided to meet high need, low demand transport requirements.

Large public buses designed for compact cities do not meet the needs of all rural communities. Because they are often unaffordable to purchase and operate in a regional context, more flexible and cost-efficient systems of public transport need to be considered and actively encouraged. One example of disadvantage resulting from regulation is that in many areas, the use of school buses by people needing to access places of work is still prohibited. This disadvantages young people and others without a license or access to private vehicles.

Eastern Victoria has long advocated for the reintroduction of **high-speed rail** along the east coast between Melbourne and Sydney as part of the connection of regional Victoria to major cities. Such a service would offer fast and efficient travel options and dramatically reduce the tyranny of distance that is a current, major disincentive for those considering relocation from the metropolitan areas.

Similarly, investment in regional passenger and freight **air services** would significantly reduce the tyranny of distance and the disincentive that lengthy travel by vehicle presents to relocation from metropolitan areas. Most regional areas have local aerodromes that with suitable investment, could support passenger and freight aircraft. These services may need some initial **fare subsidisation**, to encourage patronage and ensure that fledgling commercial services are viable.

Advances in **clean energy production** technology present industrial and economic opportunities for new settlement areas. If regional communities can provide for their own needs *and* produce surplus energy for export, the states' dependence on fossil fuel-derived energy may be reduced.

Selection of new settlement locations should consider the availability of clean energy sources including solar, wind, waste energy harvesting, hydro and pumped hydro storage. Additionally, many regional and remote areas, including parts of East Gippsland, are prone to recurrent power outages. Most industries rely on **reliable power supply**, so power outages are currently a significant disincentive for industry to relocate to many regional areas. Consistent power supply should be an objective of all levels of government as a prerequisite for growth and development across regional Australia.

The **strategic and statutory planning controls** for new settlement areas should encourage and facilitate suitable development of clean energy projects, through clear and efficient processes.

A reliable **water supply** is essential to any settlement for personal consumption and commercial, industrial and agricultural requirements. To manage competing demands for water effectively, and provide regional settlements with reliable, long-term access to water, the infrastructure needs to be closely integrated.

Also, water infrastructure needs to be designed in a way that is tolerant of changes in environmental conditions. The supply of water to new regional settlements cannot be based on historic rain and river records. Instead, a network comprising a broad range of supply and reuse infrastructure will be required. To maximise contingency and minimise risk as a result of changes in climate, careful consideration and planning will be required that has regard for the threats and opportunities presented by each region.

Wastewater recycling and re-use for personal or industrial need must be integrated into water supply systems. Stormwater collected from within regional settlements must also be harvested and reused for environmental, personal and industrial uses at both micro (individual property) and local area level.

The development of **waste management** infrastructure in proximity to regional settlement areas presents opportunities to manage waste in accordance with best practice and develop a service model capable of catering for the demands of metropolitan areas. This presents industrial and economic opportunities for regional areas while at the same time, addressing existing gaps in the states' existing recycling capacity.

Waste **recycling** inputs and outputs need to be carefully integrated into supply chains. There is opportunity to align recycling specialisation with regional production and create opportunities to export out of the region. Logistical costs are often one of the main barriers to optimising recycling and re-use. Therefore, smaller, regionally based value-adding facilities would enhance take-up of these strategies and reduce waste going to landfill

Above all, waste management infrastructure should be designed and integrated in a way that leverages the energy harvesting potential of domestic and industrial waste, including food waste.

4. Further information

Any queries or requests for additional information about East Gippsland or this submission would be welcome and can be directed to:

Anthony Basford
Chief Executive Officer



Contact us

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