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Submission to Inquiry into the National Broadband Network from City of Greater Dandenong

Reference: NBN Inquiry

Enquiries: Ron Ghiggino

25 February 2011

The Chair

House of Representative Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Chair

RE: Inquiry into the National Broadband Network

We would like to make the following submission and comments to the House of Representatives Infrastructure and Communications Committee inquiry into the role and potential benefits to the National Broadband Network (NBN).

As a brief background the City of Greater Dandenong is located in the south east of Melbourne and includes the suburbs of Dandenong, Noble Park, Keysborough and Springvale. With approximately 140,000 residents and an estimated 11,000 businesses the city is a diverse mix of residential, commercial and industrial activity. Whilst the commercial and industrial activity produces significant gross regional output and employment one of our challenges is the capacity of many of our residents to participate in this employment.

From a commercial perspective the city currently has a number of fibre cable suppliers and the introduction of the NBN as an alternative supplier has the potential to introduce further competition to the market where price versus speed will be market determinants. There are some smaller sites (including a number operated by Council) that currently use ADSL and the proposed expanded coverage of the NBN would benefit these businesses and locations.

It is understood that wireless will continue to be a complimentary technology and Council is using an increasing number of 3G wireless devices for inspection and emergency management operations. It is expected the demand for this will continue to grow.

For our residential community a number of benefits could be evident in following areas

- Greater access to online opportunities for retraining and skill development – Libraries, Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres
- Growing and developing home based business opportunities

- Opportunities to address low levels of literacy and numeracy through education and learning.

However there are some barriers to a greater uptake of broadband services

- The community has low computer ownership in the home
- There are low levels of literacy, not only in English but often in the first language
- Levels of isolation through social, cultural and economic reasons – particularly for women

Whilst there are many advantages in developing a faster and more efficient broadband network until more of our residents have access to computers, a knowledge of how to use them and affordable access the potential opportunities may not be achieved.

Attached are some additional comments that add to the argument that access, affordability and a capacity to use are equally important considerations in addition to just the availability of broadband.

Yours sincerely

Ron Ghiggino
Manager Economic Development

Comments for Council's Submission to the Broadband Inquiry

Information concerning a variety of social outcomes within Greater Dandenong and other disadvantaged communities indicates that limited internet access is associated with relatively high levels of social disadvantage and unfavourable educational and employment outcomes.

The 2006 Census also found that 60% of homes in Greater Dandenong had access to the internet and 43% to broadband – the lowest rates in Melbourne, and substantially less than the corresponding metropolitan levels, of 74% and 54%, respectively.

An examination of information concerning internet access and other social circumstances reveals a strong correlation between the proportion of homes connected to the internet, and rates of unemployment, educational levels and limited English literacy. Those communities in metropolitan Melbourne with low levels of internet access in 2006, also featured the lesser levels of literacy, higher rates of early school leaving and elevated unemployment rates. Further information, concerning internet usage within Greater Dandenong, shows that residents with at least year 12 education were three times more likely than those with year 10 or less, to have used the internet in the previous week.

Greater Dandenong is relatively disadvantaged with respect to its incomes, employment, education, literacy levels and English fluency. In 2010, unemployment levels stood at 10.2% - nearly twice the metropolitan level of 5.4%. Incomes, recorded in the 2006 Census, were the lowest in metropolitan Melbourne, while the proportion of young adults who leave school before completing year 11 is 16% - the highest rate in Melbourne. These conditions are compounded by relatively high levels of limited English fluency among a predominantly migrant population, with 15% of residents having limited fluency in the use of spoken English – over three times the corresponding metropolitan level, of 4%. Estimated levels of limited literacy, based on the findings of the 2006 Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, stood at 26% in Greater Dandenong, the highest rate in Melbourne. The SEIFA Index, published by the Commonwealth Government and based on the findings of the 2006 Census, ranked Greater Dandenong as the most disadvantaged locality in the state.

Such a marked association between internet access and progress in education and employment is consistent with practical experience of the increasing importance of quality internet access to participation in secondary and tertiary education, access to commercial information and as a means for remaining informed of local and other events. Moreover, such information is now frequently presented on the internet in community languages – a matter of keen relevance to Greater Dandenong, where over half the population was born overseas, and languages other than English are spoken in nearly two-thirds of its homes.

The City of Greater Dandenong believes consideration should be given to the prospective benefits of improved internet broadband as a means to improve access to information vital to education, employment and community life, and to mitigate social, economic and educational disadvantage.

Note:

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Unless otherwise stated, any views or opinions presented are solely those of the author.

Thank You.
