

Trevor John Cooper
Submission to the Inquiry into the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment
(Democratic Plebiscites) Bill 2007

I, Trevor John Cooper, respectfully submit that:

I most emphatically disagree with the Queensland Government's decision to terminate the Size Shape and Sustainability Local Government review process and replace it with an appointed panel of Commissioners to determine the number and shape of local government areas in Queensland and the nature and extent of the representation of the communities residing within those areas. All of this whilst denying the people their basic democratic rights to have a say in the proceedings other than through a brief opportunity to make written submissions. My objections are based on the grounds that:

- There was little opportunity allowed for the duly elected members and staff of local government to effect meaningful reform through a collaborative and consultative process before the Reform Commission process was imposed upon them
- The Terms of Reference under which the Reform Commission operated were far too narrow to allow serious consideration of any reform process other than amalgamation. This ignores the considerable evidence that suggests that amalgamation is not the best way of effecting the financial efficiencies called for.
- The time frame within which the Commissioners were forced to make their decisions was too short to allow for anything more than a cursory consideration of the complex and diverse issues and problems involved.
- There is no provision for the people of Queensland to exercise their democratic rights and make comment upon the findings and recommendations of the Commission in fact those rights were specifically denied through legislation

In my opinion, amalgamation of the Shire of Stanthorpe with the Shire of Warwick will be to the detriment of the Stanthorpe community in that it will:

- **Reduce** the extent of local representation.
- **Reduce** the level of service to meet local needs
- **Reduce** local employment and skilling opportunities.
- **Reduce** support for local businesses through fewer local government supply contracts.
- **Reduce** allocation of local government funds toward local projects.
- **Reduce** or completely destroy local identity and sense of community.
- **Reduce** or downgrade of important local services.

Telephone Poll

In mid July, the Stanthorpe Shire Council commissioned a telephone poll of the people of Stanthorpe, asking the questions:

- Do you think Stanthorpe Shire should be amalgamated with any other shire
- Do you think that a referendum should be held on the issue

In response to the first question, 88% of the people surveyed said they did NOT want amalgamation, and in response to the second question, more than 90% said they wanted a referendum on the issue. The sample surveyed was 500 persons, giving the survey a confidence level of 99%

Therefore, my strong contention is that the Local Government Area (LGA) of Stanthorpe should not be amalgamated with any other LGA without the expressed consent of its residents as evidenced through a democratic process such as a referendum or plebiscite. I would welcome the opportunity to give evidence in support of this contention before this Senate Inquiry and request that Noosa would be the most appropriate venue.

In support of this contention, I offer the following evidence:

Stanthorpe Shire

The Stanthorpe Shire lies adjacent to the NSW border in South East Queensland and has an estimated population of 10,600 residents, over half of whom reside in the town of Stanthorpe whilst the remainder lives on properties or in townships and villages throughout the shire. The town of Stanthorpe offers a comprehensive range of business services, education, health facilities and recreation and cultural opportunities and, in conjunction with the village structure, offers a diverse range of lifestyle opportunities that is proving increasingly attractive to tree changers.

Stanthorpe Shire is a multi-cultural society and has a large population of Italian immigrants and their descendants who have contributed significantly to Stanthorpe's uniqueness that sets it apart from other communities. Italians brought their culture, fine food and wine, which has enriched and differentiated the local area. This point of difference with other communities should be taken into account when examining issues associated with communities of interest.

Personally, I have lived and worked in the Stanthorpe Shire for more than 30 years as a fruit and vegetable grower, a teacher, a deputy principal of the local High School and, most recently, as an elected councillor with the Stanthorpe Shire Council. Experiencing life here from such a wide range of perspectives has provided me with a considerable insight into the unique nature of the Stanthorpe community which qualifies me to make the following observations with the regard to Communities of Interest.

Communities of Interest

The Stanthorpe Shire Council's Corporate Plan has discarded the traditional local government focus on Roads, Rates & Rubbish to embrace corporate pillars under the headings of Innovation, Creativity, Opportunity, Lifestyle, Environment and Governance. This has allowed the council the opportunity to act as a nurturing catalyst to the particular Communities of Interest that give Stanthorpe its distinct characteristics.

Communities of interest are complex, richly layered mosaics of interdependent social and economic elements. Stanthorpe's unique communities have many interconnected facets. I will focus upon just two, of which I have an intimate knowledge and which set Stanthorpe apart from its neighbours; Stanthorpe as a **Learning Community** and as a **Wine Tourism Premier Destination**

- **Learning Community:**

A Learning Community is one that actively promotes and encourages lifelong learning at all levels, enabling personal fulfillment, economic resilience and community involvement.

In September 2005, at its annual Learning Expo, the Mayor of Stanthorpe declared the Shire of Stanthorpe to be a Learning Community, the first (and so far the only) Local Government area to do so in Queensland. However, the progress towards this goal began long before that date with the birth of the concept of the Granite Belt Community of State Schools (GBCoSS) and the Granite Belt Learning Precinct.

There are fourteen primary schools and two High Schools on the Granite Belt, all of which are members of GBCoSS, which was formed with the aim of creating a seamless pathway for students to progress through their primary and secondary stages of education. From their late Junior to Senior years of High School, students are presented with flexible, multiple pathways to further their learning with options ranging from short courses through Learning Network Queensland at the Community Learning Centre, TAFE courses through a local campus of Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE, to full degree courses through the jewel in the crown of the Learning Precinct, the Queensland College of Wine Tourism where the University of Southern Queensland has established an oenology research facility.

These opportunities are also available to members of the community of all ages.

The Learning Precinct concept, at the heart of the Learning Community, was conceived, driven and developed by a group of local champions, including representatives of the local wine industry, in collaboration with the Stanthorpe Shire Council. Other partners included Learning Network Queensland, University of Southern Queensland and Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE. The bricks and mortar infrastructure that constitutes the physical presence of the Learning Precinct is located on the High School campus and includes access to the school's facilities in addition to a Community Learning Centre, and the Queensland College of Wine Tourism, incorporating an oenology research sub-campus of the University of Southern Queensland.

The development of the Learning Community and its unique relationship with the Council, local schools, local industry, and tertiary institutions has been the subject of numerous research papers and presentations. It continues to flourish and grow – particularly through joint initiatives between Stanthorpe Shire Council and the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). These projects include:

- **Granite Belt Community Engagement Network (GBCEN)**
An innovative concept where the Parents' and Citizens' Associations of local schools deliberate upon community issues with the Principals acting as facilitators. The issues are identified by both

Council and the P & C Groups and their decisions are communicated back to Council through electronic survey instruments. USQ are involved as participatory research partners to evaluate the project and their findings will be presented in a joint research paper titled, 'Evaluating Community Engagement: Lessons for an Australian Regional University,' at the next AUCEA Conference in Alice Springs.

- **GraniteNet**
GraniteNet is an exciting project of international significance that will build a self-sustaining community portal utilising cutting edge converging technology to facilitate the development of Stanthorpe as a Learning Community and optimise communication opportunities between communities of interest within the Local Government area.
- **Resilience Project**
The uniquely resilient qualities of the Stanthorpe community are widely recognised, to the extent that a joint UQ/USQ research team spent some time in the district recently identifying the factors contributing to this quality. From their findings, a Resilience Model will be developed that may be used by other communities seeking to improve coherence and community spirit.

Without proactive local champions and the productive partnerships forged between the Stanthorpe Shire Council and various government and non government departments, these learning initiatives would never have eventuated. Additionally, there are significant opportunities for growth and development in the local education industry. Stanthorpe is one of only four locations in Queensland recommended by the Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts for the placement of international students.

- **Wine/Tourism Premier Destination**

Ask anyone about Stanthorpe and the Granite Belt and they will immediately identify the area with fine wines and tourism. The cool climate, the altitude 900 metres above sea level, the granitic soils, the multicultural, and the magnificent scenery has earned that reputation. On Wednesday May 16 2007, the Minister for Wine Industry Development, Margaret Keech, paid tribute to this unique community of interest when she launched the locally-designed Granite Belt brand at the Queensland College of Wine Tourism in Stanthorpe to mark the beginning of the second century of wine-making in the area. The brand identifies Stanthorpe and the Granite Belt as the premier wine tourism destination in Queensland, recognising the uniqueness of the area as 'what the rest of Queensland is not'. In the Minister's words, 'What you're showing is a real leadership for Queensland and, on behalf of the Government, I applaud you.' Funding from the Stanthorpe Shire Council has enabled Granite Belt Wine Tourism to employ a promotions officer who will ensure that the unique attractions of the area will continue to be recognised and that visitor numbers will continue to increase. These visitor numbers have a dramatic effect on the effective resident population of the Stanthorpe Shire, adding a full time equivalent (FTE) of more than 15% or 1500 permanent residents bringing the population to over 12,000.

In addition to being a Learning Community, Stanthorpe is a Creative Community, and many talented visual and performing local artists enrich the visitor experience with Jazz Festivals, Apple & Grape Harvest Festival, Opera in the Vineyard, Brass and Wine, Concerts at the Winery, and many, many more.

Natural Resource Management

- The boundaries of the Stanthorpe Shire reflect logical and consistent natural resource boundaries with Pikes Creek and the Severn River comprising the headwaters of the Border Rivers catchment. Both rivers discharge into the Dumaresq River which forms the border between Queensland and New South Wales. The whole of the Shire is contained within the Border Rivers catchment as the existing Shire boundaries follow the watershed in the north and the east. The Border Rivers catchment in Queensland is limited to Stanthorpe, and the down stream shires of Inglewood, Waggamba and Goondiwindi. The catchment does not include Warwick Shire which is located within the Condamine catchment.
- Stanthorpe Shire Council has commenced planning for the construction of a new dam on the Severn River at Emu Swamp. The project has been declared to be a significant project and the terms of reference for an environmental impact statement are presently being finalised.
- The present boundaries of the Shire provide a perfect fit with the catchment area and reflect the intentions of the State in terms of water planning.
- Stanthorpe is located on the Granite Belt - a massive and unique granite intrusion approximately 200 million years old which is the northernmost extension of the New England Tableland, a stepped plateau of hills and plains with elevations of between 600 and 1500 metres on Permian sedimentary rocks, intrusive granites and extensive Tertiary basalts.
- Stanthorpe Shire Council works with State agencies, catchment and Landcare groups and community groups to protect the National Parks and vegetation of the Stanthorpe Plateau and Tenterfield Plateau. The continued jealous conservation of these natural resources is recognised as being essential to the future of the Shire for both vested and altruistic motives - to maintain the capacity to attract visitors and offer a clean, green lifestyle to residents as well as preserving the naturally rich biodiversity of the area.

Financial Sustainability

- Stanthorpe Shire Council does not appear on the Premier's infamous hit-list of weak or very-weak councils, derived from the Queensland Treasury Corporation (QTC) Financial Sustainability Review. Stanthorpe is presently in a sound and sustainable long-term financial position where planned service and infrastructure levels can be met without unplanned increases in rates or disruptive cuts to services. However, surrounding shires have received lower ratings and are identified on that list. It is difficult to see what is to be gained financially from amalgamating Stanthorpe with those adjoining shires. Such mergers would be detrimental to

Stanthorpe Shire's existing financial position and to its current and future sustainability.

- The outcome of the QTC Review indicated that Stanthorpe Shire Council has a moderate rating with a neutral outlook. This means that Council has a high capacity to meet its financial commitments in the short- to medium-term and an acceptable capacity in the long-term. It is expected to be able to manage unforeseen financial shocks and will be able to meet adverse changes in its business and in general economic conditions with minor to moderate revenue or expense adjustments. Council's capacity to manage core business risks is assessed as acceptable.
- Stanthorpe Shire has clearly shown itself to be financially sustainable and should be allowed to continue those sound practices in the interests of its ratepayers. Bigger is not necessarily better. However, in the interests of improving that sustainability further, there are a number of non-merger options that could be implemented, including resource sharing through formal service agreements and strategic alliances. Many of these were identified in the initial phase of the SSS Review process for further detailed investigation, including resource sharing opportunities with Tenterfield Shire to the south of Stanthorpe in NSW.

Amalgamation Options

There seems little to be gained, and a great deal for Stanthorpe Shire to lose through any amalgamations or mergers. Even when evidence is judged against the Commission's excessively restrictive Terms of Reference, there is no case for amalgamation, as the following deliberations indicate:

Stanthorpe/Inglewood

- Grouping of Like Communities of Interest – there is a limited community of interest with the Texas community. They use Stanthorpe as a service centre and there are some education links between the two. Community linkages between Stanthorpe and Inglewood are extremely limited and distance would prevent Stanthorpe from becoming a major service centre for Inglewood residents. Amalgamation of the two Shires would result in the major population and service centre being located at the eastern extremity of the Shire and extensive travel distances to the other service centres.
- Financial Sustainability – even without a detailed knowledge of the financial sustainability problems of the Inglewood Shire, it is unlikely that amalgamation with Stanthorpe would address the issues and would severely weaken Stanthorpe's own moderate financial position.
- Planning and Growth Management – no advantages would be gained by amalgamating the two shires to address this issue. There are no growth management or infrastructure issues on the boundaries of the two shires. The major urban centres are well removed from shire boundaries.
- Natural Resource Management – both shires are located within the Border Rivers Catchment and work effectively with the QMDC, the regional natural resource management (NRM) body. Co-operative arrangements have been established to deal with NRM issues for councils in the Border Rivers area, which also includes Goondiwindi and Waggamba. These include sharing the services of an NRM officer between the four shires and the regional NRM body.

Stanthorpe/Warwick

- Grouping of Like Communities – the two communities of Stanthorpe and Warwick have distinctly different cultural and social views, different economic drivers and operate quite independently of one another. I have personally surveyed many Stanthorpe residents and have found them to be vehemently opposed to amalgamation of the two shires.
- Financial Sustainability – there is no evidence to suggest that merger would improve the financial sustainability of either of the shires in question. In fact, Warwick is still struggling to recover from the amalgamations imposed upon it 13 years ago.
- Planning and Growth Management - there are no shared growth management or infrastructure issues and the major urban centres are well removed from the shire boundaries. No opportunities exist to share existing infrastructure with the exception of shire road networks, which are currently linked in a limited manner.
- Natural Resource Management – Stanthorpe and Warwick Shires are located in different river catchments. Stanthorpe is located in the headwaters of the Border Rivers system whilst Warwick is in the headwaters of the Condamine River system. The current shire boundary is the boundary between the two river catchments and both shires are members of different NRM regional bodies. From a vegetation management perspective the two shires contain distinctly different vegetation communities, with the vegetation in Stanthorpe being similar to that found in the New England Tablelands region of New South Wales.

Stanthorpe/Inglewood/Warwick

This option would concentrate all of the negative impacts described above:

- No common community of interest
- No improved financial sustainability
- No shared planning or growth management issues
- Separate water catchment areas and natural resource management issues

Conclusion

The evidence presented above shows clearly that there are no identifiable advantages to be gained by amalgamating Stanthorpe Shire with neighbouring shires and there is a great deal to be lost. Stanthorpe is a proud, innovative and resilient learning community that has clearly identified for itself a future growth path founded upon burgeoning local wine, tourism, and education industries that build upon and complement the established traditional horticultural industries. That growth will be stimulated through planned developments the Stanthorpe Shire Council has in train, including the Emu Swamp Dam and the Airport. Future population growth is assured through the proximity of Stanthorpe to the explosive growth areas of the South East Corner.

Bigger is not necessarily better, and local government means just that – local. No merger should be imposed upon the Stanthorpe Shire without giving the people the right to 'Get Involved' and have an input into the determination of their own future through a referendum.

I am a member of the Queensland Government's Ministerial Regional Community Forum, serving a second term. Despite many frustrations and disappointments, I have maintained my commitment because I strongly espouse the democratic values enshrined in the concept and I genuinely believed in the words of the Premier: 'No matter where you live in this great state, the Queensland State Government is listening to your views, concerns and ideas. Greater involvement of the people and communities in the government decision making processes is one of the cornerstones of our desire to make government work even better in the Smart State'

Please, give our community the opportunity to have their say, listen to their views, give them the opportunity to be involved in the decision making process of local government reform.

Respectfully submitted by:

Trevor John Cooper