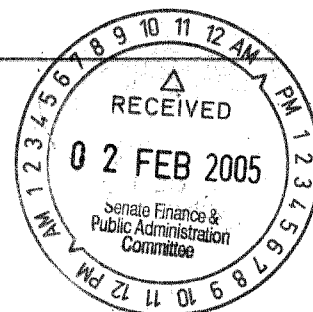


Hodgson, Alex (SEN)

From: Peter Milner [Peter.Milner@ahcacc.com.au]
Sent: Wednesday, 2 February 2005 10:27 AM
To: FPA, Committee (SEN)
Subject: AHCACC response to the Inquiry into the Regional Partnerships Program



Apologies for the late response; we have had email problems.

In regard to the above inquiry, the Australia's Holiday Coast Area Consultative Committee (AHCACC) provides the following comments:

As a general comment, the Regional Partnership Program has been an excellent Australian Government initiative; achieving significant outcomes and tangible economic and community development in this region.

Many lessons have been learnt from previous programs such as the Regional Assistance Program (RAP), Dairy RAP and Regional Solutions; the current program guidelines, administration and processes have been cognisant of these lessons, streamlined and much improved.

All processes, including those relating to propriety, potential conflict of interest and pecuniary interest are clear, well documented and in our experience rigorously adhered to. This ACC has had no major difficulties with the program.

Suggestions for further improvements are:

Devolution of decision making to DOTARS, preferably at Regional Office level, to further streamline administration and accountability.

ACC's already maintain close contact with DOTARS regional office staff, local members and ministers responsible on project proposals, discussing potential projects, seeking their comments and support as appropriate. The current decision making process, particularly involving all the various tiers of the Department could lend itself to excessive review, individual interpretation of guidelines, priorities and the merits of a project without the necessary first hand knowledge.

Greater consultation/ feedback between DOTARS and ACC's on applications under consideration;

ACC's are the Departments "eyes and ears" on the ground. The ACC takes its role very seriously; its volunteers and staff spend an enormous amount of time developing projects that will benefit its region; What the ACC determines is a regional priority project is in fact a regional priority. After an ACC recommendation to the Department, ACC's are out of the loop and do not see recommendations at the various levels on the TRACs system. Transparency of the process could therefore be improved. Decisions to not approve recommended projects should also not be taken in isolation from consultation with the ACC; without the possibility to rework proposals with proponents addressing matters of concern or seeking further background information.

Clarification or removal of the Discretionary Grant concept

In an economic and community development context, if a proposal meets the guidelines the only other issue that should be considered is its regional priority in comparison to other projects under consideration in the event of program funding limitations.

Questions from DOTARS Regional Office should be sent to ACC's, not direct to proponents

ACC's always need to work with proponents anyway to adequately address issues raised. Proponents can also be put off by formal and/or lengthy emails and potentially good initiatives can be lost. ACC's are well equipped to perform this necessary "hand holding" role, particularly with inexperienced proponents and community groups.

ACC's have a formal role in monitoring projects;

Although not the contractual body, ACC's for reasons mentioned above are well placed to ensure accountability for public monies and assist with the achievement of outcomes.

Increased awareness and therefore greater consideration documented in the guidelines of the importance of the role and potential influence of ACC executive and project officers;

ACC executive and project officers are normally the first point of contact for project proponents. They also have enormous influence on the ACC committee members and DOTARS staff in supporting or otherwise a proposal.

Separate committees should not be established for the Sustainable Regions Program;

ACC's are the Australian Governments Regional Development Network. There should therefore be a "one stop shop". The establishment of separate committees confuses communities and creates inefficiencies and duplication.

Greater emphasis or a weighting be provided to Regional Projects;

As an example, the creation of 10 jobs in a metropolitan area is not really significant but is certainly significant for small rural communities.

Flexibility in cofunding guidelines;

Small communities have enormous difficulty meeting the current criteria. Many worthwhile projects cannot access significant cofunding. The provision of the Australian Government being a minor contributor can often also mean that any influence in ensuring outcomes are achieved is lost or overshadowed by different requirements from the major contributors.

Improved program, project and outcome publicity;

ACC's normally first hear about a project approval via the local media. The communication channel needs to be improved. There is also the need to better inform communities of the programs excellent results, the Australian Government initiatives for Regional Australia and the formal recognition of ACC volunteers and their role in any project announcements and publicity.

Don Phillips
Chairman
Australia's Holiday Coast
Area Consultative Committee.

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