
Section: MAYORAL MINUTE

File:

Item: 4. Rural and Regional Taskforce: Report to Premier of NSW

REPORT SUMMARY

A Minute to inform Council of the primary recommendations of the New South Wales Rural and Regional Taskforce recommendations to Government and recommending representations to the State Premier in support thereof.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Minute be noted and that Clarence Valley Council makes representations to Premier lemma seeking early and full implementation of the recommendations of the Rural and Regional Taskforce.

BACKGROUND

On 1st April 2008 the Premier of NSW received the Rural and Regional Taskforce Report which was developed after meetings with rural and regional communities across the State during 2007 and dealing with Government service delivery. Councillors will recall that one such meeting was conducted in Grafton and hosted by Council in late October 2007.

Councillors will also have received a media release from Taskforce member Hon Richard Torbay which highlighted the major report findings.

ISSUES

The timing for the release of this report is good in that State budget discussions are in progress. The report authors argue that the report and recommendations are a sound representation of rural and regional communities and should act as a blueprint for future government policy making.

The Report includes 22 recommendations including a fixed share of income tax revenue for local government, establishment of a Regional Infrastructure Fund, integrated locally based health care systems and streamlining of State and Commonwealth regional development bodies.

Key Taskforce findings recommend that the NSW government quote:-

- “Develop locally based integrated community health care systems and holistic local models to attract GPs and procedural specialists to rural and regional areas. Work with the Commonwealth on programs to train dentists in regional universities and expand public dental services. It wants to see a broader range of mental health, geriatric care and drug and alcohol services in regional areas. Improved health service access for Indigenous and socially and economically disadvantaged patients is also an issue to be addressed with new initiatives and programs.
- Introduce a five year Regional Infrastructure Fund to provide grants to local councils and other relevant organisations for the development or upgrading of social and economic infrastructure in regional communities. The fund would be similar to the Victorian Regional Development Infrastructure Fund. The Taskforce also strongly recommends that the NSW Government support efforts by local government to secure increased Financial Assistance Grants from the Commonwealth Government. These grants should be fixed as a

share of income tax revenue to ensure local councils have access to a growth revenue stream for the future. The Taskforce advocates that the NSW government sign a suitable Intergovernmental Agreement with local government. This would identify ways to fund local government projects and infrastructure to lessen the impacts of rate pegging.

- Work with the Commonwealth to streamline the number of State and Commonwealth regional development bodies to reduce duplication in NSW. This includes a review of government agencies, departments and boards involved in economic development activities to increase the level of project funds available to rural and regional communities. The recommendation also includes mandating economic development as a core function of local government, subject to ensuring that adequate resources, support and structures are in place.
- Widens the geographic eligibility criteria of the existing Payroll Tax Incentive Scheme and introduces zone tax incentives in areas suffering population decline. Red tape reduction and compliance cost minimization programs for small to medium sized businesses are also advocated in the report.
- Supports planning reform in consultation with local government and other stakeholders to ensure the implications of specific measures are thoroughly tested before finalisation and implementation. The Department of Planning regional service delivery should be maintained along with appropriate regional level decision making.
- Continue long term funding for the Country Towns Water and Sewerage Scheme and the consultation process on water utilities proposed by the Minister.
- Empower Regional Transport Coordinators to manage all available community transport options to improve services, support the Brisbane to Melbourne inland rail project and continue to replace timber bridges and prioritise those on school bus routes or posing a safety risk. Increase subsidies for regional air services, for jet services to be sought for key regional airports and to encourage more competition on major air routes. It calls for a cap of \$10 for administrative fees on Country Link pensioner rail concessions.
- Fund outstanding public school maintenance projects. Take measures to improve job prospects for Aboriginal people and young people in rural and regional areas. For government departments and agencies to work with the private sector to develop partnerships and regional models of training and skills development. The Gwydir Learning Region model should be examined for its application in other rural areas of the state.
- Work with the Commonwealth on improved broadband infrastructure and mobile phone coverage in regional areas, increase regional public library funding and extend the Drought Support Workers scheme until the end of 2009. The report recommends that the NSW Government dedicate resources within the Ministry for the Arts focused on encouraging the growth of arts industries, activities and individual artists in regional areas". End quote.

Each of the above suggestions and recommendations would provide significant benefits for the residents of the Clarence Valley and are deserving of strong support by Clarence Valley Council. On this basis the Mayoral Minute recommends that Council make representations to Premier Iemma seeking early and full implementation of the recommendations of the Rural and Regional Taskforce.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Nil but significant positive ramifications are possible for rural and regional communities by implementation of the report recommendations.

IAN TILEY
MAYOR

