



Naracoorte Lucindale Council

December 9, 2011

Department of Broadband, Communications and The Digital Economy
Attention – Secretariat
Regional Telecommunications Review
GPO Box 2154
CANBERRA ACT 2601

RE: Submission to the Regional Telecommunications Review

The District

Naracoorte Lucindale Council is situated in the heart of the Limestone Coast region and Naracoorte is located midway between Adelaide and Melbourne. Naracoorte Caves National Park is South Australia's only World Heritage Site and a premier visitor attraction.

Over the past 12 years the Lucindale and Naracoorte areas have experienced significant economic and social growth. Viticulture boomed in the nineties and early 2000s, and commercial (blue gum) forestry emerged as a major industry, particularly in the south-western area of the Council. More recently Teys Bros meat works expanded operation has contributed to the growth of the local workforce and an increase in the migrant population.

These factors have resulted in a small but steady population increase following a substantial decline in the early- and mid-1990's. This growth, in conjunction with the low unemployment rate, has ensured a steady rate of commercial and economic growth within the Council area, despite the prolonged series of below average seasons.

In common with most regions, the Council's major urban centre (Naracoorte) is experiencing the bulk of the current population growth. This in part reflects the movement of older people from primary production pursuits into retirement.

Telecommunications

Having reliable and high speed telecommunications is increasingly a vital tool for the economic, social and cultural development of rural and regional Australia. For the Naracoorte Lucindale Council area it is vital for those working in the agricultural sector, as well as the businesses that support the sector. Without improved telecommunications services it is anticipated that economic development in the district and region will be substantially restricted. Technology frees companies

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from being tethered to major population centres and as space availability declines and increases in cost, regional centres become more attractive.

It is critical for tourism industry and particularly to promote the only World Heritage site in South Australia. Telecommunications also important in making broader educational opportunities available and support the limited health services that exist isolated relatively communities. With increasing numbers of our young men working in other states with the mining industry, telecommunication with family members remaining at home is essential for keeping those families connected and ultimately together.

Regional/rural communities benefit from high quality communications because it helps to:

- Reduced isolation,
- enhanced communication between families and business partners,
- increased education opportunities
- eliminates travelling time

We are concerned that adequate coverage of mobile 3G/4G phone and broadband services is not provided, and ultimately the service that is provided is not at a high enough speed. The issue with mobile broadband is low signal strength which means any service we get is always at a much slower rate. We can end up with good coverage but not at a high enough speed so the service quality becomes problematic in low lying areas, such as the council depot. This is particularly a problem for those living in the rural areas of the district because of the nature of the terrain with rolling hills and flats.

We are also concerned to know that Telstra's services in rural and regional areas are likely to go down after about 20 minutes of a fire starting or other emergency commencing because the lines get jammed with people sending digital images from mobile phones. Clearly technology available to the user is now far outstripping the infrastructure that is in place in the regional areas, and there seems to be little understanding of this situation at either the State or Federal level. Until this situation is addressed we should anticipate more disasters of the same magnitude that bushfires have created in recent years.

High speed fibre and fixed line services provide an opportunity to address the issues that exist with wireless.

Government

Without internet connectivity the local council would hardly be able to operate and meet the legislative requirements of the South Australian Local Government Act. The State government has been centralising services and leaving a void within regions for the past decade. Technology is the only option available to assist in filling this void. The risk for regions is that improved telecommunications may mean that all remnants of a physical presence by State government will be removed altogether.

Below is a list of a few of the activities that various functional areas of the NLC use on a daily basis.

- a. payments – rates, registrations etc. purchasing
- b. SERIC – tool that provides users with mapping information (contours etc.) that help with zones, identifying risks, maintenance/up-grade work, new development, road work upgrades.
- c. DTEI information – freight maps to identify routes for heavy vehicles to travel on – B-Triples etc. and to identify shortfalls on our roads that such vehicles cannot use.
- d. National Toilet Map – use to provide travellers with information
- e. Tourism – various sites that provide information to travellers about facilities and sites in the district
- f. Aviation data provide to Asian Aviation Magazine to assist pilots etc. that might need to visit the region
- g. LGA and CASA website to understand legislation etc. for compliance
- h. LGFA – Banking activities with Local Government Finance Association and other banking groups
- i. AAA – Australian airport association use tools to keep up with other airports etc.
- j. Zero Waste, and EPA – online tools used for waste management
- k. Saleyard association – promote the activities of the Council owned Naracoorte Regional Livestock Exchange
- l. WMAA – waste management Australia – info to help with waste management etc. to help improve waste management technical.
- m. CCF – Civil Contractors Federation – information on contractors, risks, liability on a regional and national basis, identify contractors machinery, techniques etc. Tools for contractor availability, legislations, training etc.
- n. Asset management – online tools
- o. Various sites that support the activities that councils need to meet its planning responsibilities.

With the centralization of postal sorting services to cities trying to formally communicate with ratepayers has become a significant challenge. As we recently found out we can no longer work on the assumption that ratepayers will receive a written communication within the space of one week. The cost of using a local courier to deliver a letter to all ratepayers is prohibitive. Our only option now is to text or email ratepayers if we need to quickly inform them of an issue or event. We can use social media, but much of our community's demographic are made up of generations that are unlikely to be great users of social media, let alone email and text messaging.

Educational

Learning options are directly proportional to the number of children in a school, so the lower the number the less subject options that are available. Access to reliable high speed internet would provide an opportunity to address this disadvantage. It would also provide an opportunity to enhance learning in a more general sense with expanded support learning options available for teachers and bridge some gaps for schools and districts with limited library services.

There are other opportunities that a high speed internet service can fill. These include:

- Distance from a work place in rural areas is a factor influencing people re-entering the workforce. Being connected with reliable and high speed internet would enable them to work from home.
- Enhance existing further education opportunities for the farming, local government, TAFE, etc.
- Facilitate tertiary level research and education from the field. The Naracoorte Caves has ongoing research work involving archaeologists and others. Greater sharing of knowledge and skills with the student bodies located at city campuses if there a high speed internet service was available. Also the reverse for students being able to spend more time in field without missing out on lectures and tutorials that take place on city campuses .

Health services support

High speed internet service would help to improve access to specialist medical consultants and minimize cost burden that patients carry to traveling to a capital city to see a specialist. Although some transport support is available, it is not unusual for regional inhabitants over the age of 80 years of age driving three plus hours for a medical consultation.

Other areas where high speed internet service can bridge the health service gap that exists in the regional areas are:

- Emergency services support – e.g. CT scan interpretation after-hours, including being able to use medical expertise overseas outside of regular business hours.
- Health education – support for students, interns and general practitioners who chose to work in rural hospitals and practices.

There are many examples around the world where appropriate technology makes experts available from anywhere. As hospitals become more constrained by budgets, technology can be used to maintain and improve services.

Business activities

Without access to reliable fast high speed internet service advances in farming practices will be hampered, and the opportunity to expand and diversify the industry base in regional areas will be very limited. The Naracoorte Lucindale district is located in an area where there is reliable fresh water, a good reliable climate, located between two capital cities with port facilities nearby. With appropriate zoning and incentives it is ideally placed for new industries to establish themselves without all the costs that occur in a major city. Having reliable telecommunications and a high speed internet services are fundamental pieces of infrastructure that are required for these natural advantages to be utilized.

Farming, the mainstay of the district can all gain business efficiencies by being able to do the purchasing, business banking, accounting work, including liaising with accountants in city from home. Eliminating hours of travel time provides enormous savings for the farming businesses,

particularly when the required labour inputs are not available. In addition are activities like online auctions of livestock, land, pasture and crop planning and management using satellite imaging.

Unfortunately, outside of major towns the internet and mobile phone services is often very poor making it difficult for producers to take advantage of the time savings that electronic communication and transactions provide.

Tourism activity provides significant support to local businesses. Aside from the natural advantages that exist in and for a region, such as location, world heritage sites, wineries, bike and walking trails etc. being able to promote these advantages are critical to growing tourism. Websites, blog sites, tweets and Facebook pages are a critical part of the promotion process. Without having the infrastructure to build and manage these sites and activities, which includes visitors being able to use and access these sites while they are in the region, it will be impossible to grow the tourist business in this district and region. It used to be that word of mouth was the best form of advertising, now we have to add to this the recommendations and comments that tourist make online.

Youth and Families

Increasing rural and regional families are being separated by work locations. Many people from farming regions are now working for the mining industry, usually in a different state so having reliable and good mobile and internet services assist in keeping families connected. Without being able to use network services like Facebook and Skype can help to keep parents and teenagers further apart than usual. In addition, to prevent young people access to telephonic and internet tools that their city counterparts take for granted only exacerbates the disadvantages created by distance and small populations.

Consumer Issues

Council has had reports of people purchasing higher end phones only to find they were unable to access the range of services from their home and having signed a contract said they have been unable to do anything about it.

Information about how to improve phone or network coverage is difficult to get hold of. Telstra staff have a woefully inadequate understanding of what is available and only persistent requests to speak with someone in senior management might help, or better knowing a local communication expert that spends most of their waking hours finding answers to the challenges they have had to deal with can you get answers. Telco's in general seem to be more interested in trying to get people signed up to new plans and with telemarketers making all sorts of dubious statements to get households to sign up to their plans.

Conclusion

Primary production is still an important part of the Australian economy and to facilitate growth and efficiencies in this sector required decent mobile phone service and access to the NBN. They are

also critical if there is to be economic growth in the region areas, and for local government to function efficiently.

Reliable communication options are also critical to address inequities in education and health options for people living in regional areas. They are also necessary for families to stay in contact with one another increasing numbers of rural families have to manage with a member being permanently employed in the mining industry in another State.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Helen Macdonald', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dr Helen Macdonald
CEO