

27/11/2011

SUBMISSION to the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee.

My name is Sandy Thomas. I am a 39 year old, work from home, freelance graphic designer. My home is located only 1.5 hours north of Sydney but is considered remote in regards to the provision of telecommunications (qualifying for assistance with access to satellite TV and internet). I have no mobile phone or wireless internet reception and cannot access ADSL. The internet connection (essential for the running of my business) is through Optus satellite. The cost of this, for an easily exceeded download limit, at very slow speeds, is not insignificant.

Living and working in small communities, people like me wear many hats, so I am writing this submission as a wife, mother of a 6 year old, a sole trader, the Secretary of the Wollombi Valley Chamber of Commerce, Hunter Mobile Preschool and Laguna Public School P&C management committees. Even though the Wollombi Valley has a low threshold population (1460 people - 2006 Census) it is a major tourism gateway to the NSW Hunter Valley region via Tourist Route 33.

Question 3. The committee would like to hear from businesses and organisations about their participation in, experiences of, and expectations about, the digital economy. Examples could relate to specific sectors such as agriculture, mining, manufacturing or retail; business-to-business activities; productivity; teleworking; and the development of new knowledge-based industries.

My business is as a freelance graphic design service provider. I have one main financial services client in North Sydney and I work entirely by satellite internet and landline phone. My type of job is essential living in a remote area. My husband is a full time shift working RN at Wyong Hospital – 70kms away and I have the job of driving my 6 year old to and from school as there is no public transport available. This leaves me 5 hours each day to work at home. In 2010-11 my phone and satellite internet expenses equated to 11% of my income. I understand I am a small fish in a big pond but for a digital economy to succeed it needs to work effectively on all levels.

The major issues I have with working as a service provider in the digital economy are:

- 1) phone line outages (4 days due to repair work last year) and not having any mobile phone or Skype alternatives (Skype has issues with satellite connections and is not up to the task when running a business with too many time delays and drop outs)
- 2) satellite internet packages are too expensive and too limited. For example my Optus satellite internet package is currently \$80 per month. This gives me 5GB downloads between midnight and midday and 1GB from midday to midnight per month. I have been on satellite plan for 5 years and it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep running a business on satellite. The assumption software manufacturers seem to make is that everyone has a high speed connection with unlimited downloads. I can log on in the afternoon and unknowingly use my month's worth of download capacity when Windows does an automatic software update. The 'best' package I can upgrade to is 10GB per month and the cost for this is \$417 per month.

It also seems like the major providers like Optus are reluctant to acknowledge the existence of satellite customers. A good example of this is to try and find any information on the Optus website about satellite internet broadband. It doesn't exist.

Question 19: Are there specific cybersafety challenges that arise from the way that communications technologies are being used by regional, rural or remote communities?

I have had to change my security from the well known and respected McAfee to Avira. McAfee have stated they no longer support their security software updates to satellite customers. My car GPS provider Garmin also state they cannot provide map updates to those with a satellite connection. The need to closely monitor the time of my downloads means turning off 'automatic downloads' (a function strongly recommended by both Windows and my Virus protection software) which leaves my business and computer at risk.

Question 6. What are the main barriers to regional communities increasing their use of information and communications technologies and do you have any ideas for ways in which regional communities could progressively overcome these barriers?

A main barrier is that we have limited infrastructure investment. An example of this is as the Secretary of the Wollombi Valley Chamber of Commerce (WVCC) for 2 years I have been trying to obtain a grant to pay for the infrastructure required to set up a wi-fi hotspot in the main street of Wollombi so that people with smart phones, ipads, or laptops can gain free access to the internet and their emails. The WVCC can pay the ongoing running costs through advertising but we cannot raise the \$4,000 set up costs as this constitutes 80% of our annual income. To date our grant applications have been unsuccessful for various reasons. The WVCC conducted a resident's survey in November 2009 which identified 'internet services' as the issue with the highest score for importance and the lowest score for satisfaction so the WVCC sees this project as one of our top priorities.

If we had a free wi-fi hotspot in Wollombi many groups of people would benefit:

- 1) The greater Wollombi Valley community who don't have any internet services available at home due to no power (mains or solar) or who have power but can't afford satellite internet services.
- 2) The not for profit Gallery and Museum who struggle to get volunteers as the volunteers like to be able to use the time to continue working but can't do so unless they are online.
- 3) The stay-at-home working parents who could, for no addition cost to their business come into Wollombi with their laptops and work together, to lessen the sense of isolation they feel both geographically and emotionally.
- 4) The retail businesses that will have an increase in the number of customers stopping in the village.
- 5) WVCC members and the wider business community who instead of having to drive long distances back to their office or home to download their emails can stop in Wollombi to do e-business.
- 6) Visitors to the area who use smart phones, ipads, iphones or laptops as their main form of communication, or as their main researching tool for activities, food and accommodation while in the NSW Hunter Valley region.
- 7) The greater Wollombi Valley community who in times of disaster – and we have our share, can use the wi-fi hotspot to access updates on flood and fire threats, via government websites and emails when unable to access their homes or phone lines.

To have a wi-fi hotspot would bring Wollombi into the 21st century. I want technically savvy young people to move to the Wollombi Valley, buy a house, send their kids to preschool and public school, run a successful business and enjoy all there is to love about this area but not having connectivity to mobile and internet services continues to be a serious road block. Now don't get me started on the roads! lol

If required, I am happy to discuss or validate any or all of these points with you. My hope is that your committee doesn't leave businesses and towns like mine out of the NBN roll out or out of your overall review. Most of the Wollombi Valley's residents are already in the 1% of the Australian population who do not have mobile phone service, please don't let us be some of the 7% who miss out on fibre-to-the-premises technology. If we are in the 7% please consider putting in more mobile phone towers so we can access the internet wirelessly instead of only having access via the increasingly obsolete satellite network.

Being on the urban fringe of Sydney, Central Coast and Newcastle I hope you will see our areas potential and plan the infrastructure required for the future economic and social success of the Wollombi Valley, its visitors, residents and business owners.

Thank you for all your hard work and good luck with your review.

Regards,

Sandy Thomas