

24 February 2011

Andrew McGowan
Enquiry Secretary
Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr McGowan

New Inquiry into the National Broadband Network

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Committee regarding the new enquiry into the National Broadband Network (NBN). RDA Illawarra has played an instrumental role in bringing the NBN to the region (Kiama/Minnamurra) following our submission to Minister Conroy in early 2010. We are now keen to see the rollout to the rest of region and are actively pursuing all avenues to ensure this occurs in the very near future.

About RDA Illawarra

Regional Development Australia *Illawarra* is the peak regional development consultative organisation for the Illawarra region (Wollongong, Shellharbour and Kiama). It is a locally based, not-for-profit, incorporated association.

RDA Illawarra is governed by an *apolitical* board of community members and business people, appointed by the Commonwealth and NSW Governments, who volunteer their time to promote the sustainable development of the Illawarra region.

About the Region

The Illawarra region is located approximately one hour south of Sydney and spans an area of 8,485 square kilometres. It is situated on a narrow coastal strip from Helensburgh in the north to Gerroa in the south. It encapsulates three local government areas of Wollongong, Shellharbour and Kiama and enjoys a mixed terrain of the ocean, rural and urban. The region has a strong industry base of manufacturing, mining, engineering, finance and business services, tertiary education, tourism and retail and has one of Australia's most important deepwater ports.

As mentioned above, Kiama/Minnamurra was selected as one of the first mainland release sites for the NBN rollout, and there is strong support from local business, government and community for the expansion of the rollout into the Shellharbour and Wollongong areas.

Capacity of NBN to contribute

RDA Illawarra believes the NBN has considerable capacity to contribute to economic growth, job creation and social inclusion in the region. We make the following comments in respect to the brief:

a) **Delivery of government services and programs.**

The NBN can significantly impact on the ability of government to better consult with the community. This is particularly relevant to Local Government, which often covers vast areas and includes remote towns, villages and individual residences. The ability to offer live, interactive consultations remotely will enable greater community participation.

Because of the inconsistent nature of current broadband access throughout the Illawarra, many residents presently experience slow or unreliable internet access. The NBN will enable all residents to have equal access to important existing government services such as license and registration renewals, tax return lodgement, Medicare claims and job seeker information; as well as to future government services and programs not yet remotely accessible.

b) **Achieving health outcomes.**

The NBN will be vital in improving health outcomes in the region. The Illawarra currently lacks many specialist medical services, meaning that residents have to travel out of the area for consultations and treatment. The number of journeys for sick and injured people could be greatly reduced by the ability to attend these consultations remotely. Remote consultations/diagnoses could be conducted in conjunction with local health professionals from patient's homes, from private practices, or from local hospitals.

Health outcomes could similarly be improved for the region's significant aged population, and this could greatly contribute to a change in delivery of aged care, enabling more elderly people to be cared for in their own homes, reducing the drain on current health resources, and reducing distress for the patient.

The University of Wollongong has recently opened the Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute (IHMRI). The NBN has great capacity to contribute to the IHMRI vision of "excellence and innovation in health and medical research, better health services, a healthier Illawarra community" by enabling researchers to work with academics, clinicians and health care workers across the country and the world, to conduct vital health research.

c) **Improving the educational resources and training available for teachers and students.**

ICT has become vital in all levels of education. The NBN can improve the range of resources and training available, as well as increasing the availability of distance education, enabling students to study a wider range of subjects without the personal, social and financial costs of having to relocate. The NBN could also contribute to combined learning opportunities with classes, groups and individuals from remote areas being able to come together in a virtual space.

d) **The management of Australia's built and natural resources and environmental sustainability.**

The availability of reliable remote access to Building Management Systems and Infrastructure Asset Management Systems will improve the overall management of Australia's built environment.

The ability to telecommute and work remotely will decrease the need to travel for work purposes, and with therefore decrease the impact on our natural resources. This is particularly relevant to the Illawarra which has the largest commuting population in the country. Some

20,000 people commute to Sydney daily, having a huge impact on transport systems and roads, and contributing to carbon emissions.

The NBN will bring the opportunity for new management systems for natural resources and new environmental warning systems to be developed which could eventually mitigate the impact of natural disasters such as drought, flood and bushfires.

Finally, the NBN can increase accessibility to information about personal and household resource usage which will motivate individuals to be more resource-efficient, and ultimately improve environmental sustainability.

e) Impacting regional growth and employment opportunities

The Illawarra suffers from high levels of unemployment and our young people, in particular, fall within this category. The NBN could provide greatly increased opportunity and hope for many unemployed people, especially young people by improving local career pathways in technology-based sectors such as digital creative industries. This also has the potential to improve school retention rates and increase enrolments in technology courses.

The area also struggles to retain its ICT graduates from the University of Wollongong. The NBN can provide more opportunities within the region, and encourage our graduates to remain in the area.

There is also great opportunity for young people to be trained to connect local households to the network. With so many households in the area, employment in connecting households and maintaining connections could be considerable. This training and employment opportunity could radically impact disadvantaged communities by building resilience and confidence, particularly in young people.

f) Impacting business efficiencies and revenues, particularly for small and medium business, and Australia's export market

The NBN could provide better opportunities for home-based business development and entrepreneurship. Current inconsistent broadband connections hinder business growth, particularly in the exporting field, and deter potential newcomers to the market. The NBN will improve connectivity to national and global markets, and enhance the competitiveness and growth prospects of Illawarra-based, export oriented businesses.

g) Interaction with research and developments and related innovation investments

The University of Wollongong is internationally recognised for both research and teaching expertise. The SMART (Simulation, Modelling and Analysis for Research and Teaching) Infrastructure Facility is a world leading research and training centre that will address many issues relating to infrastructure development. These facilities contribute to the NBN capacity to test new types of applications. For example, medical informatics applications could be tested for functionality over regional and remote networks.

h) Facilitating community and social benefits

In addition to the NBN's capacity to improve the ability of the community to participate in government consultation, there is also opportunity to improve community cohesion and connectedness, and to reduce social isolation.

The changing nature of work, flexible working arrangements, and the time-poverty experienced by many people, means that many people are unable to participate in community and leisure

activities. Aged and infirm residents are also often house-bound and are therefore unable to enjoy community and leisure activities. Similarly, many traditional community groups such as Rotary, Apex, Red Cross etc, struggle to remain viable because of declining membership. The NBN can contribute to people's ability to join interest groups and participate remotely.

Through NBN, people will be able to enjoy many activities remotely. For example, an exercise class could be accessed by many people from their own homes, or by a group remotely at a community facility. Meetings, book-clubs, lectures, and speeches could be attended and enjoyed by people all over the area, and nationally or internationally, thereby improving individual connectedness and providing social benefits.

RDA Illawarra appreciates the opportunity to comment on the capacity of the National Broadband Network, and would welcome the opportunity to address the Committee and elaborate on the issues raised in this submission. Please contact me on 02 4227 4500 for any further information.

Yours sincerely



Natalie Burroughs
CEO
Regional Development Australia Illawarra