



**Regional
Development**
Australia
I L L A W A R R A

Submission from Regional Development Australia *Illawarra*

in response to

The 'Our Cities' Discussion Paper

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Introduction

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.

Wollongong is the third largest city in New South Wales and the tenth largest city in Australia. It has a population of over 280,000 (2007) and a growth rate of 2.9 per cent (2006).

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. A small team of regional development practitioners (Chief Executive Officer, Project Manager, Green Jobs Illawarra Project Manager and Administration Officer) is employed by the RDA Illawarra Board, which receives operational funding from the Commonwealth and NSW Governments.

In broad terms the RDA's role is to be a link between community, business community, business and Government:

- Advising Government about needs and opportunities in the Illawarra;
- Whole-of-Government responses to opportunities and needs in the region; and
- Leading the implementation of economic development projects.

This Submission was compiled using the results of a consultation process RDA Illawarra undertook in late 2009 and also following discussions with a number of key organisations in the region.

Our Aspirations

The Regional Development Australia Illawarra vision is for a sustainable region with cities and regional centres that offer higher quality of life, socially, economically, and environmentally, through high levels of employment with a highly skilled, adaptable, productive and inclusive community operating in a diverse, vibrant and growing economy.

The Challenges and Opportunities

Within our region there are cities and towns of varying sizes and stages of development, with different capacities and needs. Some of the challenges faced by these cities include:

Social: The region is affected by higher than average population turnover, including tertiary students and a significant number of humanitarian refugees, which affects social cohesion and employment stability. While the net growth in population (aged over 5 years old) from 2001 to 2006 was just over 7,100, Census data shows that there was a total of over 43,000 people who settled in the region between 2001 and 2006. This points to considerable turnover in the population – with 17% of 2006 residents being recent arrivals.

The region also contains some suburbs typified by low educational and employment levels, poor social and community infrastructure, and above-average crime statistics. The region also has a significant ageing population with 15.2% of the population currently over the age of 65. This will increase significantly over the next two decades as the retiree population is expected to jump from just under 45,000 in 2010 to over 75,000 by 2030.

On the other hand, the region has many relatively wealthy suburbs, and several new suburbs with rapid growth. The beachside suburb of Austinmer, for example, has an average house price of \$679,000 compared to a regional average of \$373,000.

There is much opportunity to build community capacity and improve social cohesion. There is also opportunity to build education and income levels.

Economic: The average income in the area is well below the national average, and youth unemployment rates are high. The unemployment rate for the Illawarra was 6.9% as at September 2010, while the youth unemployment rate was 14.5%. Income levels are also below the national average; the median weekly income for individuals aged 15 years and over in the Illawarra was \$395 in 2006, which was well below the national average of \$466. There is a lack of growth in many Illawarra industries, and a lack of investment in major infrastructure compared to many other regions.

Our proximity to Sydney, our port, and our reasonably priced real estate, together with enviable lifestyle opportunities, provides us with a great opportunity to attract business to the region. There is also opportunity to encourage more business and research innovation.

Transport: Transport remains a major challenge in the area and the cities and towns in the Illawarra are disadvantaged by insufficient passenger transport. Many Illawarra industries face constraints due to inadequate freight transport infrastructure.

Productivity: The region has a world class University, but struggles to retain graduates. Much of economic infrastructure, particularly our road and rail transport infrastructure requires upgrade and investment. The National Broadband Network rollout in Kiama will improve connectivity in that area, however the opportunity to rollout the Network throughout Shellharbour and Wollongong should be capitalised upon sooner rather than later.

Harnessing our productivity

The biggest challenges for Illawarra towns and cities are the difficulty in attracting and retaining a skilled workforce, including the challenge of retaining the graduates from the University of Wollongong; a lack of public passenger transport which in turn restricts education and employment opportunities; and the need for significant investment in economic infrastructure such as roads, railways, the port and communications. There is also an opportunity to continue to expand on our regional airport to create a hub of business activity in a prime location.

Well planned investment into road and rail infrastructure in the Illawarra will improve access to Port Kembla, and will facilitate freight transport to improve business productivity and increase employment opportunities. In particular, the immediate completion of the Maldon Dombarton Rail Link would complement the expansion of the Port of Port Kembla. This would not only facilitate the rapid movement of large quantities of freight which is forecast to rapidly increase over the next few decades, but would also alleviate traffic congestion and reduce wear and tear on local roads.

The timely expansion of the NBN rollout from Kiama into the Shellharbour and Wollongong areas would improve communications and connectivity and provide further industry and employment growth by enabling local business to compete globally. The expansion would also provide opportunities for a workforce which could telecommute, thus reducing the need to travel, and overcoming geographic isolation. Currently, some 20,000 people commute to Sydney daily, having a huge impact on transport systems and roads, and contributing to carbon emissions.

The opportunities encompassed by the University of Wollongong, The Illawarra Institute of TAFE NSW, and other education providers means there is also a need to invest in education, research and innovation in the region.

Improved cooperation between State and Local government would facilitate the planning and protection of infrastructure corridors, strategic sites, and buffers required for future operation of our cities, and for improving productivity by offering sites where complementary industries and activities can be clustered together.

Significant improvements must be made to passenger transport to provide a network of buses and trains with efficient routes and complementary timetables. This is particularly relevant for the suburbs which house the many disadvantaged and disengaged residents of the Illawarra. Economic efficiency would be improved by fleets of varying size vehicles to target peak and trough travel times. Performance effectiveness of public transport reform could be measured by indicators such

as timeliness, number of passenger trips and the number of repeat journeys (such as purchase of weekly/monthly travel passes).

Additionally, there needs to be significant investment and reform of the health system. The region's public hospitals are under-funded and under-resourced, and much of the infrastructure and equipment is dated and inadequate. This means not only that local people often need to travel out of the area for life-saving medical treatment, but that the region struggles to attract specialists who are lured away to areas with state of the art facilities.

In conjunction with investment into health infrastructure and equipment, there is also a need for proactive health campaigns targeting key health issues. In the face of an ageing population, proactive health campaigns can promote healthy ageing, reduce the incidence of diseases such as diabetes and cardio vascular disease, and thus decrease the drain on the health system. Public health could also be improved by the provision of open space and active travel networks to encourage outdoor activity; and the use of walking or cycling as means of travel to work, shopping or leisure activities.

Advancing our sustainability

RDA Illawarra has a strong commitment to working with local business and community members to improve sustainability, reduce resource consumption and waste, and protect our natural environment. We are committed to attracting Green Industry and promoting Green Jobs, and to protecting local agricultural land.

Protecting and enhancing land and habitats which are ecologically sensitive, have heritage value, or are agriculturally productive can be done through consultation with, and inclusion of, the local community. Long term sustainability must be incorporated into land use planning, and there must be a move to more integrated planning models to ensure the needs of the community and the environment are protected.

Efficient use of resources such as water, energy and food can be improved by taking a holistic view which incorporates protection of resources such as water and agricultural food-production lands, improving the ways in which we use resources, and education and awareness-raising amongst the community and business community. There is an opportunity to promote a business case for resource efficiency as well as focussing on environmental impacts, and to engage all sectors in the implementation of resource preservation, reuse, and waste reduction initiatives.

Our cities and infrastructure can achieve a lower ecological footprint through a combination of legislative amendments and the training of planners and planning organisations in strategies to achieve green and healthy cities. In planning our cities, we must incorporate active and public transport options to reduce carbon emissions from private motor vehicles. Integrated planning can also reduce carbon emissions by making use of economies of scale, and by taking account of land use and infrastructure planning. Land use planning can also protect vulnerable areas by protecting them from development or from certain activities.

Greenhouse gas emission can be reduced through a concerted program of legislation, incentives, education, engagement and partnerships, implementation, evaluation and review. Legislation and policy change is needed to ensure climate change risk is incorporated in the design, construction, and operation of our towns and cities. This must be a strategic initiative, not merely a compliance requirement, and could focus on environmental management systems or similar.

Enhancing our liveability

Compact development may have the advantage of providing housing more suited to the region's changing demographic – such as smaller families, an ageing population, and larger numbers of people living alone. It may also provide more affordable housing which will reduce social disadvantage and assist the many people in the area who live on below-average incomes. However, it is vital that such developments are well connected by public transport, and provide access to all necessary services. Compact development should also make allowances for appropriate public green space for recreation and leisure, and for active transport options such as walking and cycling.

The concept of the polycentric city structure would work well with compact development, because people would be able to live closer to where they work and would have good access to shopping and services. However, the polycentric structure must be supported by road and rail infrastructure to connect the regional centres to major cities and to larger economic infrastructure.

Integrating well-planned public space, which incorporates green space, art and cultural activities, and recreation areas for all ages into developments is vital for improving liveability. Social inclusion and community cohesion can be improved when people of all ages can come together in the public domain. Cycle and walking tracks can not only facilitate active transport, but provide access to the public domain. In order to encourage use of these facilities, they must be designed with safety and security in mind. People want to feel safe in the public domain, so good visibility, adequate lighting, and the opportunity for natural surveillance must be incorporated in the planning process. By providing usable public space and active transport options, public health can also be improved as residents are encouraged and enabled to enjoy a more active lifestyle.

Improving the governance and planning of cities

A common theme from our discussions with key organisations in compiling this submission was that greater levels of cooperation and collaboration between all three spheres of government, and in particular between State and Local Government, will improve the governance and planning of cities and regional centres. Clarity of policy is key to cooperation.

Coordination and planning across local government boundaries requires participation. Participation gives opportunity for negotiation, and while there is already significant interaction between local government authorities, there is opportunity to develop ways of working together to enhance planning, and quality of life in regional Australia.

A concerted effort should be made to reduce the red tape which frustrates development, or new methods of negotiating bureaucratic procedures could be devised. For example, large developments

may be allocated a 'concierge' to escort them through the various levels of government approval. This would provide a single point of contact who could respond to questions about progress and approval.

We note that the Local Government & Shires Association of NSW in their recent discussion paper "Modernising Local Government" calls for further community discussion about the potential economies of scale and other benefits that could accrue from local government reform. RDA Illawarra would support further national and community discussion and examination on this issue if significant benefits were shown to come from various reforms.

The 'Our Cities' discussion paper raises complex and important issues. RDA Illawarra appreciates the opportunity to comment on the paper. Please feel free to contact our office if you require any further information.

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