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30 SEP 2021

2021 Regional Telecommunications Review
Secretariat
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional
Development and Communications
GPO Box 594
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secretariat@rtirc.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Submission to the Regional Telecommunications Review

Moreton Bay Regional Council (MBRC) is pleased to provide a formal submission to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review.

We thank you for the opportunity to outline the connectivity issues our communities face and to suggest solutions for the Review's consideration.

1) Introduction

Moreton Bay is Australia's third largest local government area by population and home to ten State and three Federal electorates. The region is expected to grow from currently 470,000 residents to close to 700,000 residents by 2041.

With our Regional Economic Development Strategy 2021-41, Council has an ambitious plan to make Moreton Bay Region Bigger (a \$40 billion economy by 2041), Bolder (100,000 new jobs and 16,000 new businesses by 2041) and Brighter (making the region one of the top 10 regional knowledge and innovation hubs in Australia).

Despite its large population and proximity to Brisbane and the Sunshine Coast, Moreton Bay is a diverse region which includes significant rural areas, both on the coast and in the hinterland. Roughly 60% of the Moreton Bay Region is within an eligible area under the funding guidelines of the Mobile Black Spot Program (MBSP).

Even though welcome investments have been made by governments and Telecommunications Carriers (Telcos) over a number of years through programs such as the MBSP, several rural communities within the Moreton Bay Region continue to face mobile and broadband connectivity issues. Recent media coverage of connectivity issues experienced at just one of these locations is provided below:

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W www.moretonbay.qld.gov.au

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LiqC0QLrO7s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hm8Gq9-Y7I>

MBRC is thus well placed to contribute to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review. Our submission will focus primarily on the following questions in the Issues Paper:

- *To what extent will new technologies enable significant change to the delivery of telecommunications services in regional Australia over the next 5-10 years? Are there any barriers to accessing these technologies?*
- *How can Government better support the rapid rollout of and investment in new telecommunications solutions in regional areas?*
- *How can different levels of Government, the telecommunications industry and regional communities better co-ordinate their efforts to improve telecommunications in regional Australia?*
- *What changes to Government investment programs are required to ensure they continue to be effective in delivering improved telecommunications?*

2) MBRC's experience with the MBSP and suggestions for improvements

Effective mobile coverage benefits the Moreton Bay community in many ways including:

- Economic: Supporting local businesses to broaden their markets and speed up their operations.
- Safety: Enabling fast community communications during disasters such as weather and fire events.
- Transport: Improving household bandwidth to enable telecommuting with its flow-on benefits.
- Council digital transformation: Enabling Council to deliver services, manage assets and engage with the community using digital methods.

Since the MBSP funding began, there have been five funding rounds, with Round 6 to begin after round 5A. The Government has committed \$80 million for Round 6 of the Program. The design process for Round 6 is expected to commence soon.

Over the course of the funding rounds, the Federal Government has sought feedback from community groups and government organisations to identify black spots. These black spots have been collated and are available for review within the Mobile Black Spot Database:

<https://nationalmap.gov.au/#share=s-qmYEiDx3gp6CmV9qfGZRxw4aqmV>

I am advised that in April 2016, MBRC agreed on priority locations as depicted in Figure 1 Priority Locations (below). These locations were chosen based on a number of factors including the extent of the black spot, population and businesses located in these areas.

Eligible funding applicants are Telcos. Therefore, Council does not apply for funding itself but lobbies Telcos to seek funding for specific priority locations within the Moreton Bay Region. Additionally, Council has offered co-funding of \$10,000 per priority location to Telcos to increase the likelihood of their funding applications being successful.

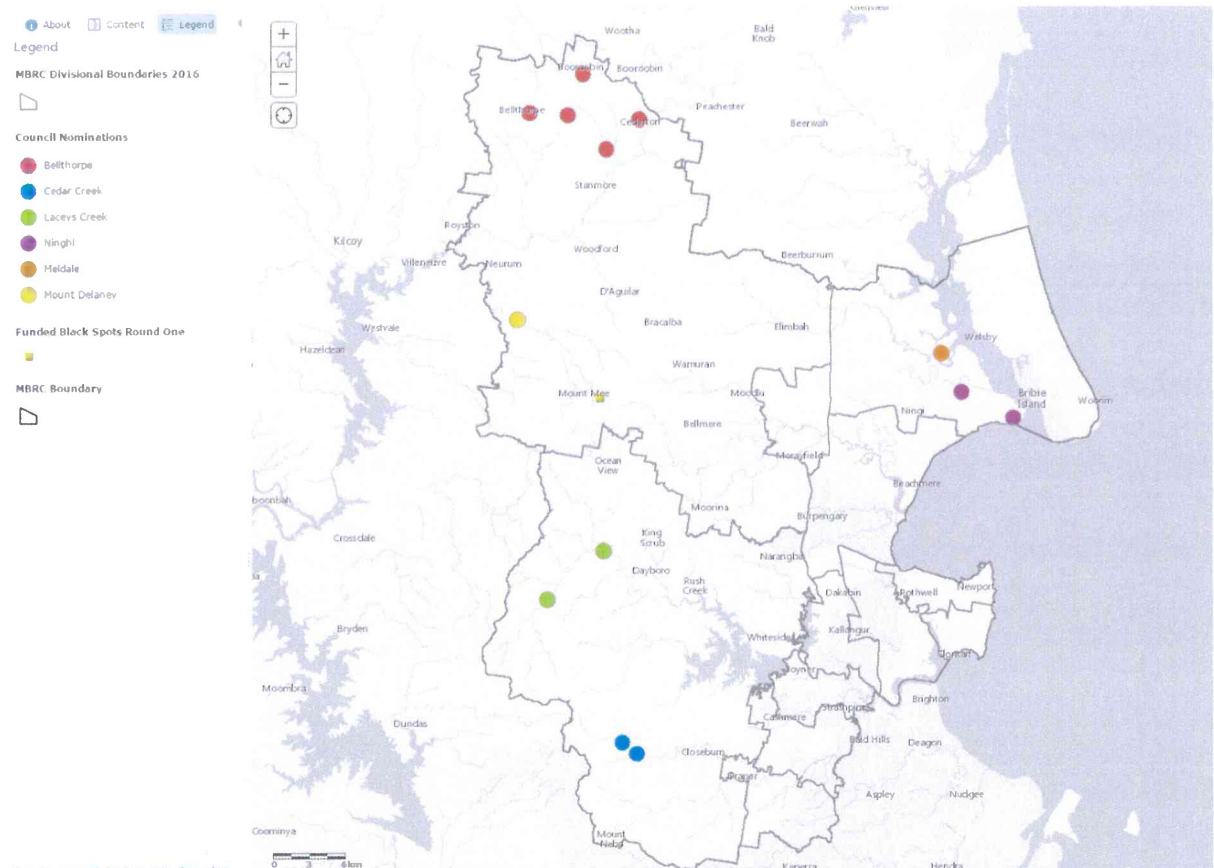


Figure 1 Priority Locations (2016)

Council officers focused on these locations when lobbying Telcos and, to date, this direct approach has been successful for three macro towers: Bellthorpe and Stanmore (Round 2) and Cedar Creek (Round 4). Additionally, Mount Mee (Round 1) was funded by the program prior to priority locations being set.

In March 2019, the Federal Government announced that Round 3 would be Federal Government nominated locations only. The Moreton Bay Region had seven locations successful under this round which was based on the Mobile Black Spot Database and previous Council representations via the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ).

While the Moreton Bay Region has seen some success in having its mobile black spots addressed, Council's experience with the MBSP has been sub-optimal, largely due to difficulties in engaging with Telcos. Since 2016, I am advised that Council officers have sought engagement with three major Telcos, through letters from the CEO and officer follow up, but results have been mixed.

Council now enjoys a productive working relationship with one Telco but it has taken a long time to get to this point, largely due to the difficulty in identifying an appropriate contact within the Telco. A second Telco has only recently responded to repeated requests by Council officers to engage over the issues and there has been no response from the third Telco, not even to hear about potential co-funding from Council.

This lack of engagement with Council on the part of Telcos has also meant that, even where MBSP funding has been obtained, the roll out of the funding has not been straightforward and has been affected by delays due to difficulties in identifying suitable mobile tower locations in a mobile back spot area.

For example, Council officers have been seeking information from the successful applicant (Telco) regarding the likely go-live date for funded base stations in Cedar Creek and Cashmere since April 2020. The Telco's approach is to seek likely locations for a mobile tower and speak with the landowners and local residents to ascertain likely support for the proposed infrastructure. If support can be obtained, the Telco would arrange for a commercial lease agreement with the landowner and prepare and submit a development application to Council.

In the case of Cedar Creek, I am advised that the Telco had initially been unsuccessful in finding a suitable location that had community support. When Council became aware of this and that the Telco had sought approval from the Federal Government to remove these locations from their funded locations list, Council intervened and approached the Telco. As a result of Council's intervention, negotiations with private landowners resumed at that point.

As an alternative solution, Council has identified a suitable parcel of land that it controls on which the infrastructure could be built subject to a development application process. The Telco has confirmed the parcel of land would be suitable for the required infrastructure, providing the missing coverage. In pursuing this option, Council has encountered further obstacles which we wish to draw to the Panel's attention.

Under the *Local Government Regulation 2012 (QLD)*, Telco advise that Council is required to charge market rates for telecommunications leases. However, Telco advised Council that mobile black spots are inherently unviable commercially and charging market rates therefore means a project will never get off the ground. The details are as follows:

- Pursuant to s236(1)(c)(vi) of the *Local Government Regulation 2012 (QLD)* an exemption is provided for the disposal by a local government of a valuable non-current asset (**Asset**) by way of a lease for a telecommunications tower, without the requirement to put the Asset to tender or auction (**Exemption**).
- The Exemption is only available if:
 - The consideration for the disposal of the Asset is equal to or more than the market value of the Asset (s236(3)); and
 - A written report is obtained from an independent registered valuer confirming the market value of the Asset (s236(5)).

Council acknowledges that this is a matter for the Queensland Government and therefore outside the scope of the Review but has included it in this submission to underline the point that obtaining MBSP funding is often only the first step in the process and by no means guarantees a successful outcome for the community.

Recommendation 1:

MBRC recognises the value of the Mobile Black Spots Program and acknowledges that several adjustments have been made to the program over its life. However, to remain fit-for-purpose, it is recommended that further refinements be made. In particular, it is recommended that Telcos be encouraged to engage early with local governments and that they be required under the program guidelines to provide a single point of engagement for councils.

Continued and deeper engagement between Telcos and Council is imperative to provide a community voice to influence the priorities of mobile carrier activities within the Moreton Bay Region.

3) Access to modern technologies to improve broadband coverage

Council is working productively with NBNC Co to improve broadband coverage in the Moreton Bay Region, but is also keen to explore other options for connectivity such as small satellites in low Earth orbit (LEO) e.g. Starlink. However, it is Council's understanding that Starlink is unfortunately not available due to various reasons such as federal government regulations. It is Council's position that any government regulations that prevent digital access for the Moreton Bay community be re-considered, in collaboration with Council.

Recommendation 2:

It is recommended that government regulations be reviewed to ensure they facilitate rather than prevent digital access for the Moreton Bay community through modern technologies such as small satellites in low Earth orbit (LEO).

It is important that local government is given the opportunity to provide the Review with a local understanding of how better digital connectivity would provide greater opportunity and overcome barriers for those living, working and raising a family in regional, rural and remote Queensland, and we thank you again for providing us with the opportunity to do this via our submission.

Any questions regarding this submission can be addressed to Mr Stephan Bohnen, Principal Advocacy and Policy Advisor, Moreton Bay Regional Council via email stephan.bohnen@moretonbay.qld.gov.au or phone (07) 3094 3658.

I give permission for this submission to be made public.

Yours sincerely



PETER FLANNERY
Mayor

Our ref: 62906950