

Mobile Coverage Programme Discussion Paper
Submission Cover Sheet

Submission Information	
This cover sheet should be attached to submissions made to the Department of Communications in relation to the Mobile Coverage Programme Discussion Paper.	
Contact Details	
Name of respondent:	████████████████████
Name of organisation:	Central Highlands Councils
Phone:	████████████████████
Email:	████████████████████
Website (if applicable):	
Date:	Friday 28 February, 2014

Confidentiality and privacy

All submissions and comments, or parts thereof, will be treated as non-confidential information unless specifically requested, and acceptable reasons should accompany each request. Email disclaimers will not be considered sufficient confidentiality requests.

Respondents lodging a submission should be aware that submissions (excluding any information agreed to be treated as confidential information) will be made publicly available, including on the Department of Communications' website. Submissions and comments will be subject to freedom of information provisions. Despite a submission being identified as confidential or sensitive, submissions may be disclosed where authorised or required by law, or for the purpose of parliamentary processes.

Do you want all or parts of the submission to be treated as confidential? **Yes** ☐ **No** ☒

If yes, identify below which parts of the submission are to be treated as confidential (and provide a reason):

If the submission contains personal information of any third party individual, indicate on this Submission Cover Sheet if that third party individual has not consented to the publication of his or her personal information:

Submission Instructions

Submissions are to be made by **5:00pm (AEST) Friday 28 February 2014**.

Where possible, submissions should be lodged electronically, preferably in Microsoft Word or other text-based formats via the email address mobilecoverage@communications.gov.au

Alternatively, submissions can be sent to the postal address below (to arrive by the due date):

The Manager
Mobile Coverage Programme
Department of Communications
GPO Box 2154
CANBERRA ACT 2615

All submissions lodged will be acknowledged by the Department of Communications by email (or by letter if no email is provided). Respondents lodging a submission who do not receive acknowledgement of their submission should contact the Department. Submissions which are not acknowledged by the Department as being received may not be considered. Respondents should be aware that emails greater than 10Mb may not be successfully delivered.



Submission to the Commonwealth Government's
Mobile Coverage Programme discussion paper

February 28, 2014

Introduction

The Central Highlands Councils (CHC) welcomes the Commonwealth's commitment of \$100 million towards a programme to improve mobile coverage and telecommunications competition in regional Australia.

The CHC recognises that the internet, mobile phone usage and digital technology developments are rapidly shaping the way that people live and do business. However, it also recognises that for many regional consumers, telecommunication services are often unreliable and sometimes non-existent.

The CHC is an advocate for the Central Highlands region in Victoria, aiming to ensure residents are not disadvantaged simply due to their regional location and have access to telecommunications services of a comparable standard to those in metropolitan areas. The CHC also believes minimum mobile coverage standards and world standard infrastructure is critical for regional businesses to remain competitive into the future and for the region to capitalise on its competitive advantages in ICT, education and tourism.

The Mobile Coverage Programme will have a significant impact on the CHC's ability to deliver on the CHC Regional Strategic Plan, particularly the strategic directions relating to economic growth, utilization of the region's strength in ICT and providing better access to education and training.

The regional area covered by the CHC includes the major transport route between Melbourne and Adelaide, is home to a number of small communities affected by mobile phone coverage black spots and most importantly, contains areas prone to natural disasters and emergency response occurrences such as fire and flood. All of these factors demonstrate that the region is an important stakeholder in the Government's Mobile Coverage Programme.

Background

Central Highlands Councils (CHC) is an alliance of eight central Victorian local government municipalities and State Government representatives that work collaboratively on regional issues and projects of mutual importance to deliver vital services and create a brighter future for their combined communities.

The eight CHC alliance members include the municipalities of Moorabool, Golden Plains, Central Goldfields, Hepburn, Ballarat, Pyrenees, Ararat and Northern Grampians.

CHC comprises two distinct groups; the Central Highlands Mayors and CEOs Forum (Forum) and the Central Highlands Regional Planning Committee (Committee). Working collaboratively, the two groups are striving to realize the shared vision of providing a productive, sustainable and liveable region. Guided by this vision, the groups have responsibility for monitoring, implementing and reviewing the Central Highlands Regional Strategic Plan (RSP) and for strategic oversight of emerging regional issues and priorities.



The RSP noted the major attributes of the Central Highlands as:

- Proximity and access to Melbourne
- Sustained population growth
- Outstanding built and natural heritage
- Victoria's best developed and integrated regional higher education and training system network
- Regional Victoria's strongest concentration of information communications technology (ICT) and computing services and capacity
- A restructuring economy embracing new opportunities in areas such as ICT, advanced manufacturing, education and tourism.

With this in mind, the CHC views the Mobile Coverage Programme, particularly the Expansion Project as critical to capitalizing on the region's strengths and will be an essential element required to address the emerging telecommunications needs of the region.

The Central Highlands Region

The Central Highlands region is home to more than 200,000 people with the population growing over the past decade at about 1.8% per annum. Based on current growth rates, the State Government projects that the region's population will reach more than 278,000 by 2041.

With this growth in mind, it is important that sufficient infrastructure, technology and service delivery supporting telecommunications capacity be provided to allow for predicted increased demand and changing consumer needs, particularly with regard to mobile coverage.

The Central Highlands region is well represented in the manufacturing, construction, retail trade, education and training, and healthcare and social assistance employment sectors. With the exception of manufacturing, all of these sectors are projected to increase employment levels over the next 30 years. Growth in the "knowledge economy" industries is also expected, which will see a greater reliance on world class digital technology and telecommunications.

In addition to the traditional regional industries of agriculture and manufacturing, the Central Highlands Region has a well recognized and expanding ICT sector, which through Federation University Australia (FUA), the FUA Technology Park and firms such as IBM employs almost 2000 people with capital expansion investment planned in the order of \$200 million. It is also home to Victoria's best developed and integrated higher education and training system network, all of which rely on a world class telecommunications system and service.

Relevance of the region with regard to programme funding

The unique characteristics and needs of the Central Highlands region make it an area of particular relevance to the Government's \$80 million Mobile Network Expansion Project. The following provides details of these characteristics and predicted needs in relation to the three main components/criteria detailed in the Mobile Network Expansion Project:

1. Contains a major transport route

The Western Highway traverses the region, linking the cities of Melbourne and Adelaide. This highway is the second busiest national highway in Australia, in terms of freight movements (over five million tonnes/annum) but also passenger and commuter vehicles. It is well documented that multiple mobile black spots are situated along the Western Highway.

Not only is the Western Highway of major importance, but so too is the rail service between Melbourne and Ararat. Passenger numbers on this route increased 150% between 2005 and 2011 with patronage exceeding 11 million passengers (in 2011) and expected to continue to grow as the State Government's Regional Rail Link Project is completed.¹

The Melbourne-Ballarat section of the rail line is in particular, promoted as an ideal for workers commuting to Melbourne. A key aspect of train travel promoted to potential commuters is the ability to work while traveling including using mobile phones and lap tops (requiring internet connection via WIFI). Due to the unacceptable poor mobile coverage experienced by commuters on the Ballarat-Melbourne line, it is virtually impossible to conduct mobile reception dependent activities whilst traveling. The entire line is considered a black spot due to the absence of mobile coverage.

2. Small communities with black spots

Reliable phone and internet access across the region is crucial to support the competitiveness of businesses such as large exporters (e.g. wineries and other agribusinesses), small home-based enterprises and the business and tourism sector in general.

In addition to the impact on businesses of unreliable or non-existent mobile coverage, there is also a well recognized desire of communities to increase the social connectivity of residents who live in isolated areas who are remote from family and friends and rely heavily on telephone or internet communication for both social and safety needs.

Small communities in the Central Highlands region that are considered a high priority with regard to mobile coverage black spots include Dereel, Blackwood and Moonambel.

In 2011, the Centre for E-Commerce and Communications undertook a study on behalf of the Central Highlands Councils. Part of the study involved reviewing Community Action Plans (CAPs). CAPs provide a roadmap for creating community change. They generally specify what will be

¹ <http://www.regionalraillink.vic.gov.au/about/benefits/demand>

done, who will do it and how it will be done. In other words, CAPs detail what groups of residents want to accomplish, what activities are needed during a specified timeline and details the resources (money, people and materials) that are needed for them to be successful. While community terminology around priorities varies, issues linked to broadband technologies and telecommunications are a very consistent theme across many of the community action plans which were reviewed as part of this study including:

Amphitheatre: Improve mobile phone coverage to assist local businesses, residents and tourists. Lobby for a tower in the district.

Avoca: There is a lack of affordable broadband access which inhibits businesses, groups, farmers and the general community at a time when the internet is the governments preferred communication tool. It is difficult to encourage new businesses that work from home if the speed is slow. To combat this, the possibilities of providing affordable, high speed broadband access to the community will be investigated.

Beaufort: Better mobile phone coverage is required as a lot of 'out of range' areas still exist. The pay phones in Beaufort and Trawalla are not to be removed as they offer a communication point for emergencies and phone access for those who have no home or mobile phones.

Clunes: Community infrastructure priorities include working to improve telecommunications.

Evansford: The current mobile phone and broadband internet services have been given a very high priority for improvement.

Korweinguboorra: Economic development objectives include improved mobile phone coverage.

Lake Bolac: Specific projects have been requested to achieve affordable broadband internet connections for the youth.

Lexton: A Mobile phone tower is required for better reception for the community.

Lyonville: Communications infrastructure comparable to metropolitan areas has been prioritised, including the provision of email, wireless internet and mobile phone coverage. The construction of a tower is acceptable.

Moonambel: Would like better telephone services and technology to be more readily available.

Mt Egerton: Improve information flow within the community by investigating new ways of communications – email, mailing of newsletter, etc.

Newlyn/Rocklyn: Project ideas include access to broadband via landlines.

Snake Valley: Investigate reliable and faster internet options for residents who work from home. Lobby to ensure that 3G delivers equal or superior coverage to what is currently available.

Trawalla: There is limited mobile phone coverage in the area so it is important for the pay phone at the roadhouse to stay.

Waubra: Lobby for improved mobile phone coverage and broadband internet access.

Yendon: Future economic development projects include the improvement of all forms of telecommunications media such as landlines, mobile phone services, broadband and television reception.

Marnoo: Improved mobile phone coverage and internet services.

3. Areas prone to experiencing natural disasters

Many communities within the Central Highlands Region have expressed a frustration with the pockets of mobile phone black spots scattered throughout the area, specifically following a number of recent natural disasters including fires in Dereel, Halls Gap and Musk and flooding in

the Pyrenees region. These events highlighted the significant gaps in mobile coverage, affecting the ability of emergency services to communicate with affected residents and to ultimately protect both people and physical assets.

Case Studies

1. In the report '*Barriers to success for local economic development*' it highlights a local winery and resort that spent 10 hours per week following up online accommodation enquiries due to poor internet coverage. In addition Taltarni winery contemplated relocating its Australian-wide administration centre from Moonambel due to lack of mobile phone service resulting in potentially ten job losses.
2. Pyrenees Shire Council invested \$680,000 building a new centre at Moonambel reserve to provide community use, training and staging for emergency management. Due to lack of mobile phone coverage it is unable to reach its potential
3. Pyrenees Shire Council implemented a major planning amendment in the Moonambel region to encourage tourism and home business development. While demand is great, poor telecommunications is impacting its success.

Outcome sought/Specific needs

Based on the unique characteristics of the Central Highlands region and the dependence the region has on minimum mobile phone coverage, it is imperative that the Central Highlands Region has improved telecommunications. This will be achieved by installing new telecommunications towers in the region.

Conclusion

Central Highlands Councils currently has mobile phone 'black spots' and limited broadband internet coverage across large parts of its municipalities. This presents major challenges for individuals, businesses and visitors to the region.

In regional centres, access to telecommunications at a standard enjoyed by Australians living in metropolitan areas is crucial to address issues of concern such as rural isolation of youth and the aged, and to promote connectivity as an inducement to potential new residents.

Reliable phone and internet access across the municipalities are crucial to:

- support the competitiveness of large exporters such as the award winning Pyrenees wineries, the local agribusiness sector and home-based businesses;
- health and education purposes;
- increase the social connectivity of residents who live in isolated areas, are remote from family and friends, and rely heavily on telephone or internet communication.

In addition, mobile telephone coverage 'black spots' mean some residents are unable to contact emergency services, which raises critical concerns and creates potentially lethal situations, particularly during bushfire season.

"We'll have this fantastic broadband going through the area where I can be hooked up to Doctors all around the world for diagnosis, but if I can't ring an ambulance when I am injured in the middle of the paddock that is not good to me."

(Pyrenees Mayor Michael O'Connor, The Australian, April 11, 2013 page 6)