

Re: Oberon Council Fit For Future submission

As a landowner in the Oberon LGA having no connections or interests in the Council, I am impartial as to whether the council remains independent or is forced to merge with Bathurst. Were Oberon a larger council, it may have better bargaining power to attain resources from the State Government, but then a cooperative of the existing Councils –Lithgow, Bathurst and Oberon – may be equally effective. A larger Bathurst council could become Bathurst centric and excessively bureaucratic, failing to effectively service the particular needs of towns, villages and rural communities. Whichever model is adopted, it should deliver overall benefits to all stakeholders: residents, businesses, farming and visitors. The main concern from my perspective is that the pace of infrastructure provision and improvements have fallen short of the need. This may however be attributable to failure at the state and federal government level rather than local.

With regard to the Council submission statement:

“This has been demonstrated with the significant growth in subdivision applications since the new LEP came into being with one major development application in Oberon proposing 250 residential lots as well as significant growth in rural lifestyle properties and increased demand for industrial land. This growth in development opportunity as well as new jobs created through various sectors including Aged Care, further expansion of the Timber Manufacturing sector and Mining in the Burruga area will see our population increase at a much faster rate than current projections.”

I make the following remarks:

- (i) ABS population statistics show historical population growth in the Oberon LGA is stagnant (2006 census 5030 persons; 2011 census 5040 persons). Owing to Oberon’s poor accessibility by road and lack of fast public transport facilities it is probable population growth will remain modest.
- (ii) The expansion of timber processing is limited by supply, which in turn is limited by the area of suitable land allocated to forestry. Given the constraint, expansion of timber processing may not be economically feasible.
- (iii) In relation to mining, history shows increases in population are rarely sustained: as the resource dwindles, so does the population.

In view of these remarks the anticipated increase population growth rate may never arise. While it would be of some benefit to expand local population, bigger is not always better. One wonders for example, whether the water and energy infrastructure will be adequate to meet the purported future demand. In 2006 the Oberon dam was almost empty at the height of the Millennium Drought, requiring severe water restrictions for an extended period.

Council fitness for the future depends on the role Oberon will fulfil. Perhaps the best course is for Oberon to focus on increasing tourism and improving farm productivity, especially considering the burgeoning population of Sydney. This does not require growing residential population excessively. Instead it requires improving transport accessibility. The Oberon LGA is actually very close to Sydney as the crow flies, but nearly twice as far by road and public transport. This is one reason why the Southern Highlands, for example, attracts many more visitors. Measures to improve road safety and travel times over the main access roads, and public transport would greatly improve the

attractiveness of the area for visitors, businesses and current and prospective residents.

Recommended improvements:

- (a) Re-align the road between the Great Western Highway and Oberon. It is rough and has too many steep hills and low speed curves. Despite increasing tourist demand for Jenolan Caves, Oberon and National Parks, there has been no concerted effort to re-align the road, which would improve road safety, reduce journey times and boost productivity.
- (b) By-pass of Great Western Highway with 110km/hr motorway from Penrith. The recent improvements on the GWH will never be sufficient as long as the road is constrained to service ribbon development in the Blue Mountains. A motorway would reduce travel time from Penrith to Lithgow by 40%, and based on current traffic volume save 14400 person-hours per day.
- (c) Re-align the western railway between Penrith and Bathurst to eliminate low speed curves and aim for a 160km/hr rail speed. The current railway reflects 19th century practices of following contours, thus the journey time to Bathurst from Sydney takes over 3.5 hours. A sound re-alignment programme could shave more than one hour off the journey time.

The challenges facing the local area therefore are the same whether the council remains unchanged or becomes part of a larger Bathurst council. The necessary improvements are beyond council, but in the hands of state and federal governments.