

Executive Officer  
Local Government Expert Advisory Panel  
Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal  
PO Box K35  
Haymarket Post Shop NSW 1240

Dear Sir,

I refer to the proposal to **“merge” Gwydir Shire Council with Moree Plains Shire Council.**

The Warialda District Chamber Incorporated is opposed to this proposal and we believe that our Shire should remain independent and be allowed to achieve its potential.

The following organisations and individuals have similar views about the “merger”.

- a. Moree Plains Shire Council is adamant in its opposition
- b. Gwydir Shire Council is adamantly opposed
- c. More than 500 people in 8 public meetings in Gwydir were unanimously opposed
- d. An “odd socks campaign” highlighting the disparities and incompatibilities has gained wide public attention and approval.
- e. Our highly regarded local member, the Hon. Adam Marshall MLA has stated his backing for Gwydir Shire, noting that “big is not always better”. Mr. Marshall recently wore odd socks at a National Party Conference and a photograph of the occasion appeared in the local press.
- f. The energetic Vision2020 group has been vocal in its opposition since the proposal was first made.

#### **A discussion of some important history and its impacts.**

I believe the following information is relevant and is the truth as I see it, having participated in and observed public life here for over 30 years.

Gwydir Shire was formed in 2004 from an amalgamation of Yallaroi and Bingara Shires. \$3,500,000 of Council funds were used to facilitate the amalgamation. I suspect that the loss of these funds has impacted on the financial capacity of Gwydir Council. It was arranged under pressure from the then NSW Government, in order to give the new Shire (Gwydir) greater economic scale and population base.

However, 2 towns and their districts (Bingara and Warialda), where a proportion of the populations had honed their points of difference with the other town over many decades, were then brought together under the one administration. These tensions have produced at least one overt anti-the-other-town campaign conducted in Shire elections and, anecdotally, are factors in the voting intentions of many voters at election time. The communities’ tendencies to blame the “other place” and to resent expenditure elsewhere are still evident, particularly at times of difficulties. I think it likely that these inter communal tensions played into the large number of people signing petitions against an application for an extraordinary rate increase in 2014. I think most rate payers have now made a reappraisal of that issue.

#### **Threats to unity and participation.**

I do see encouraging signs of greater understanding and willingness to work together. But there is much work to be done. If Gwydir were to be amalgamated, I think much of the progress in communal interaction and cooperation would be damaged, if not lost. It is hard to

imagine a larger Shire faced with complex issues over a very large area, being effective in taking account of and handling such sensitivities. With the best of intentions, I suspect the central administration would become discouraged.

It is not difficult to see other negative impacts for the people of Gwydir. Given that representation from this area would be reduced, stress on those seeking election (and those who were successful) would increase. Tensions, such as those described, would re-emerge and the constructive ambience which is developing would be destroyed.

Also, the capacity of a centralised administration to focus effectively on issues particular to this area would be compromised and the exciting possibilities of development being currently explored would be dimmed, if not extinguished. Again, the very positive engagement by community volunteers and leaders over a wide spectrum would be in danger.

### **Gwydir's strong record of achievement and future potential.**

Since its inception, 11 years ago, Gwydir Shire has been proactive in the delivery and expansion of the range of services for the people of the Shire. These programmes built on the excellent achievements of the previous Shires. People now living in Gwydir Shire enjoy well-presented towns and villages with access to services, including medical, aged care and educational, that will stand comparison with most places on the planet.

Gwydir Shire also maintains close links with rural people and is considerate of the difficult circumstances facing primary producers. In recent years, low commodity prices have combined with adverse seasons to build pressure on many people. Because of this, and after extensive consultation with rate payers, Gwydir did not seek, until 2014, rate increases outside those allowed under rate pegging legislation. I believe most other Shires in our part of the State have sought and gained at least one "extra" rate increase in the last decade or so.

The Council has also joined with other Councils in order to lobby for adequate road funding, based on the sensible principle that productive areas should be given special attention. The soils that produce bountiful tonnages for export also tend to be the soils over which it is expensive to build and maintain roads. Likewise, the Council has supported the inland rail project.

Additionally, Gwydir is well on the way in researching new cropping opportunities for the Shire and an innovative energy-from-waste project. Both of these initiatives involve consultation with international companies.

### **Population Issues**

However, despite this impressive record, Gwydir's population has continued to decline. It is probable that changes in agriculture have contributed to this by affecting opportunities on the land and on businesses providing services to primary producers.

#### There is a way to redress this declining population.

The availability of services and the general presentation of the Shire, combined with its natural attributes make for an agreeable area in which to live. For instance, over 30 teachers have settled in the Warialda area, including 3 former principals of the Public School. The new principal has purchased a home in the town. The husband and wife medical practitioners have been here for over 25 years.

The Shire has not experienced heavy industry and with the exception of some small gold mining ventures, no mining. The towns are old in Australian terms – Warialda's first School opened in 1850 – and I think in character, they retain some features of village and rural life

prior to the industrial revolution. Certainly, the towns and villages hold onto many of the positive features of an earlier Australia including, of course, a love of sports and a willingness to engage with new comers.

Remarkably, there are dozens of houses for sale in each of Bingara and Warialda. Additionally, I'm assured that basic infrastructures such as sewage treatment works, are operating at about half capacity (this would allow for future expansion of housing stock without burdening current rate payers). I know of no new housing construction at this time.

The biggest impediment to more people settling in the Shire is the Shire's (and the towns') lack of profile in areas of more concentrated population.

I believe that if ways can be found to encourage people from away to come and inspect the availability of real estate (in towns, villages and acreages) then there will be a continuing inflow of new settlers.

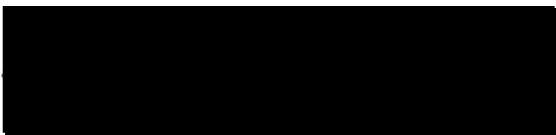
In short, I foresee the possibility of an inland residential zone, which gives people an alternative to the head long dash to the coasts when they are looking to relocate from more populous areas. As this process develops, so will employment and business opportunities.

Discussions on how to advance this vision are occurring and the Gwydir Shire has adopted a policy of promoting the Shire as a desirable place to settle. Adam Marshall MP has also been informed of the possibilities and has offered encouragement.

To conclude, Gwydir Shire Council, already a stand out in service delivery and the identification of progressive solutions to problems, can become a model for dealing with issues of population drift confronting rural Australia.

What is needed now is time and a widening of focus. There is immense potential available to the existing Gwydir Shire, waiting to be tapped.

Thank you for your attention





Ted Stubbins.  
President Warialda District Chamber Inc.

22/7/2015

*"Serving and Growing the Community Together"*

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President: Ted Stubbins   
Vice President / Treasurer: Ann Willis   
Secretary: Bronwyn Sargeant 