

Infrastructure Priorities for the Regions

Your name: Chris Sounness and David Jochinke

The organisation you represent: Wimmera Development Association in collaboration with Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership

Your position: Chris Sounness is executive director of Wimmera Development Association; David Jochinke is chairman of the Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership.

Email: chris@wda.org.au

Contact phone number: 0409 559 364

Submission: Addressing Regional Disadvantage

To which region or regions does your submission relate?

The Wimmera Southern Mallee

Have we captured the main issues of disadvantage in your region? If not, can you provide further evidence?

The Infrastructure Victoria report includes the key issues facing the Wimmera Southern Mallee but requires further investigation and recognition of the region's future. This includes equitable access to services and opportunities that other parts of the state have.

With regards to road and rail, the Wimmera Southern Mallee requires sustained and increased maintenance budgets and solutions to road and rail routes to provide certainty to both local businesses and investors. The Infrastructure Victoria plan highlights key priorities but does not indicate a priority order. Using the evidence base in this report and scenario planning for the region may be able highlight priority order for investments

For all parts of the community to have certainty over where publicly funded future infrastructure will be built is very important. Having certainty over a route for a future bypass of Horsham even if it is unlikely to be undertaken in the next 20 years will assist the private sector to undertake their own private investment in infrastructure. Conversations have occurred for many years, but a lack of certainty of that route is impacting confidence of investment and therefore limiting flow of private capital into the region.

A greater understanding on the pressure points of Wimmera Southern Mallee roads and rail is needed, and a solution to alleviate that pressure proposed. This allows informed prioritisation and decision making – and for road and rail both within and outside - but vital to - the region. As a significant grain-growing area, Wimmera Southern Mallee businesses need the opportunity to access rail freight, allowing the effective shifting of high tonnage in a time-efficient manner. The Port of Melbourne, for example, allows trade of product from the Wimmera Southern Mallee. Improving speed and efficiency in accessing the Port reduces costs for many parties.

The Wimmera Southern Mallee requires an investment prospectus and infrastructure planning for renewable energy. The region has a stranded resource plus pent up demand for further investment by the private sector however through lacking infrastructure and planning around weather to build infrastructure to move the resource from the region or understanding the investment opportunities to build infrastructure in the region to utilise the resource needs to be undertake. This includes using the renewables to create to Green Hydrogen convert to ammonia and Green Urea fertiliser. Establishing infrastructure that could use the regions stranded renewable energy assets in the region giving a new competitive advantage and provide flow-on benefits to employment and lowering the cost of living.

The Grampians New Energy Taskforce (GNET) report – Towards Zero emissions (Draft only – awaiting DELWP Ministers sign off before public) highlights infrastructure opportunities in renewable energy, demonstrating the region is forward-thinking in this area. Developing the report into a tangible plan highlighting investment opportunity for both public and private sector would allow businesses and governments to invest wisely.

Data on the Wimmera Southern Mallee's areas and outcomes of disadvantage shows more than 29 per cent of Wimmera residents do not have internet access. Our region is disadvantaged in this space. We also have poor mobile connectivity with many large black spots area which impacts on community safety and business productivity.

In relation to the agriculture industry in particular, the report notes the need for enhanced digital connectivity, but its reference to fixed mobile towers fails to acknowledge the bespoke solutions this region needs. The Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership's digital plan identifies 6 key recommendations including boosting infrastructure for mobile connectivity and supporting bespoke solutions for low population communities. *The attached Birchip Cropping Group Report* shows that, for example, the grains industry would receive direct benefits of up to \$125 an acre through enhanced digital connectivity. Projects such as the \$3.6 million AgTIDE DATA project – which involves establishing a 1000-hectare digitally enabled demonstration farm at Longerenong, with sensors and devices allowing detailed data to be collected – demonstrate the region's ability and potential for innovation in agriculture with the right investments.

Can you provide evidence of an infrastructure barrier that is contributing to poor outcomes in this region? This could include (among other things) barriers related to transport, access to digital services, or a need for new or upgraded facilities.

The lack of a plan to enhance electrical connectivity in the Wimmera and Southern Mallee is limiting options to take up more renewable projects. A lack of legislation to allow behind-the-meter arrangements is also limiting the ability to attract industry.

Having a whole-of-infrastructure vision hasn't been a priority for our region. The work of Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnerships has focused on more immediate solutions in the short-term. Now is the time to form a longer-term infrastructure plan around the future of road routes and of routes and access to freight and passenger rail. An integrated plan, with sign-off from the state government and local governments, could highlight opportunities for public and private investment.

Do you have ideas for infrastructure related solutions to address disadvantage in your region, or exceptional examples of what's working well that could be duplicated in other areas?

The Wimmera Southern Mallee requires a 30-year infrastructure plan that is integrated and prioritised. That plan should seek regional input, created in partnership with the state government.

An investment prospectus would require assistance to create, but would bring great value to the region – particularly in the areas of mineral sands and renewable energy, including projects and how to use the stranded renewable energy within the region.

Further, should large private investment occur in the Wimmera Southern Mallee, for instance one or Mineral Sands mines commence, a state planning taskforce designed to assist the region to rapidly respond to planning and building other related infrastructure - such as community and government assets - is needed. As a guide any significant infrastructure investment over a certain limit would be best done through a planning taskforce which support the regional planners. This could focus on projects worth more than \$10 million (excluding farm investments) within smaller regions like the Wimmera Southern Mallee of less than \$6 billion worth of economic output in size. In regions of this size there often is not the level of expertise embedded in the region to undertake these projects. Therefore, external support is needed and the funding to access this support.

This taskforce could work with and build capacity among local professionals, who currently don't have the skills and/or exposure to projects to develop and refine their skills.

Disadvantage indicators show health outcomes for many Wimmera and Southern Mallee residents are poor, and this is due to a lack of access to health and support services. Life expectancy for men and women is below the state average in many areas. Preventable hospitalisation rates are above average, almost doubling the state average in the Hindmarsh shire. Dental health is two standard deviations from the state average. Access to mental health support is limited.

Wimmera Health Care Group has campuses at Horsham and Dimboola and services a population of about 54,000 people across an area of about 61,000 square kilometres. It provides allied, acute, subacute, primary and residential aged care to more than 10,000 inpatients, 16,000 emergency patients and 123,000 outpatients each year. It employs about 850 people. Wimmera Health Care Group's Wimmera Base Hospital in Horsham is no longer fit for purpose. The health service has a plan to refresh the infrastructure and this needs to be a priority for the region. Bush nursing services whilst small scale infrastructure need to ensure that the planning occurs to ensure remote infrastructure is refreshed and renewed at appropriate rates and therefore needs to be included any infrastructure.

Wimmera Health Care Group has a plan for its future, but that plan requires endorsement from Infrastructure Victoria that this is the way forward.

Please provide business plans, service plans, program evaluations or other evidence to support your submission.

See attached:

Wimmera Health Care Group Feasibility plan Oct 19

- Wimmera Health Care Group service plan 2016
- Birchip Cropping Group plan Value of Connectivity 2017
- Birchip Cropping Group Connectivity Capability Trust 2017
- Wimmera Development Association Regional investment plan 2018
- Grampians New Energy Taskforce (GNet) technical Report 2020 (Not for Distribution)
- Draft Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership digital plan (Not for Distribution)
- Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership priority actions (Not for Distribution)

Please upload your submission directly via our website or email enquiries@infrastructurevictoria.com.au
Submissions close 7 February 2020.