

Broadband considerations in Central Queensland  
A submission to the Regional telecommunications review.

Following the request for submissions made by the Minister in his press release dated 11 April 2008 the Central Highlands Development Corporation would like to present the following material for consideration by your committee on ways ahead for regional Queensland.

The Region:

The Central Highlands region is located to the west of Rockhampton in central Queensland and comprises a sizeable portion of both the Bowen Basin coal deposits and the Queensland Sandstone Belt. The region is an economic engine for Queensland, in 2006 the Central Highlands region had a Gross Regional Product of \$2.7 Billion. The region boasts a diverse economy underpinned by coal mining and agricultural.

Broadband Issues:

Communications and in particular access to affordable, reliable broadband is seen as a limiting factor to the growth of business, regional economic development and comparable educational opportunities for the region's children.

Within major towns a key problem has become apparent where telephone services have been provided using pair gain technology, older devices do not have the capability to provide broadband access. This has resulted in cases where one house in a street can access ADSL while their neighbour cannot and is forced to use a high cost, typically slower service. In many cases depending on the specific technology users are further disadvantaged by the dial up data rates available being limited to at best 28kb. This has resulted in large portions of new estates being able to access a telephone service but not being able to access ADSL broadband.

The information received so far indicates that the Australian Broadband Guarantee funds are available to assist individual installations, it is felt that this is in need of review to arrive at a funding model that would allow a community based solution instead. As an example a community of 200 households could apply individually for ABG funding and receive subsidies totalling approximately \$540 000 however the same community could not aggregate their demand and then use this funding to procure a device which would allow access to an ADSL style terrestrial service, often available at a fraction of this cost. As an example Telstra recently quoted a figure of \$100 000 to replace a cabinet and devices that would provide this service to a community.

You will find attached a report on the community of Rubyvale illustrating how entire communities of some size are missing out and searching for solutions.

What is a community?

A second issue will be the mechanism used to define communities, if as is feared a decision is based on a numbers formula then many smaller communities which function as regional economic hubs will still be without access to terrestrial broadband for some time to come. In a region where many small schools serve the children of geographically diverse properties and where many small business provide services across the same large geographic area there is a need for broadband access to enable these businesses and schools to have the same standard of communications as those in larger centers.

In many of our smaller communities the “telecenter” has become the focal point of the town’s community with library services, public internet access, banking and access to government services available in one location. Once again fast, reliable and affordable broadband access would enhance the living options in these smaller but vital regional hubs.

Recommendations:

That a priority be put on upgrading all terrestrial pair gain type systems to a technology which will support ADSL type broadband. Much of the cost of this upgrade could conceivably be funded under more flexible ABG arrangements.

That a mechanism be built into the ABG scheme that will allow communities to aggregate demand, perhaps under local council arrangements or through a regional broker scheme and apply for infrastructure upgrade, similar to the older Broadband Connect scheme.

That communities be assessed on a formula that takes into account the regional economic, social and amenity value of the communities rather than just the population. Using this method if the initial decision was that communities of less than 100 people did not qualify for a node then the community could prepare and present a submission against their regional value for reconsideration.

Conclusion:

In my experience within the region I represent the effects of the previous Broadband Connect scheme while generally helpful were blocked by an element of inflexibility in the process, communities which fell within guidelines and were able to show sufficient demand were enabled. Other communities, some of which would have benefitted far more in an economic and social sense had no means of getting themselves considered for equipment upgrade. In a similar sense particular sections within towns such as suburbs where the service was provided using older technology equipment had no means to have their predicament recognised by the scheme.