



CITY OF LITHGOW COUNCIL

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Contact Miss Leanne Kearney

1 November 2005

Federal Parliamentary Standing Committee
on Communications, Information Technology
and the Arts
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

INQUIRY REGARDING THE UPTAKE OF DIGITAL TELEVISION IN AUSTRALIA

With reference to the above inquiry, Lithgow City Council wishes to make the following submission for the Committee's consideration.

As part of the Television Blackspots Program commissioned by Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Lithgow City Council made submissions as part of Round 1 and Round 2, and the following projects were approved:

- Hartley
- Portland
- Capertee
- Glen Davis and
- Megalong Valley/Kanimbla Valley

The Hartley and Portland projects were both approved as part of Round 1 submissions, and upon approval, Council investigated the cost of providing facilities at both sites that would be able to receive and broadcast digital transmissions due to recent developments in technology, and anticipated future trends for the television retransmission industry. After discussions with Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Council was advised that upto \$25,000.00 per broadcasting service was available. Council's consultants had originally suggested that Council investigate installing digital transmission equipment, and began investigating the possible costs associated with this, and if this was permissible under the Federally funded project, allowing Council to make an informed decision in relation to the most feasible type of transmission. The lowest cost provided was approximately \$60,000 per broadcast service, a cost that Council was not in a financial position to provide, considering the Hartley project included four (4) broadcasting services (ABC, WIN, Capital and Prime), and the Portland project included five (5) broadcasting services (ABC, SBS, WIN, Capital and Prime).

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Council was initially advised by Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts that digital transmission would be phased in throughout New South Wales, and the expected transverse period would be between 2007 and 2008.

The Glen Davis, Capertee and Megalong Valley/Kanimbla Valley projects were approved under Round 2 of the Blackspots Programme.

Due to its location, the Glen Davis project retransmits four (4) satellite channels (Impaja, ABC, SBS and 7 Central), as there were difficulties in locating a site that would service more than fifty (50) properties whilst still receiving local free to air television channels. Whilst the affected residents were not fully satisfied with not being able to receive broadcasts that most other residents were receiving, once advised that due to site and transmission signal strength issues satellite transmission was the only option available, the residents were appreciative that at least they were getting a television service, rather than the lack of service they had been receiving in the past.

Originally, the Capertee project was to also be constructed utilising satellite transmission as analogue signal strengths were very weak at the maximum testing height of fifteen (15) metres, however, during construction of the transmission tower, a number of local channels were test broadcasting digital signals, and when these signals were tested beyond the fifteen (15) metre test height, the signal strength vastly increase enough to allow broadcasting of local channels from this site (requiring an amendment to the project).

The Megalong Valley/Kanimbla Valley project was a joint project between Lithgow City Council and Blue Mountains City Council, and as the transmission site was located within the Blue Mountains Local Government Area, an agreement was reached where Blue Mountains City Council would be the co-ordinating body for this project (mainly due to the workload involved in Lithgow City Council trying to progress four (4) other television retransmission projects).

All four (4) television retransmission project where Lithgow City Council is the co-ordinating body have been completed, with many residents congratulating Council on providing an essential service to them that has been lobbied for previously on numerous occasions without success. With this praise, residents have also raised concerns regarding the availability of digital services in the Lithgow City Council area, and whether they will be affected when analogue services cease in the future. Residents are also enquiring why other areas in the Lithgow local government area are already serviced by digital transmission, and why they do not have the opportunity to experience the same service.

Unfortunately, Council is unable to answer these question, and have been advised by DCITA that all funding for this project have been expended, and the project has ceased and will not be extended for any other existing or future projects, and that the funding was for analogue services, not digital retransmission.

It is Council's belief that if the digital signal strength is stronger than the current analogue strength (as indicated by testing undertaken at the Capertee site), then Council may be able to retransmit a stronger signal in digital, which will increase the amount of residents able to benefit from this worthwhile project. Currently, Prime Television is not broadcasting a digital signal, and residents have advised that the Prime signal is weaker than the other channels available.

Council has also raised concerns with the Minister for Communications regarding the ongoing maintenance costs of these transmission towers broadcasting free to air television having to be borne by Lithgow City Council ratepayers, when other local government areas (in particular the metropolitan areas that already have access to digital services), will not have to contribute to the ongoing maintenance and upgrading for the services they receive. The Minister has responded, advising that this was never the intention of the Television Blackspots Programme, however, the funding for the project has expired, and there are no future plans to recommence or extend the project to include maintenance, as this is seen as Council's contribution in lieu of DCITA providing the funding for the capital costs of construction and commissioning.

Lithgow City Council is a small local government body, and as such, does not have the expertise to undertake any maintenance or upgrading of these sites, and must rely on suitably qualified contractors to undertake the required installation, inspections and maintenance for these sites.

Lithgow City Council is now faced with the prospect of having to fully fund the digital conversion of three (3) facilities (Hartley, Portland, and Capertee), as well as contribute 50% toward the conversion of a fourth (4th) facility (Megalong Valley/Kanimbla Valley), as well as annual electrical supply, security patrols and general ongoing maintenance and licensing costs associated with these facilities.

Lithgow City Council would appreciate any further financial assistance available from the Federal Government which will provide support for Council in the digital conversion of these facilities, as well as any possible subsidy available to contribute toward annual maintenance costs.

Whilst Council applauds the Federal Government for providing the initial funding for this project, allowing remote and isolated areas of our local government area to receive an important community service, until commissioned, the problems associated with continuing to operate these facilities, including financially and technically, were not fully identified, and thus, the Federal Government may need to consider the position Council's who accepted subsidy under the Television Blackspots Programme are now in.

Should you require any further information regarding this matter, please contact Council's Strategic Engineer, Miss Leanne Kearney, on (02) 6354 9969, between 7.30am and 12.00pm weekdays.

Yours faithfully



Mr Paul Anderson
GENERAL MANAGER

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