

MAKING THE FUTURE CONNECTIONS

The Connecting the Coast project is aimed at creating a technological solution to alleviate any economic disadvantage on Queensland's Sunshine Coast. By **Michael Whereat**

Conceived as the communications platform for both the Maroochy Clever Networks Project and the Noosa Clever Networks Project – now aligned under the Sunshine Coast Regional Council – the Connecting the Coast project is facilitating connectivity to high speed broadband by connecting government, local business, educational institutions, health-care providers and the general community in a partnership to secure over \$11m in funding for much-needed new broadband infrastructure on the Sunshine Coast.

This initiative addresses the under-development of telecommunications infrastructure on the Sunshine Coast by utilising an innovative funding model that promotes collaboration between potential investors, and allows for more effective, targeted investment for the benefit of the partners and the broader community, specifically across education, business, and health.

In accordance with council tender and procurement processes, Connecting the Coast has pulled together direct investment from the Commonwealth Government, the Sunshine Coast Regional Council in partnership with the University of the Sunshine Coast, Allegro Networks and Mach Technology, with in-kind contributions from Matthew Flinders Anglican College and Reed Property Group.

Individually, the organisations now partnered in Connecting the Coast had insufficient resources or motivation to pursue any significant improvement in internet services for the local area. These groups have worked so effectively together because the Sunshine Coast Regional Council was able to ensure all their needs were met, and show that as a coordinated group they could achieve far more than they could individually.

This integrated approach to the development process and the delivery of new telecommunications infrastructure, while being unique for this kind of development project, addresses a common problem for regional economies, where the market forces do not provide the desired outcome for communities.

The Sunshine Coast Regional Council believes that Connecting the Coast is the prototype for private/public collaborative projects of this kind, demonstrating their capacity to innovate and achieve great results for their community.

The Sunshine Coast economy is characterised by factors such as its small scale, the need for environmental sensitivity, a service industry base, and high levels of

creative and cultural value. Within this context, supporting the knowledge economy is essential to the region's future prosperity, and resolving issues of connectivity – in terms of internet access and stakeholder relationships – is the essential element of the Connecting the Coast project.

Delivering world-class, high-speed broadband at metropolitan prices will reduce the local economy's reliance on more traditional industries such as retail and tourism; aid the regeneration of communities which have lost their traditional economic base; and enable the 'future proofing' of the Sunshine Coast region.

For example Cooroy, an ex-timber town of less than 7000 residents, has experienced great social and economic upheaval in the past six years, with the closure of two mills and several other anchor employment sources in town. The connection of Cooroy to fibre optic cable, the



The Mayor of the Sunshine Coast Regional Council, Bob Abbott, at the launch of the fibre optic cable project at the University of the Sunshine Coast.



construction of the Data Centre at the site of the old Cooroy Butter Factory, and plans for a new library have increased the economic security of this small regional community.

Connecting the Coast will enhance network access through a mix of fibre optic cable, the provision of two new network points, new wireless base stations and a new 155MBps (megabytes per second) backhaul link between Brisbane and the Sunshine Coast. The combination of wireless and fibre optic cable provides network security and redundancy, with the capability to reach over half of the Sunshine Coast population and potentially 38,500 businesses in the region.

Connecting the Coast is creating catalytic change in the region by supporting local business and innovation; encouraging e-commerce on the Sunshine Coast; delivering benefits to broadband consumers; and improving the efficiency of essential services.

The Sunshine Coast Regional Council is now looking to promote the use of new services and develop more strategies for future development, while working with local

organisations to improve access to telecommunications by mandating broadband infrastructure in all new developments.

Other regions and levels of government are looking at Connecting the Coast as a template for the development of telecommunications infrastructure in other regional areas. The Federal Government is interested in the outcomes and is seeking more material on the project from the Sunshine Coast Regional Council.

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Business Vitality Initiative pilot

The Small Towns Victoria Program completed the pilot of the Centre for Innovative and Entrepreneurial Leadership's (CIEL) Business Vitality Initiative (BVI) pilot around the state at the end of June. Mike Stolte, Director of the Canada-based not-for-profit CIEL, trained five facilitators from across the state to deliver the pilot and possible future programs. The piloting of the economic development focused BVI methodology is a first for Australia.

The BVI helps townships to assess their capacity to support entrepreneurs and to foster small business growth. The BVI measures the perceptions of community leaders, business and industry leaders, education and health providers and residents about the current business environment in their town and compares the results to an average of other townships to determine possible short- and long-term actions the community can undertake to improve its business friendliness.

The five pilot townships in Victoria (Yarram, Dimboola, Myrtleford, Robinvale and Macarthur) have each held two township meetings – the first with a small representative group and the second with the greater township – and are now in the throes of delivering their selected actions.

In the first meeting, business and community leaders met and considered each town's capacity to work with

entrepreneurs and foster business growth. The township was assessed through an intensive, one hundred-question survey along with some group discussion work.

The second meeting was a focus and action session involving the entire community. Each facilitator presented findings from the surveys completed and discussion groups that took place in the first session, along with some proposed actions. Everybody was asked to vote on the actions they believe to be of priority for the township.

Following the priority-setting exercise, the attendees self-select an action work group to join. A 'reality check' is performed in the work groups in order to see if current resources, energy and circumstances will allow the township to move forward with their selected priority actions.

All the pilot townships have the support of the trained facilitators over the next six months to support them, and their community sponsor (the Economic Development Officer from the local council in most cases).

Full reports, summary reports and selected actions from each pilot township are available on the Small Towns section of the Municipal Association of Victoria website <http://www.mav.asn.au/ecd/rrd/smalltowns>