

Katherine Region Economic Development Forum 16 November 2005

Summary Assessment of Key Issues Arising

The following is a summary assessment of the key issues arising out of the Katherine Region Economic Development Forum.

Regional government programs

Forum delegates expressed the following views:

- The region is heavily dependent on government business
- A strong concern was the lack of adequate regional autonomy across a wide range of government (both NT Government and Australian Government) functions. Decisions made in Darwin lead to perceived inefficiencies.
- Specific examples raised included the timing of contracts, Power and Water Corporation (PowerWater) program control, building certification, roads, land tenure zoning, telecommunications and departmental representation in the region.
- The PowerWater monopoly means high costs of power with no room for negotiation for bulk users and this is a constraint to development.
- Longer term planning (including timing and location) for public infrastructure developments is sought. The plans for large scale government infrastructure should be promoted in advance to the community to enable them to use these prospects to attract people to the region. This would also provide proof of the government's faith in the region.
- Some deficiencies of infrastructure, for example rural power and phone coverage were identified. A key problem is that the cost of infrastructure is going through the roof so new and creative solutions are required.
- Isolated concerns exist for regulations and taxes. A large number of buildings were constructed prior to the application of the present regime of building certification, resulting in a large number of residential and commercial buildings difficult to insure or resell. Other examples included Stamp Duty and the lengthy approvals process for environmental regulations.
- Key proposals for business-related regulations were the need for a one-stop-shop and plain English.

Developing resources

Forum delegates expressed the following views:

- Abundant natural resources together with the transport linkages exist in the region.
- The availability and access to land for more intensive farming, rural business and town and community residential purposes are significantly limiting economic development. Potential exists for better tenure uses of some of the larger marginal pastoral properties although Native Title is a constraint.
- The proposed introduction of Aboriginal land lease back arrangements is anticipated to accelerate economic development.

Housing and building stocks

Forum delegates expressed the following views:

- An acute shortage of owner and rental houses exists throughout the region. Inadequate housing quality is an associated problem.
- Shortages also exist for the delivery of services such as health facilities and child care centres.

Indigenous participation

Forum delegates expressed the following views:

- Combining Aboriginal land resources with entrepreneurial inputs would produce benefits.

- Capacity building in Indigenous areas is hindered by lack of housing for staff. The Indigenous population is a major untapped resource for the region. A big advantage is that the people are permanent residents.
- Fundamental to winning jobs is addressing the lack of numeracy and literacy skills. A way of achieving future employment options is to have a program to get kids to go to school.
- Some anti-social behaviour in towns presents a negative image for people looking to reside in the region.
- Mainstream businesses are reluctant to partner with Indigenous people due to cultural and risk factors. Government has a brokerage role here.

Improving business performance

Forum delegates expressed the following views:

- A need exists for more information and studies on the Katherine region investment opportunities. These opportunities will then need to be marketed.
- Mentoring/incubators were advocated for business enterprise managers. Their role could include partnership facilitation, understanding cultures, acting as brokers and exploring marketing opportunities.
- Business needs to be receptive to new opportunities. Examples include old age homes, child care centres, innovative means of keeping tourists stay longer, water-based enterprises and marketing hay to southern states in drought.
- Technology improvements through research and development (R&D) are supported and valued. The focus should be 'on the ground' R&D and extension. However, some ambivalence was evident on the relative merits of private versus public R&D.
- The daunting processes of applying for R&D funding need to be improved. The assessment of grant applications should, if possible, take into account the operator's past inputs into the business rather than just the inputs for the particular project. Government has a role to provide more assistance to businesses applying for grants.
- More business success stories are required and important.

Regional liveability

Forum delegates expressed the following views:

- Liveability characteristics of the region are critical for attracting people (of all ages) to move into the region to work and live. For example, it is a critical ongoing challenge for Defence.
- Liveability is essentially determined by a combination of facilities and services. These include, among many others, schooling, perceptions of the region, personal safety, communications, child care, health services and job opportunities for spouses.
- Regions must realistically promote their region, for example as Tennant Creek has done using a locally produced DVD.

Labour supply

Forum delegates expressed the following views:

- Labour challenges identified were labour supply, skilled worker availability, seasonal fluctuations and the ability to retain highly paid and skilled staff through the "off season". Industries mentioned included tourism, pastoral and horticulture.
- Education and training to enhance the capacity of business operators, employees and people leading not-for-profit organisations were all advocated and supported.
- Innovative models of delivery of education and training are sought. For example, the role of Vocational Education Training (VET) in schools should be further explored. In-situ training in Indigenous communities was suggested.
- Skilled migration (from interstate and overseas) is recognised as necessary. However, this must be handled very carefully and balanced against efforts to engage local people, especially from the huge untapped Indigenous population.