WEEKLY COLUMN

Friday, 2 December 2016

Hospitals with no doctor – we need answers and action

What's the use of having new modern hospital facilities if we have instances where some are without doctors on duty? Well, that's the question I'm asking of Hunter New England Health (HNEH) this week. I've asked for a 'please explain' why the Inverell and Glen Innes Hospitals were without doctors on duty recently.

This past weekend the Inverell and Glen Innes Hospitals were left to operate without a doctor – and the hospitals were left with no on-duty medical officer.

I'm seriously concerned that these are not isolated incidents and I've since learnt that doctor services were not being provided at the Inverell Hospital for a further two days this week.

This treatment of the community by HNEH is simply not acceptable and it is only through good luck that a major medical emergency hasn't occurred so I have been in touch with the Chief Executive of HNEH Michael DiRienzo and requested an urgent meeting to discuss these ongoing shortfalls in service – he has told me that there are no staffing problems.

It's not good enough and hospital staff, proper medical backup and support is a minimal requirement and I don't believe HNEH are meeting that at this time.

These hospitals service significant population centres and should be adequately manned at all times.

Sunnier skies for renewable energy boost

As the Parliamentary Secretary for Renewable Energy I launched a bulk-buy program designed to get hundreds more homes and businesses across an area from Gunnedah and Tamworth to Armidale and Glen Innes into new generation solar power use this week.

This second bulk buy represented a boost to households who could not only save up to 30% on normal installation costs – but would bring down their power bills at a time when electricity costs continue to go through the roof.

This is a great initiative and is another giant step for this region in switching to renewable energy use.

The new bulk buy is aimed specifically at getting customers across the Northern Tablelands to switch their hot water systems from off peak electrical to solar but is also targeting new solar users in the Tamworth, Liverpool Plains, Armidale, Gunnedah, Uralla and Walcha local government areas.

The program provides discounted installation costs based on partnerships with an evacuated tube solar hot water system supplier and a Tamworth-based eco-energy and solar power installer.

You can see why retailers and installers are reporting a big spike in demand for solar systems like we saw six years ago with the 60c energy rebate scheme – this package is a win-win really because you're getting a quality product at a discounted price that will help you at a time when power bills have jumped 10per cent and look likely to continue skyrocketing.

This is the second community bulk-buy project under the Farming the Sun initiative from solar energy advocate and enterprise Starfish Initiatives.

The first bulk-buy six years ago achieved a strike rate of 270 residences across the tablelands region, worth nearly $7million in solar energy, including some 137 who switched to solar hot water too.

This time around Farming the Sun hopes to get another 270 hot water solar switch customers over the tablelands – but also install another 1megawatt of solar power for 333 residences across the broader region including to the south to Tamworth, Quirindi and Gunnedah.

$16.3 million Moree East Public School rebuild officially opened

I had the great honour of officially opening the new $16.3 million school upgrade at Moree East Public on Monday where a rebuild has going on for 18 months.

The official opening brings a long held dream to a wonderful reality for the Moree school community.

Education will shape the future for the young people of Moree and we are committed to creating better life opportunities for future generations – and this major works project goes towards achieving that aim.

These wonderful new facilities will create a modern learning environment and these learning spaces are exactly what the community and students of Moree deserve – facilities as good as those in any public school in NSW.

The major capital investment is part of the Connected Communities Strategy, and includes 15 new and refurbished classrooms, a new administration and reception block, refurbishment of the Careunga building, which serves as a community hub, he renewal of the covered learning area and carpark and improved energy sustainability with installation of solar panels.

This magnificent upgrade was part of Education Minister Adrian Piccoli's promise to invest substantially in bringing Connected Communities schools up to the standards we expect of our schools anywhere in the state and I applaud and appreciate his commitment to this project.

Moree East has already seen huge improvements in student results, placed last year in the top 10 per cent of schools across NSW for student learning improvement and on track to be in the top five per cent this year.

Another four new mobile phone towers on the way

Mobile phone reception blackspots throughout the region will soon be further reduced with the news this week that four additional locations in the electorate had been selected for funding to construct new phone towers.

The improvements in network coverage will be delivered through the State Government's investment of $15 million into the round 2 of the Federal Mobile Blackspot Program.

The towers will be built at Baldersleigh, west of Guyra, Aberfoyle, east of Guyra, Pinkett, east of Glen Innes which are Telstra towers and at Wongwibinda, near Ebor, a Vodafone structure.

Eight new mobile phone towers in the Northern Tablelands were announced last year as part of round 1, including Hillgrove, Bonshaw, Elsmore, Kings Plains, Hetheringtons Sugarloaf at Rocky Creek, Spring Mountain Road, Invergowrie and Balala.

These latest four were troublesome mobile blackspots so it's great to see they'll get new towers under the second round.

Deputy Premier gets a first-hand look at problem Inverell intersection

During his visit to the north, I took the chance of showing Deputy Premier John Barilaro one of Inverell's busiest intersections and I will continue to keep a close eye on progress with this.

It's not as simple as just building a roundabout. There will likely be a lot of work to re-align the Gwydir Highway and the bridge approach to construct the roundabout. With the service station across the road, space is at a premium and the final design will have to be carefully considered.

Inverell Shire Council has already committed $500,000 to the project and is seeking the balance of the funding from the State Government, estimated to be around $1 million.

While a formal submission won't be made to the government until the design plans are finalised, costed and approved, the Deputy Premier shares my views of the need for the roundabout.

Inverell Shire Mayor Paul Harmon, Deputy Mayor Anthony Michael and General Manager Paul Henry joined us on the visit and briefed Mr Barilaro on the traffic problems at the Gwydir Highway and Tingha Road Bridge intersection.

This intersection is one of the busiest in Inverell and the major road link for the community to Guyra, Bundarra and Armidale. As Inverell continues to grow, this intersection will become even more congested during peak times with school buses, trucks and local traffic.

Armidale NSW SES gets a new flood boat

We can often joke about people and their new toys but seriously the new flood boat for the Armidale State Emergency Service Unit will boost their flood and emergency response capabilities far beyond what they experience now.

Namoi SES Region Controller Andrew Galvin was with me for a short ceremony on Thursday to hand over the **$26,900** 4.75-metre Jabiru 385 boat to Armidale SES members.

The boat will give a considerable lift to the emergency capabilities of the 43 active volunteers and members of the unit.

They devote considerable time to preparation and training to ensure their skills and equipment are constantly able to meet the variety of situations they respond to – and the boat will add to their safety and skilled response capability for others in emergency situations.

Frank Crump honoured for his selfless community contributions

I love helping recognise the very best of our community members for their dedication and tireless work and it was a great pleasure to mark popular Moree identity Frank Crump's work as a volunteer this week.

I presented Frank with a certificate for his 25 years of service as a volunteer with many organisations in Moree, as part of the Premier's volunteer recognition program, and you can't count on two hands the organisations and the groups Frank has given valued service to around Moree over that time.

Frank is a local champion and highly regarded by everyone for his work and I've enjoyed spending many hours with him on the annual hike for homeless, at the footy or at the community radio station.

Bingara school students dig funding for a bush tucker garden

School students from Bingara will get their hands really dirty in the coming weeks following a State Government grant to allow them to start planting out a new native bush tucker garden.

Bingara Central School has been given **$3,500** under a NSW Government Environmental trust program.

The grant will go towards buying seedlings and plants for a new dedicated bush tucker area in The Living Classroom green space just outside Bingara so besides getting lessons in environmental science the students will have some practical work in landscaping and cultural and culinary experiments too.

Upcoming rail renewal works at Moree

Work on a rail line renewal and upgrading of the level crossing at Tycannah St in Moree got underway from this week.

Transport for New South Wales (TfNSW) is undertaking the project as part of the NSW Government's Fixing Country Rail program across the state. Works are being completed by TfNSW's contractor, John Holland Rail (JHR). JHR operate and maintain the Country Regional Network across NSW under a ten year contract with TfNSW.

Information has been distributed to 4,800 Moree residents and businesses, detailing the works, expected to be completed by the end of January 2017, subject to final approvals and weather conditions.

Site operations will run from Mondays to Sundays from 7am to 6pm and there will be some overnight construction to minimise disruption for the public but no work is planned during the Christmas-New Year holiday period.

Once the level crossing is upgraded later this month, the 'GIVEWAY' sign at Tycannah Street level crossing will change to a **'STOP'** sign, so I would advise for safety reasons that for anyone using it, please follow the new road signage once installed and **'STOP'** before the Tycannah Street level crossing to check for trains. Once the rail line renewal work is completed in January 2017, trains will once again use the line.

Today

Today I'm in Moree holding meetings with the local police, Ambulance service and other constituents. Tonight I'm in Guyra to switch on the community Christmas tree

ADAM MARSHALL
Member for Northern Tablelands
Parliamentary Secretary for Northern NSW and Renewable Energy