

WEEKLY COLUMN

Friday, 11 December 2015

Airport funding for Moree and Armidale

There was terrific news for the Armidale Dumaresq and Moree Plains Shire Councils this week thanks to \$3 million in funding from the State Government for major upgrades to their regional airports.

The two projects would receive \$1.5 million each from the government's Regional Tourism Infrastructure Fund, which was also funding 15 other successful proposals from councils across rural and regional NSW. By funding country airport infrastructure we're making a long term investment to create jobs and improve services for residents to support airports with the greatest capacity to increase visitor numbers, stimulating our local economies.

Armidale and Moree airports serve as vital gateways to our wonderful region and provide critical links for business, medical services and tourism. This is a much needed investment in critical infrastructure in the Armidale and Moree communities that would create jobs and contribute to further local economic growth with the potential for an additional terminal upgrade at Armidale in the New Year.

In Armidale, council will undertake at \$2.1 million expansion of the current 3-bay airside parking apron to allow four aircraft, three of which could be Dash 8 Q400s, to make use of the apron at the same time. As the Armidale airport continues to grow in usage (123,000 passengers last year) the apron must be enlarged to facilitate extra services and ultimately larger commercial aircraft using the airport.

Moree Plains Shire Council would be embarking on a \$2.2 million upgrade of its airport main runway. He said the Federal Government would contribute \$500,000 to the project and council \$200,000. A new lighting system will also be installed for the runway, improvements to the airside water drainage and resurfacing of the entire runway strip.

Both upgrades will support the efforts of both councils to improve safety and attract new flight services to and from our region.

New dog unit ready to collar criminals

On Monday the NSW Police Force introduced the State's newest Dog Squad Unit as a permanent placement at the Oxley, Barwon and New England police commands. The Police handler and his general-purpose police dog 'Johnno' were officially introduced at Tamworth Police Station.

I was pleased to be on hand to his welcome the team which is a welcome addition to the region in providing vital operational back up right across the New England and North West region. This is a vast improvement on the previous situation whereby officers investigating various offences in all three commands who wished to access a dog unit, had to do so through Sydney or Coffs Harbour.

This arrangement will be much better and will be a huge support to supplement existing police resources to help investigate crime and also catch offenders for a whole range of offences.

\$3 million to improve safety on Waterfall Way

I was pleased to announce that a major safety upgrade of Waterfall Way, about 30 kilometres east of Armidale, is underway. There will be \$3 million invested to

completely rebuild and widen a dangerous two-kilometre section of the busy route between the St Helena and Four Mile Creek Bridges.

This is good news; Waterfall Way is a major freight transport route connecting the Pacific Highway on the coast to Armidale and it's also an important tourist link that is seeing more and more traffic each year. This narrow and winding section of the Waterfall Way is notoriously dangerous with many near misses reported and, as late as a fortnight ago, a car was run off the road along this stretch. Luckily no-one was injured.

I'm delighted to see the government has listened to our region's request for additional funds to improve this section of Waterfall Way, which comes on the back of more than \$2 million of upgrades closer to Ebor recently. I'll continue to press the government for further funding to continue improving Waterfall Way, including more passing lanes for motorists.

Work will be carried out on weekdays from 7am to 6pm and Saturdays from 8am to 1pm with the project scheduled for completion in March next year, weather permitting. Changed traffic conditions including lane closures would be in place for the safety of road users and workers. One lane would remain open at all times with traffic control in place to guide motorists safely through the worksite. Plan for delays in your travel of up to 15 minutes and be patient while the work is underway.

Mobile Blackspot nominations close soon

Nominations of mobile black spot locations in the region need to be submitted by 31 December to be eligible for consideration under round two of the Mobile Black Spot Programme. This is a Commonwealth Government program and round one saw 22 new and upgraded mobile towers approved in this electorate, with the first one expected to be commissioned near Glen Innes before Christmas.

Mobile Black Spot locations that are nominated will be added to a national database, which will then be provided to mobile operators as a guide to where mobile base stations are required. I encourage residents who suffer from limited or no service, to consider taking this opportunity. Nominations can be made online at www.communications.gov.au/blackspots

Kingstown Preschool bounces back

Santa made an early delivery to the village of Kingstown this week as the community came together to celebrate the resurrection of the Kingstown Preschool. I was delighted to join the parents, children, supporters and staff in welcoming Santa, enjoying some cake and unwrapping gifts.

This little preschool is a wonderful example of people-power, or more accurately, little people-power. When the previous operators decided to withdraw their support and close the service a few weeks before Term three ended, the local families faced a long trip into Uralla or Bundarra.

Instead of giving up, a hastily convened group of local mothers stepped forward and began the fight to win back the important service in this remote village. The group initially led by Kingstown's Kylie Vincent and Josephine Tonkin, took up a big challenge to save the service and ultimately, they won the day. The Kingstown Community Preschool was reborn as a community-run facility with a coordinator and educator employed. Not only that the student number almost doubled from seven to 13.

The value in having local early education facilities such as the Kingstown Preschool is that the children have the opportunity to 'grow' into big school and get the best start they can in their education. I congratulate all those who worked to ensure the preschool's future and thank the Minister for Early Education Childhood Education Leslie Williams who helped facilitated licensing and funding for the group.

Away from home student's allowance boosted

I was pleased to announce earlier this week that allowances will be boosted for to isolated families whose children need to undertake secondary study away from home. Next year the base allowance rate for the *Living Away from Home Allowance* (LAFHA) would be \$2,000, a 40 per cent increase on this year. Additionally, Year 11 and 12 isolated students will be offered a supplementation of \$460, up from \$334 this year.

Some parents raising children in rural and remote NSW have to travel enormous distances to get to a secondary school. Increasing the LAFHA recognises this challenge and provides some financial support to the family.

The LAFHA provides an opportunity to many families to broaden educational options when they live too far away from a secondary school to attend on a daily basis. The NSW Government initiated the review of the LAFHA at the request of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association.

The allowance will continue to be means tested so that the basic and supplementary payments can better support those who need it most. LAFHA is available to students who are boarding, to attend public and non-government secondary schools. Details of the allowance and application procedures are available on the Department's website www.schools.nsw.edu.au/rde/scholarships/lafha/index.php or by calling the Rural and Distance Education Team on 02 6334 8070.

School presentations

This week I enjoyed taking some time to join school communities in the electorate as they marked the end of another school year.

Moree Secondary College, Duval High School, Ashford Central School and Guyra Central School, all made me feel very welcome. I am always inspired by the enthusiasm in our schools and presentation events are a great way to catch up on all the achievements being made by talented students across the region.

Today I had the pleasure of being a guest speaker at my old school Farrer Memorial Agricultural High School. It was great to see some familiar faces and new.

Fresh water for Copeton Park visitors

Visitors to the stunning Copeton Waters near Inverell can leave the water containers at home now that a new \$600,000 water treatment plant has been turned on. I had the pleasure yesterday of joining Gwydir Shire Mayor, John Coulton, Inverell Shire Mayor, Paul Harmon and CEO of NSW Crown Holiday Parks Trust Steve Edmonds for the 'turning on of the taps'.

The plant has a capacity of 250kL per day and the availability of fresh drinking water will give visitors and campers a welcome break from carrying in water making life easier for the many visitors to this sensational part of the region.

This is great news for the region and I look forward to inspecting the additional upgrades to sewer and power facilities early in the New Year. For a full list of activities, accommodation and rates at any of the nine Inland Waters Holiday Parks visit www.inlandwaters.com.au.

Safer walking and riding in Moree

I was pleased to recently have a chance to inspect the recently completed cycleway/pathway which links the Aboriginal communities east of the railway with the Moree town centre. The State Government allocated \$300,000 in the budget to the Moree Plains Shire Council to assist with the cost of completing the shared pathway project and it was great to see the finished project.

It is a 900 metre pathway along the Gwydir Highway from Wirriala Street to Ann Street was the final stage of what was a four-stage project to link the Aboriginal communities east of the Railway with the town centre. The good news story is that the RMS shared the Council's enthusiasm for this project and was happy to fund the final stage.

Council's 10-year-term plan identified that the Gwydir Highway path links the whole community east of the railway line with the town centre.

This community has a high aboriginal population and their long term plan was to extend the path all the way to the Aboriginal Mission of Stanley Village from the CBD. There is low ratio of cars per household and a high ratio of residents per house and the old pathway was only one-metre wide and was far from adequate for the large number of pedestrians using it.

Council has successfully worked with the RMS to make this route as attractive as possible as there are currently 1,000 pedestrian crossings per day and many of these are at night. The 2.5-metre wide path is a great improvement on what was previously there and will assist in funnelling everyone to the safest location to cross the Highway.

The weekend

Tomorrow I am attending the opening of the new Oak Tree Retirement Village Community Centre in Armidale. This is a substantial investment in our community.

If you are in Guyra on Sunday, or feel like a road trip – then don't miss the Christmas Picnic at the Guyra Community Garden at the top of the range. Take your own meat, drinks and salad to share and enjoy some great Guyra hospitality.

Next week, I am attending the final school presentations for the year and will be travelling around the electorate. At this time of year please take care on the roads and make sure you arrive at your destinations safely.

ADAM MARSHALL
Member for Northern Tablelands