$2 million rail fix for Moree agriculture & freight efficiency

This is what strategic investment looks like: by spending $2 million in reinstating a disused section of rail line at Moree, the NSW Government will enable hundreds of thousands of tonnes of grain, cotton and pulses to be railed to Newcastle instead of being sent by truck to Queensland.

I announced on Monday that as part of the $15 million Fixing Country Rail pilot program, the government will spend $2 million to reopen 2.8 kilometres of the currently disused Moree to Inverell railway branch line. The work will link Broadbent Grain’s receival facilities, which are on the abandoned Moree-Inverell line, with the main line servicing Moree.

That means that about 250,000 tonnes of grain and 6,400 twenty foot containers of cotton and pulses – the equivalent of 6,000 trucks – per year can be moved by rail to Newcastle instead of having to go by road to Queensland ports. It’s a big win for Moree’s rural economy and for jobs in country NSW. It’s an investment in appropriate transport options, better roads, and greater efficiency.

All told, 10 projects across NSW will receive a share of $15 million under the Fixing Country Rail pilot program, in addition to the $400 million to be invested into the program itself. The first full round of Fixing Country Rail funding will open later this year. Regional councils, producers, rail operators and other businesses are encouraged to work together and apply for funding under the program.

New $1 million platform for University of New England innovation

Put good ideas together with good research and potentially you have a powerful process for driving innovation and enterprise. That’s certainly the aim of the $1 million partnership I announced this week between the NSW Government and the University of New England (UNE), which will go towards building the SMART Region Incubator.

The Incubator will help the region’s business innovators and agricultural entrepreneurs develop their ideas and build their markets by drawing on the considerable knowledge amassed by UNE researchers. The incubator will also help UNE students and researchers with promising ideas explore avenues for commercialisation.

This initiative ties in with my drive to build the transport and infrastructure capacity of Armidale and the region, so the electorate can fulfill its considerable promise as a centre of commerce and innovation.

$30 million redevelopment of Inverell District Hospital another step closer

Great news: the next phase of planning for the $30 million redevelopment of the Inverell District Hospital has begun.

Following the allocation of $1 million in the 2016/17 NSW Budget, the Hunter New England Health (HNEH) capital works and NSW Health Infrastructure teams are now progressing with the next steps of planning for the new facility.
I’m told the business case for the redevelopment should be in place by the end of the year. It’s the same process as the $60 million Armidale Hospital redevelopment. Construction of this project is about to get underway.

This is another incredibly exciting step for the Inverell community, which can now be assured of seeing tangible progress in the next 12 months with further community consultation, detailed design plans developed and virtual walkthroughs of the redevelopment.

This time next year, we will fully understand what is involved in the redevelopment of Inverell Hospital, and will be in a strong position to secure for funding to begin construction.

**New public defender appointed for Armidale and Tamworth**

A few weeks after learning that Jeffery McLennan SC has been appointed to serve as the region’s first live-in District Court judge, we have the additional news that barrister Stuart Bouveng has been appointed as public defender for District Court trials in Armidale and Tamworth.

Public Defenders are barristers independent of the government who appear in serious criminal matters for clients who have been granted legal aid. Mr Bouveng will begin working as a public defender for the region on Monday, 15 August 2016.

Together, the community and I have campaigned strongly for additional court resources to deal with the mounting backlog of District Court cases. With these two appointments, the government has delivered exactly what we need.

During a legal career spanning more than 20 years, Mr Bouveng has worked for private law firms in NSW and the United Kingdom, as well as NSW Legal Aid, NSW DPP and the Aboriginal Legal Service NSW/ACT. The appointment of Mr Bouveng is part of a $20 million package announced by the NSW Government in December 2015 to slash the District Court backlog of criminal trials.

**Have your say on future wind farm development in the region**

As the Northern Tablelands electorate becomes a favoured region for renewable energy, it becomes more important that our community has its say on the planning of renewable energy projects. That opportunity is available right now, with the NSW Government calling for community input during consultation on its new wind energy planning framework.

With its new policy framework, the NSW Government aims to put greater certainty and consistency around wind farm development in order to attract investment while balancing the needs of the community. The framework has been developed to address flaws in the draft 2011 wind farm guidelines, which among other things have resulted in long delays in assessing projects.

In one case, a wind farm proposal took more than 2,500 days to be determined. The average determination times for wind projects in the past five years has been more than
1,000 days – a crippling imposition for developers, and a real blockage to getting the benefits of this technology into our rural communities.

The policy incorporates new technical bulletins that frame the objectives behind revised standards for visual impact and noise. The new noise criteria adopts South Australia’s stricter standards on base noise limits.

With this new framework, we need to get an appropriate balance between building an attractive investment environment and community safeguards. This frontline electorate’s input and insights will make a valuable contribution to this process.

The proposed new framework can be viewed at www.planning.nsw.gov.au/Have-Your-Say. Submissions can be made online or via post: Department of Planning and Environment, Attention: Director, Industry and Infrastructure Policy, GPO Box 39, Sydney NSW 2001. Submissions close on 16 September 2016.

**Funding available for better fish habitat and better fishing**

For great fishing, you need great fish habitat, which is why up to $40,000 is now being made available to people and community groups through the NSW Government’s Habitat Action Grants Program.

Improved fish habitat in our waterways is a win across the board – for fish, fishers and the quality of our rivers and streams. And for the Northern Tablelands, which boasts some of the best river and stillwater fishing to be found in Australia, these grants offer a chance to build the foundations of future angling in the region.

The latest round of the Habitat Action program is offering large grants of up to $40,000, and small grants to kick-start a project of up to $2,000, to fishing clubs, community groups, local councils and individuals wanting to improve fish habitat in the region. Applications for Habitat Action Grants are now open and close on 30 September 2016. For application forms and examples of past projects visit www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/hag

**Funding available to celebrate unit in our diverse communities**

The media is full of news about people failing to get along with each other, but I’d prefer we celebrate the more encouraging human ability to work together. The 2016/17 Unity and Celebration Grants, which form part of the Multicultural NSW Grants Program, provide funding for projects which help unite local communities, promote social cohesion and showcase the benefits of cultural diversity.

Walk down the main street of any of our major towns and you see faces representing different parts of the world. As it has always done, this diversity brings energy and innovation to our communities. Let’s celebrate that. The Unity and Celebration Grants are great way to recognise the value we gain from unity in diversity.

Unity Grants provide up to $30,000 to support local community projects, and Celebration Grants provide up to $5,000 for festivals and events that bring communities together and showcase the benefits of cultural diversity. Only not-for-profit community organisations and local councils are eligible to apply for Unity and Celebration Grants. Applications close on 9 September 2016. To apply for a Multicultural NSW Grant visit www.multicultural.nsw.gov.au
Today and the weekend

Today I’m in Armidale catching up on meetings with locals about another potential solar farm for the region and Aboriginal justice re-investment, among other issues.

Tomorrow I’ll be heading to Bundarra to celebrate the 90th birthday of the local CWA branch before taking in the New England Rugby grand finals in Armidale. I’ll also be dropping in on the Armidale Outlaws baseball last home game of the season.

Adam Marshall
Member for Northern Tablelands