

NBN could help stem rural exodus

Community hopes and concerns raised at hearings.

The National Broadband Network could be a key to reversing depopulation of rural communities, a parliamentary inquiry into the NBN has heard.

General Manager of the Gloucester Shire Council, Allan Young, told the House of Representatives Infrastructure and Communications Committee the council sees the NBN rollout as providing economic opportunities for business growth “with the ultimate possibility of increasing the population of the shire”.

But with a population of 5,000 spread out over a semi-rural area of the Upper Hunter in NSW, the council is concerned about the time it may take to get connected.

“It is possible that NBN Co will push to have major towns and cities connected first so as to generate greater income earlier in the rollout cycle with towns such as Gloucester being left until the last years of the project.

“If this is the process, other larger population centres will benefit at the cost of smaller population centres and may in fact contribute to the economic demise of these rural towns.”

The Wheatbelt East Regional Organisation of Councils told the inquiry most of the wheatbelt area of Western Australia will receive little or no access to the NBN under current plans, deepening the digital divide between remote areas and regional and metropolitan centres.

“This lack of access will penalise the residents within these communities,” the group said. “This lack of access will adversely impact upon each of the criteria the committee has been requested to investigate.”

But network owner NBN Co said it plans to provide broadband speeds of 12 megabits per second to 100 per cent of Australian premises through a combination of fibre, next generation wireless and satellite networks.

Over 93 per cent of premises will be connected by fibre optic cable offering speeds of 100 megabits per second.

The multi-billion dollar cost of delivering fibre based connections to most Australian households is continuing to generate heated debate in parliament.

Shadow Minister for Communications and Broadband Malcolm Turnbull described the NBN as the “most extravagant and reckless undertaking of the most reckless and extravagant government we have known in our lifetimes”.

“When it comes to the biggest infrastructure project in our nation’s history, the National Broadband Network – \$50 billion of investment overall – there is no scrutiny, no accountability and no competition.”

Mr Turnbull said favouring fibre technology over wireless methods is a fatal flaw to the NBN plan.

“We are seeing right around the world the explosion of wireless broadband. This is a genuine telecommunications revolution,” Mr Turnbull said.

“This is not to say that wireless is the complete solution, but, equally, it is naive to imagine that the explosion of wireless services is not going to have an enormous impact on the broadband experience and the broadband future of Australia.”

But Infrastructure Minister Anthony Albanese said Mr Turnbull’s promotion of wireless solutions shows he doesn’t understand how broadband works.

“Experts agree that, while wireless is one part of the picture, it is not a substitute for fibre,” Mr Albanese said. “If you are going to rely on wireless broadband, you need a fibre network to support it and you need mobile phone towers on every street connected up to each other in a system through the fibre network.”



SIGN OF THE TIMES: NBN review considers costs and benefits. Photo: Thinkstock

“That is something that the Member for Wentworth might have an interesting time explaining to his electorate when those towers go up on every corner of every street.”

In a white paper report on the impact of broadband in Australia, UK social regeneration expert Dr Tim Williams said the focus should be on the potential of high speed broadband to link and develop Australia, rather than arguments over cost.

Based on the UK experience, the report shows high speed broadband allows major advances in e-health, online education, access to government and the revitalisation of regional communities.

However Dr Williams said these benefits can only be realised if all Australians have both the opportunity and ability to connect equally to the network.

“Digital inclusion is absolutely essential, and one of the findings of the report is that communities and citizens that are left unconnected will be at a deficit with their peers,” Dr Williams said. “So you’ve got to be in this thing otherwise all the benefits we talk about do not accrue to you.”

Public hearings of the NBN inquiry are scheduled until May and the construction of the network is set to continue over the next eight years. •

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