

Chamber of Commerce Northern Territory – NT SUMMIT SUBMISSION

FROM: Chief Executive Officer
RE: Chamber NT Summit Submission Paper
DATE: June 2009



On 25 March 2009 the Northern Territory Chamber of Commerce hosted the inaugural NT Summit at the Convention Centre in Darwin. The event, which brought together over fifty business leaders from across a range of business and government activities within the Territory was designed as an arena into which topics of concern could be entered and debated by those directly effected. The outcomes were seen as a range of observations which would be available for further debate by the business community and as a guide to Government on the thinking of the business sector.

The format of the Summit was not intended as a venue to pass resolutions or make concise recommendations requiring action. It did, however, expose a number of common concerns and raised some suggestions which can and should be incorporated into future planning for the development of the Territory.

The NT Summit 2009 is seen as the first of a series of such events which will be run every two years by the Chamber around selected topics chosen from across the full range of business activity. The format is not designed to dictate the outcomes, which will be determined by the input provided by the attending delegates. As the “Voice of Territory Business” the Chamber of Commerce is also a good listener.

Around the three broad topics presented on the day, the following outcomes have been distilled from the discussions held.

INFRASTRUCTURE

“At the end of the day there must be the political will and leadership to think big and build infrastructure accordingly. Government must accept that there is a limit to the usefulness of analysis and prediction. They must continue to establish the infrastructure for the inevitable growth.”

ENERGY & WATER

There is a recognition that a number of opportunities have presented themselves in the past and not been acted upon to ensure a long term sustainable supply of energy to the Territory market. Large amounts of capital have been invested in the generation of electricity but the infrastructure to provide delivery has been badly neglected. The

community expectation is that a provider of energy and water should have reliable supply and delivery systems in place. That is, after all, the very reason for their existence. Insufficient planning is being applied to the increasing demand for reliable energy and water and the future requirements across the Territory. Major projects are being forced to identify and generate their own sources as the Territory owned facilities cannot keep pace with the anticipated demand.

The community also has a concern over the survivability of infrastructure in the event of a major natural disaster (cyclone) and the lead time to recovery given the current fragility and lack of redundancy in the current systems.

There is a general belief that an insufficient amount of government resource is being applied to exploring alternative energy resources in the Territory. Solar energy and wind power, tidal generation and renewable energy and so on are but some of the alternatives available but hardly considered or supported. Government should be looking at a range of incentives to encourage the use of alternative energy sources and support for construction designs that minimise the use of energy in their operation.

The Business community is willing to work with Power and Water on a range of strategies to keep costs down but would require a level of guaranteed delivery.

There was a generally held view that another Darwin region dam needs to be in the government planning for the short, rather than medium term.

HORTICULTURE IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

There was limited discussion on this topic due to the lack of regional representation. The uncommitted capacity of the Ord River Scheme was raised as an alternative source for horticulture on the Territory side of the border.

COMMUNICATIONS

Recommendation that the NT Government examine the “Digital Island” initiative set up some years ago by the Tasmanian government to provide high speed broadband and cheap and open ICT services across the entire state, with a view to adopting the same principles in the Territory. It is acknowledged that the Federal Government will have a role to play in this arena but that the Territory and local government can make a significant contribution to the infrastructure required through their own needs.

Significant regional industries and the relevant land councils can also assist in partially funding and facilitating the installation of ICT infrastructure and should be working with government agencies and local providers to do so.

There is a need for the Territory government to lobby for a second major haul back link between the Territory and the rest of the national communication grid.

NT HISTORICAL MINING CENTRE

This was seen as a project worthy of further investigation but again discussion was minimal due to the lack of regional representation.

MANUFACTURING

“I think that it is essential to prepare now and I think that the key aspects that companies need to look at are their capability capacity, understanding of buyer requirements, what innovative approaches are available using technology and design and possibly looking at alliances.”

MANUFACTURING

At the end of the day, the greatest impact on growing the manufacturing base in the Territory revolves around the cost of establishment and on-going operation. There is a need for established support infrastructure, access corridors and available land. Power, water, roads, rail lines, ports and airports will all play a part in the final investment decision. The infrastructure needs to be flexible enough to meet the initial needs of the enterprise and capable of speedy development as the demand grows. Government needs to recognise that a level of redundancy should be built into all major services to meet this immediate need, rather than attempting to add the components after the fact. It is recognised that a lack of forward planning within government and political expediency has meant that we lack some important resources.

COMMON USER FACILITY

The existence of such a facility was acknowledged by the meeting as being of vital importance in establishing Darwin as an important support base for major projects, not only in the Territory but across Northern Australia. The Government is urged to continue the development of the facility to a useable state and industry is ready to assist in identifying potential tenants for developing projects. The facility needs to stay within the control of government to ensure that it is available to all at a reasonable cost, given the flow on benefits of the facility into the local economy.

DESTINATION TERRITORY

“In total, three quarters of the Territories population resides in the seven major centres across the Territory, Darwin, Palmerston, Litchfield, Katherine, Tennant Creek, Alice Springs and Nhulunbuy.”

HOUSING

There is a direct correlation between industry recruitment and the cost of housing in the Territory. It is acknowledged that housing has always been expensive but the gap between the Territory and other jurisdictions is widening. Lack of Government planning and the limited release of residential land are both seen as factors contributing to the current situation. There is also a perceived lack of social infrastructure to support the aging population and the lower income earners. The reduction in public housing has had a cascade effect on affordable housing coming on to the private market

COST OF LIVING, AMENITIES ACCESSIBILITY

There were many positive remarks made about the facilities available in Darwin and Alice Springs. Child Care facilities are seen as being in short supply in both Darwin and Alice Springs. Again, lack of planning in providing social amenities in new developments was seen as an issue; Palmerston Hospital, Shopping Precincts and Schools. Public transport, particularly out of hours and on weekends is seen as being completely inadequate. The current taxi situation is seen as contributing to the drink driving situation. Government needs to be looking at supplementing the current public transport at peak times and during the demand seasons.

EDUCATION

The general view of the meeting was that the public education system was disappointing in its delivery of outcomes. All steps should be taken to hasten the national curriculum introduction into the Territory. Most southern states have a minimum of three hours of numeracy and literacy training. The curriculum framework adopted by the NT Education Department is seen as lacking in prescription and is so broad that individual teacher interpretations do not allow for a uniform assessment of individual students.

SECURITY AND ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

There is a need to adjust policing methods to meet the changing requirements of the community. There are a number of models that appear to be working in some communities and these should be replicated in other areas as they have been proven to work. Shop front policing and more beat police are both seen as important elements in the enforcement mix. Business would like to see a toughening in the attitude of the courts and a rejection of the social excuses offered by offenders.

HEALTH SERVICES

Again there were a number of positive comments made about the services currently offered and the professionalism of the Darwin Hospital in particular. The challenge for government is in providing adequate services in the chronic disease area, where there is a lack of specialists and a huge demand placed by a large indigenous and remote population. The disability sector is also lacking with inadequate allied health professionals and a lack of the necessary support services placing considerable stress on domestic carers. There is a recognition that we need to “home grow” more health professionals particularly for the remote health services.