

PRIORITY SUGGESTIONS

“What’s best for Community”

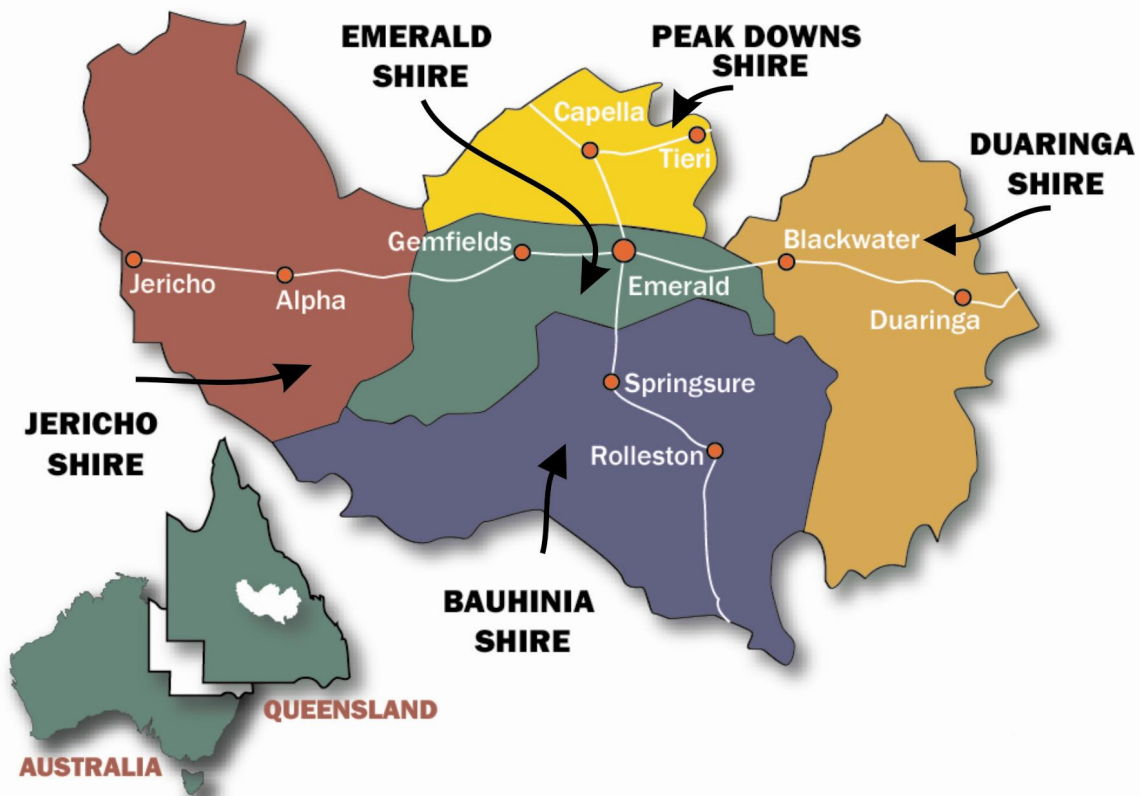
To the

Queensland Local Government Reform Commission

From the

**Central Highlands Regional Organisation of Councils (CHROC)
&**

Central Highlands Development Corporation (CHDC)



25 MAY 2007

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SECTION A: What's best for Community

A.1 Local democracy – Regional benefit:

RECOMMENDATION:

The individual Councils' preferred positions are to stand alone and not amalgamate and continue with joint arrangements and resource sharing.

Individual Councils of the CHDC/CHROC believe they best serve their communities as Individual Councils with their existing complementary regional and sub-regional group arrangements.

As individually financially sustainable, the shires of Bauhinia, Duaringa, Emerald, Jericho and Peak Downs, offer a local government structure that gives its communities **LOCAL DEMOCRACY** yet delivers **REGIONAL BENEFIT**.

The composition of the CHDC/CHROC already offers a functional model that delivers the viability, efficiency and serviceability to its communities that the Local Government Reform Commission (LGRC) is seeking. Enhancing this model with the extension of regional governance and cooperation is the self direction CHDC/CHROC has been pursuing prior to the Size, Shape and Sustainability Process (SSS), during SSS and is still the case today.

Any alternate models entertaining forced amalgamations will:

- Fracture the wellbeing of our communities
- Threaten existing community harmony
- Impact on current Council locations and the communities and business they serve
- Seriously undermine democracy through local representation
- Impose instability with all existing, planned and proposed development arrangements and opportunities within Queensland's economic engine room
- Stress an already strained local government workforce in the midst of the most severe resources boom in history
- Strip the local government workforce of individual identity creating massive culture shocks
- Ring untold financial damages in any new establishment costs

The case for rewarding a successful model requires little analysis in the face of the foreseen impacts and consequences of any alternate models entertaining forced amalgamations.

RECOMMENDATION:

Accelerate the regional governance, resource sharing and cooperation initiatives CHDC/CHROC has embarked on – this will offer true reform of a sustainable nature.

A.2 Whole of Queensland local government boundaries reform:

On Tuesday 17 April, the Queensland Government announced a State-wide reform of Queensland's local government sector. The stated intent of this reform is to modernise Queensland's local government sector and build strong, effective and financially-viable councils.

The **Local Government Reform Commission** has been established to recommend the name, class, boundary and electoral arrangements for the new local government areas.

The objective of the "Whole of Queensland local government boundaries reform" is the achievement of the organisation of local government in a way that:

1. facilitates optimum service delivery to Queensland communities; and
2. ensures that local governments effectively contribute to and participate in Queensland regional economies; and
3. manages economic, environmental and social planning consistently with regional communities of interest; and
4. effectively partners local government with other levels of government to ensure sustainable and viable communities.

CHDC/CHROC formally acknowledges the intent of the imposed program that the Queensland Government has forced upon local government through the instrument of the Local Government Reform Commission.

SECTION B: Regional Benefit

B.1 Regional resource sharing:

CHDC established in July 1997 with membership from the shires of Bauhinia, Duaringa, Emerald, Jericho and Peak Downs with the following objectives:

- 1.1 *within or for the benefit of the local government areas of member local governments, including but not limited to Bauhinia Shire, Duaringa Shire, Emerald Shire, Jericho Shire and Peak Downs Shire:*
 - (a) *to promote or contribute to economic development*
 - (b) *to promote or attract commerce, industry or tourism*
 - (c) *to promote or provide opportunities for employment*
 - (d) *to promote or assist the supply of services, including accommodation services, cultural services, educational services, environmental services, community services, recreational services, regulatory services, health services and transport services*
 - (e) *to held the finances of local government*

(f) to held the exercise of the jurisdiction of local government

1.2 *to undertake any of the matters listed in Clause 2.1 either alone or with any of the following:*

(a) the State of Queensland

(b) a government entity established under the Government Owned Corporations Act 1993

(c) a local government established under the Local Government Act 1993 (including a member)

(d) another Australian government, an entity of another Australian government or a local government of another State or a Territory

(e) subject to compliance with the Local Government Act 1993, Chapter 6, Part 4 (Enterprises), another entity

With 10 years existence CHDC is the self-established regional governance organisation, a structure that has served the region well to date and offers the Commission a clear path forward to accelerate further regional resource sharing and cooperative activities.

For the Commission's understanding CHDC incorporates CHROC and therefore acts as a sub-ROC to the Central Queensland Local Government Association (CQLGA).

The strength of the existing model of local government in the Central Highlands is the ability for individual shires to deliver locally through regional cooperation and resource sharing. CHDC/CHROC challenges the view that there is a need to form larger regional government structures in order to generate regional benefit and efficiencies.

We are addressing issues, such as:

- Optimum service delivery to community;
- Participation and contribution to the economy;
- Regional economic, environment and social planning;
- Partnerships giving sustainability to community.

An extract from the CHROC Minutes dated 24 April 2007 offers a list of regional resource sharing and cooperation initiatives undertaken.

JOINT ARRANGEMENTS

- *Grain Roads Group (1985) (+ Belyando, + Nebo – Duaringa)*
- *EPDSB (Emerald Peak Downs Saleyards Board)*
- *Nogoa River Flood Plain Board (Emerald, Peak Downs & Broadsound)*
- *CH Sub-ROC*
- *CHRRP*
- *CHNRM (+ Belyando – Duaringa)*
- *CHDC*
- *CHT (5 + Clermont)*
- *Waste Management (4 + Nebo, Belyando, Broadsound + Bauhinia Recycling)*
- *CQLGA – Waste Tender*
- *CQ Regional Waste Management Strategy*

- *Stock Routes – Share Supervisor – Emerald/Peak Downs*
- *Plant – street sweeper, trucks*
- *Building certification*
- *Plumbing Inspection*
- *EHOs*
- *Joint insurance*
- *HR Sharing*
- *WPH&S (sharing audits etc)*
- *Main Roads Maintenance – all shires*
- *Mayors' Ball (Charity)*
- *Central Highlands Regional Resource Use Planning (CHRRUP)*

CHDC/CHROC offer the following as examples of regional resource sharing and cooperation:

1. **Central Highlands Development Corporation (CHDC)** – established in July 1997, CHDC is the regional governance structure focused on resource sharing and cooperation with a strong economic development role.

The CHDC exists to pursue projects, initiatives and cooperative arrangements that will contribute to improvements in the standard of living of communities in the Central Highlands region. The Central Highlands encompasses the townships of Rolleston, Springsure, Emerald, Alpha, Jericho, Sapphire, Anakie, Rubyvale, Capella, Tieri, Blackwater, Duaringa, Dingo and Bluff. The region is home to approximately 28,000 people.

Local Government mainly funds CHDC's core operations, though CHDC manages a number of projects which are part-funded by State, Federal or corporate contributions. Regardless of funding source, all projects managed by CHDC are not-for-profit; and all have a strong participative community ethos.

CHDC has attracted some \$18million to the region through a variety of funding initiatives on the back of an 81% success rate. This equates to a return on investment for member shires of 1,152%.

Our Board comprises the five Mayors of the Shires of Bauhinia, Duaringa, Emerald, Jericho and Peak Downs as Directors and the Shire Chief Executive Officers as subscriber representatives.

They are as follows:

Chairman – Cr Peter Maguire – Emerald
 Deputy Chairman – Cr Tim Stevenson – Bauhinia
 Director – Cr Michael Wells - Jericho
 Director – Cr John Brown – Peak Downs
 Director – Cr Gary Howard – Duaringa

CEO – Bryan Ottone – Emerald
 CEO – Don Lindeman – Peak Downs
 CEO – Des Howard – Jericho
 CEO – George Frangos – Bauhinia
 CEO – Dom Carroll - Duaringa

Some examples of the projects and initiatives that CHDC has delivered or been involved with to date:

- Central Highlands Regional Organisation of Councils (Secretariat)
- Central Highlands Health Action Group (Secretariat)
- Bowen Basin Mayors Group (Secretariat)
- Directors General Visit Coordination
- Emerald Airport Redevelopment - \$1.3m
- Springsure Multipurpose Health Service - \$5.4m
- Emerald Town Centre Redevelopment - \$3.1m
- Mining Forums I, II, III
- Population Forum
- Regional Business Advisory Service
- Advance Emerald Study
- Alpha, Glenden & North Goonyella CDMA Network Infrastructure
- CHConnect – Videoconferencing & Internet Infrastructure
- Intermodal Freight Centre Options Study
- Natural Heritage Trust – Landuser Support Systems Project
- Upskilling the Highlands I, II, III & IV
- Tracks to Future – Youth Transition
- Fresh Start – Disengaged Youth
- Central Highlands Community Employment Trust
- Infrastructure Forum and Study
- Bauhinia Investment Attraction Strategy
- Peak Performance – Capella Industrial Estate
- Skills Development Study
- Skills Audit
- Skills Audit Tool Pilot
- Skills Shortage Survey Report (Mining and Major Contractors)
- Broadband Infrastructure Group
- Taking the Lead – Central Highlands Marketing and Promotion
- Regional Migration Visitation Pilot
- Central Queensland Development Alliance – Co-Founder
- Economic Development Australia – Co-Founder

2. **Emerald & Peak Downs Saleyards** – The Emerald & Peak Downs Saleyards Board is an organisation representing the Shires of Emerald and Peak Downs. The overall purpose of the Saleyards Board is the management, maintenance and development of the Saleyards facility at Emerald for the benefit of the regional beef industry.

The Saleyards Board was formed in 1967 as a joint local authority under the Local Government Act. It is jointly owned by the Emerald Shire Council (80%) and the Peak Downs Shire Council (20%).

Over an extended period of time the Saleyards Board has facilitated meetings with regional stakeholders. The consultation process has overwhelmingly supported the further development of the saleyards to a standard that meets European Union Quality Assurance Accreditation (EUQAA). Introduced and accepted scale charges and shown a great commitment to further development of the facility.

3. **Central Highlands Tourism (CHT)** - Central Highlands Tourist Organisation Inc. (trading as Central Highlands Tourism) is a non-profit organisation that exists through the support of membership subscriptions, marketing initiatives, grant funding and Local Government

support. It represents some 70 tourism businesses including accommodation providers, restaurants/eateries, tourism operators/businesses, service providers and retail outlets.

The primary role of Central Highlands Tourism is:

- (i) To market the Central Highlands as a desirable visitor destination and to effectively work with Capricorn Tourism RTO to strategically compete in the regional, state, national and international visitor markets.
- (ii) To provide visitors with a range of quality information on member businesses/products and available community services through the effective operation of an accredited Visitor Information Centre.
- (iii) To assist the facilitation of a strong, healthy and diverse local economy.
- (iv) To ensure the community within the region has a high level of understanding of the region's tourism product and associated tourism benefits.
- (v) To seek financial support from local, state and federal governments and other organisations and businesses, as appropriate, towards the continued promotion and sustainability of tourism activities across the Central Highlands.

4. **Central Highlands Integrated Planning Strategy (CHIPS)** - The Central Highlands covers over 84,000 km² and is a dynamic and changing area. The CHIPS project has considered policy directions across social, economic and environmental spheres. It brought together government, community and specialist groups and included a range of general and technical workshops as part of its research, consultation and documentation tasks. It has produced detailed Land Use mapping and template provisions for new Planning Schemes under the *Integrated Planning Act 1997* (IPA) for each participating Shire.

The collaborative approach has built on earlier cross-shire work and has set a new benchmark for ecological and resource planning in the Central Highlands. Each Council remains positive about on-going integrated planning and endeavours towards sustainable, regionally beneficial outcomes.

6. **Central Highlands Health Action Group (CHHAG)** - The Central Highland Health Action Group (CHHAG) has emerged from a stakeholders meeting held in Emerald on 28th February 2006 following the closure of obstetrics services at Emerald Hospital and public outcry and deputations to the Queensland Minister for Health.

A key role of CHHAG is to supervise the development of services in the area and to ensure community involvement in the development, planning and delivery of services in collaboration with communities of the central highlands.

The **CHHAG Objectives** are to:

1. provide a forum for the consideration of the health service needs of the communities of the Central Highlands
2. take immediate actions to re-establish services at the Emerald Hospital, including but not limited to, obstetrics and birthing services.

3. take immediate actions to create and implement a multimedia recruitment campaign, in collaboration with local practitioners, all levels of government and major industry, to promote the Central Highlands as an attractive location for Doctors and Health professionals.
4. increase the availability of, and access to, appropriate and comprehensive hospital and primary health care services for the communities of the Central Highlands.
5. reform the local health systems to better meet the needs of the communities of the Central Highlands.
6. To implement strategies that promote, expand and then maintain sustainable medical and allied health services through regional (local) education and training.
7. **Central Highlands Regional Roads Partnership (CHRRP)** – (Previous Grain Roads Group) which continues to coordinate the funding of roads of regional significance. It's believed this model influenced the formation of the Roads Alliance Partnership with State Government through the Department of Main Roads.

B.2 Regional profile:

Regional Advantages:

The Central Highlands region has a number of comparative and competitive economic advantages which constitute the central drivers of economic development in the region, including:

- Climate and soils highly suited to primary production, particularly beef, grain, cotton, grape and citrus production.
- A major water resource in Fairbairn Dam which permits irrigated crop production and industrial usage.
- Extensive coal reserves in the Bowen Basin.
- A growing tourism market, supported by major natural attractions such as Carnarvon Gorge and the Sapphire Gemfields.
- A concentration of government facilities, including administration centres, health and education services.
- A sound infrastructure base, including campuses for Central Queensland University and Central Queensland TAFE, Australian Agricultural College Corporation, private and government schools, general and mining related rail networks, a major regional airport and four hospitals.

Economic planners in the Central Highlands region, including the five shire councils and the Central Highlands Development Corporation, are committed to the further sustainable development of the area. These bodies act in a cooperative manner and show a welcoming attitude to investment.

Population:

The population of the Central Highlands region was 27,698 in 2005, which represented an annual population increase of 2.7% over the level recorded in 2004. The annual increase was also higher than the growth rates for the Fitzroy Statistical Division (0.9%) and Queensland (2.0%). Independent research undertaken by the Queensland Department of Local Government & Planning has indicated that the population of the region is approximately 29,100 when all resident workers are accounted for.

Of our five member shires three are in the top 20 Queensland Local Government Association (LGAs) as ranked by % growth, 2006-2011.

Rating	LGA	ERP 2006	2011	Total % Growth	Avg. Anl % Growth
3	Emerald	13,842	16,888	22.0	4.1
10	Duarina	6,838	7,892	15.4	2.9
14	Peak Downs	3,389	3,900	15.8	2.8

Gross Regional Product:

The estimated Gross Regional Product (GRP) at Factor Cost for the Central Highlands region increased significantly by 18.2% to \$2.7 billion in 2004/05. The Central Highlands contributed 1.9% to the gross state product of Queensland (\$141.4 billion) in 2004/05. It is estimated that if the growth that has occurred since 2004/05 is considered that the GRP would be in excess of \$3billion and an even greater contributor to the Queensland economy.

The Central Highlands shires and communities are clearly facilitating, enabling and supporting the engine room of Queensland.

Major Projects:

- Blackwater Mine Coal Handling & Processing Plant – \$234million (construction workforce of 400)
- Curragh North Coal Project (completed in 2006) – \$290 million
- Grasstree Colliery Project (commencement of longwall mining operation expected in 2006) – \$30million
- Minerva Project (commenced, full production capacity in 2006) – \$68million
- Rolleston Coal Mine (completed, full production capacity in 2006) – approx. \$500million
- Duaringa Weir (under consideration, feasibility study) – \$170million
- Central Queensland Gas Pipeline (decision to proceed pending until late 2006) – \$150-200million (construction workforce of 300)
- Blackwater International Coal Centre (opening in 2008, partnership between local, state & federal governments and mining industry) – \$9million
- Ensham Resources Central Project (EIS under review, commencement of operations expected in 2009) - \$260million
- Bauhinia Regional Rail Project (commencement of operations in 2006) – \$240million
- Kestrel Mine Extension Project
- Rolleston-Glenden Road Project – (\$21.7million – AusLink \$11.5 million, CHRRP \$6million, State \$1.7 million – due for completion June 2010)

The Central Highlands has strong population growth, a robust GRP, enormous future development and financially sound Councils.

SECTION C: Local Sustainability

C.1 Shire Viability:

The individual financial viability of each shire as determined by the recently assessed Queensland Treasury Corporation (QTC) Financial Sustainability Reviews (FSR) is evidence that each Council is achieving what the Queensland Government seeks at the very heart of the reform agenda.

Our shires are assessed as follows:

Emerald – Strong with a developing outlook – Ranked **No. 1 in Qld**

Peak Downs – Strong with a Neutral outlook - Ranked **No. 9 in Qld**

Bauhinia – Moderate with a developing outlook - Ranked **No. 12 in Qld**

Jericho – Moderate with a Neutral outlook - Ranked **No. 15 in Qld**

Duarina – Moderate with a developing outlook - Ranked **No. 44 in Qld**

Therefore, at the time of the imposed local government reform program, the QTC had assessed 94 councils. Two of our shires are within the highest rated group (Strong) – this group had 10 Councils overall. The remaining three within the second tier (Moderate) – in a group of 46.

It's incredibly important that the Commission interpret the definitions for these categories correctly.

In a proactive move to strengthen their financial position, Duaringa Shire joined CHDC as full member in July 2005. This was a deliberate move to enter into broader regional partnerships that would realise efficiency gains for the shire. Noting the robust history of CHDC/CHROC it's vital that Duaringa's decision be recognised as a reflection of the strength and attraction of the CHDC/CHROC as a successful model and acknowledgement that change was required to better position themselves financially.

As a consequence of the individual financial sustainability of each shire the CHDC/CHROC partnership has flourished to give regional benefit. The real concern is that the very nature of individual financial sustainability could be severely compromised if broader local government structures are introduced.

The QTCs FSR prove that each council is achieving financial sustainability and therefore give the Queensland Government confidence of their ability to manage delivery to their communities effectively.

C.2 Rapid Growth – RPAC Failure:

In July 2005, CHDC/CHROC made a deputation to the State Government to plead its case regarding the challenges of rapid economic growth on its communities. Key processes such as Central Queensland – A New Millennium (CQ-ANM) our Regional Planning Advisory Committee (RPAC) and the Ministerial Regional Community Forum offered little, in the way of tangible benefits to local governments feeling the pressure of rapid coal-mining development.

It is therefore difficult to pitch any logical argument that offers CQANM as a plausible geographic structure to base potential reform upon.

In September 2006, the CHDC/CHROC, disillusioned with the lack of response from State Government co-created a new alliance of LGAs called the Bowen Basin Mayors Group (BBMG). This group has been able to establish a high level of engagement with several Directors General and is evidence of positive attempts for sustainable self-determination.

This demonstrates the enormous pressure that LGAs face not only with the fact they have rapid growth that is seriously impacting on their shires, but it highlights the slow and limited response from State Government to address the issues at hand. However, Central Highlands Councils are still managing to rise above these challenges with a positive report from the QTC and decades of meaningful regional cooperation and resource sharing.

Any intentions of reform across the Central Highlands would simply exacerbate Councils ability to function as effective and efficient entities servicing their communities in a sustainable manner.

C.3 Cost Shifting:

The individual financial viability of each shire as determined by the recently assessed Queensland Treasury Corporation (QTC) Financial Sustainability Reviews (FSR) is evidence that each Council is achieving what the Queensland Government seeks at the very heart of the reform agenda.

The Australian Government, House of Representatives - Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration's report – *"Rates and Taxes: A Fair Share for Responsible Local Government, October 2003"*, clearly supports the argument that local government's sustainability is heavily impacted by other levels of government shifting the responsibility and cost of delivering more and more services within their jurisdictions without the adequate resources to do so.

The report commonly known as The Hawker Report offers the following summary:

"There is no doubt that local government has, over a number of years, been on the wrong end of cost shifting largely by State governments. The Commonwealth Grants Commission has recorded that over the last 25 years the Federal government has, in real terms, progressively increased its contribution to local government while State contributions have not grown.

However, the overriding message is very clear. To fix cost shifting on the part of all levels of government, we need to review our governance arrangements and the way our taxes, including rates, are spent. Cost shifting can be seen as a symptom of the current weaknesses in our system and it is the responsibility of all spheres of government to address the matter.

As the Committee heard, the duplication and coordination costs of all levels of government in Australia under the current arrangements probably amount to more than \$20 billion per annum.

The report identifies the current roles and responsibilities of local government and the growth of its functions. The extent and effects of cost shifting are detailed as are the major problems facing local government's deteriorating infrastructure."

If the Queensland Government looks at a comparative argument – that the level of distribution of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) has enormous impact on the States ability to sustain services to its regions – then the parallel cost shifting noted above must be accepted as a real and significant influence in determining a local government’s financial position.

The Queensland Budget Strategy and Outlook 2006-07, demonstrates the State Governments reliance on the Australian Government revenues and taxes (GST) to meet its expenditure requirements.

“Commonwealth-state¹ financial relations are characterised by a mismatch between the revenue-raising capacity and the expenditure responsibilities of the Australian and state governments. This mismatch is known as vertical fiscal imbalance. The Australian Government collects the major share of taxation revenues and, increasingly, states must rely on grants from the Australian Government to meet expenditure requirements.

Chart 8.1 shows all states’ funding sources for 1999-2000 and 2006-07 and highlights the states’ increased reliance on Australian Government funding since the introduction of the Australian Government’s national tax reforms in 2000. In 1999-2000 the states received 35% of their revenues from the Australian Government. This is estimated to increase to 47% in 2006-07. In contrast, the proportion of the states’ revenues from state taxes has reduced from 40% in 1999-2000 to an estimated 32% in 2006-07.”

Clearly, there is equally a “vertical fiscal imbalance” between state and local government which is impacting many local governments ability to service their communities effectively.

In light of these enormous pressures (Cost Shifting and Vertical Fiscal Imbalance between State and Local Government) the QTC FSRs for the Central Highlands Councils are in fact far brighter than their current healthy assessments indicate.

The impost of potential reform lumped onto the existing Rapid Growth pressures, Cost Shifting and Vertical Fiscal Imbalance between State and Local Government will have the possibility of impinging on the Councils current viability if further reforms are introduced in the Central Highlands.

C.4 Size Impacts on Service:

ABC Queensland - Saturday, 18 February 2006.

“Mr Beattie says he totally disagrees with Mr Macfarlane's view and says he obviously does not understand what it is like to live in a regional area.

"We are the only mainland state where more people live outside the capital," he said.

"If you look at Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth, the majority of people live in the capital cities.

"It costs us more to provide services.

"Let me say to Mr Macfarlane, you know, get out of the comfort of living in the southern states and actually get out and see regional and rural Queensland.

"Just understand it costs a fortune to provide services to people in regional Australia."

Premier Beattie ardently argues, with the previous Reserve Bank Chairman Mr Ian Macfarlane, the case for Queensland receiving more GST payments than Victoria and New South Wales due to the nature of its decentralised population.

However, when it comes to delivering services and local government representation to Australia's most decentralised state there is a serious failure on the Premiers behalf to apply the same logic and ardent stand.

To put this into some geographic context:

- Victoria is 237,629 km² in size, with 5million people and 79 local government authorities.
- New South Wales is 809,444 km² in size, with 6.8million people and 152 local government authorities.
- Queensland is 1,852,642 km² in size, with 4million people and 157 local government authorities inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island councils.

Professor Brian Dollery, Director, Centre for Local Government, University of New England offers the following assessment of the "bigger is better" philosophy.

"The Queensland case is further complicated by the vast distances between many local councils in non-metropolitan areas. This 'tyranny of distance' often means it is simply physically impossible to provide service from a single centre to a huge hinterland of country towns.

This points to the central irony of the Queensland state government decision to scrap the SSS program. The whole thrust of the SSS process was to identify local services that could be provided on a regional basis and create shared service agreements between neighbouring councils for the joint provision of these services.

A much better alternative is to select local services that can be provided more cheaply through shared service agreements, outsourcing, state-wide networks, and the like. This avoids the costs of diseconomies of scale in other service areas and preserves vital political representation for people living in smaller communities."

SECTION D: Local Representation

D.1 Local Representation:

The extent of regional resource sharing within the Central Highlands together with the obvious financial sustainability rating of every CH council suggests that the benefits of local representation currently present at the grass roots of our communities far outweighs any anticipated benefits that may attribute to amalgamation.

The ability for local residents to influence local direction consistent with the current structure of local government within the Central Highlands should not be ignored, particularly in a State so diverse and geographically unique as Queensland.

There are no local governments within the Central Highlands that advocate amalgamation or major change because the communities appreciate local representation and accept the regional cooperation benefits that are already being achieved.

The cooperative and collaborative nature of local government within the Central Highlands together with the positive outlook for developing and financially strong Councils that already service their local communities warrants close consideration before any structural change is considered.