

MURRAY-MALLEE STRATEGIC TASK FORCE - March 6th, 2007

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond): Just over 10 years ago the Murray-Mallee Strategic Task Force was formed in response to the identified need for a community-based group to initiate and drive the revitalisation of the region. To achieve this the group utilises departmental advisers in developing strategies to attract support for a wide range of initiatives. Using the Commonwealth/Rural Partnerships Program framework the fledgling group developed a single consolidated submission through which the Murray-Mallee community could access support available from various commonwealth and state programs. Those governments were aware that parts of rural South Australia were experiencing difficulties, including economic and social issues.

In September 1996 invited community representatives attended the inaugural meeting of the Murray-Mallee Strategic Task Force. Their aim was to achieve a long-term unified strategy for the region. The broader community contributed to the task force's endeavours, actively suggesting solutions to problems and identifying potential opportunities. The then state government invested considerable energy and resources to assist the task force to develop a package of sustainable measures addressing rural and regional matters in the Murray and Mallee dryland region. The task force served an area of some 30 000 square kilometres with about 1 750 dryland farm enterprises. This incorporates the district councils of Brown's Well, Coonalpyn Downs, Karoonda East Murray, Lameroo, Mannum, Meningie, Peake and Pinnaroo, as well as parts of Murray Bridge, Ridley Truro, Morgan, Paringa and Waikerie.

As members of the house will know, this whole region is again experiencing great difficulties caused in part by this fierce drought. However, it is also true that many of today's difficulties are the product of this government's half-hearted attitude to the region. I have already raised many of these matters even in the relatively short time I have been in this house: bus services, health services, emergency services, road maintenance, etc.

The efforts of the Murray-Mallee Strategic Task Force have been pivotal in the region's survival and revival, but, with the changing times, the job is not over yet. There is still a need to build and maintain the community's vision and sense of self value. In this changing world, there is a need to continue to be proactive. Yesterday's solutions are not necessarily today's solutions, and some of today's problems are different. This task force utilises a great deal of local knowledge, expertise, commitment and time, which comes at no cost to the government. It has had many successes including the 'Getting Traction' strategic plan securing regional transport and educational opportunities, drought response strategies and, perhaps most notably, the highly successful Xtreme Leadership Program that PIRSA is now looking to deliver statewide.

This task force has been an apolitical group, initiating many proactive and responsive programs in the Mallee and it has been relied on by government to deliver these programs. However, it cannot all be free. The funding that the task force received provided the community representatives with the framework and fabric required to maintain their crucial role. With this in mind, it is difficult to understand why almost six months ago the government chose not to continue funding administrative support for this cost-effective and valuable program. Despite a promise to discuss future funding possibilities, nothing substantial has happened. As a consequence, at this very moment the group is considering its future.

On top of the withdrawal of government support, there has been a silent trend to transfer some of the responsibilities and expenses of maintaining local services to local

governments whose resources are already stretched by rising infrastructure standards and costs and community expectations, compounded by shrinking populations and consequent revenues. It is the old argument of the chicken and the egg: are supports and services to country regions being eroded because of population shifts, or is the population shrinking because of the lack of reasonable support from government? We all like to think of ourselves as tough, sun-bronzed Aussies in a wide brown land, but with the way it is going, the next time some of our city-based government MPs venture out into the real world, they will find it deserted and they will wonder why.

On behalf of all who live in these areas and those who understand and admire their contribution to the fabric of Australian life, I ask the government to reconsider its funding policies in these country areas and give them the modest support they need.