


MALCOLM MCKINNON



2021 Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and
Communications
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10 August 2021

Dear Review Committee,

RE: Response to Regional Telecommunications Review 2021

I appreciate the opportunity to respond to the review. I write as a long-term resident in a part of regional South Australia that has long suffered poor telecommunications services.

Background:

I live part-time at Pekina, a town and surrounding farming community with poor telecommunication services. In particular, we have never enjoyed access to mobile phone coverage. Pekina is less than 300 kilometres from Adelaide so our region not especially remote, even though poor quality services sometimes makes it feel as though it is. The area encompasses at least fifty families, spread along a 35km stretch of the Price Maurice Road running south of Orroroo towards Jamestown and Laura. Patrons of the Pekina Hotel, members of the Pekina Country Fire Service and sporting teams at the Pekina recreation ground are also affected by the lack of mobile coverage, as are commuters and tourists travelling this popular alternative route through the southern Flinders Ranges. (The District Council of Orroroo Carrieton consistently records high volumes of traffic on Price Maurice Road.) The area is serviced by an increasingly unreliable landline telephone service and relatively poor-quality satellite broadband internet.

Power failures are a frequent event in our area, along with failure of the landline telephone service. At such times, older members of our community are especially vulnerable. In February this year my 84-year old next-door neighbour Claire Daly was badly injured in her home and was unable to call for help. She lay on her bathroom floor for eighteen hours before she was found. The emergency necklace she was wearing provided no assistance as the landline telephone had been out of service for a number of days. (See newspaper clippings attached with this submission.)

Lack of mobile phone coverage undermines public safety and community amenity. It is also an effective constraint on trade and enterprise. This unfair constraint and disadvantage has been further exacerbated throughout the recent COVID-19 shut-down when people everywhere have been increasingly dependant on robust telecommunication services.

Responses to questions raised in the Issues Paper:

1. *What telecommunications services are required in regional Australia to meet current and future needs? Are there any things regional communities and businesses need to do, but can't, on their existing services?*

Most significantly, regional areas like Pekina require robust mobile phone coverage. Access to a robust 4G or 5G mobile network would radically improve communications and boost the viability of farm and other businesses operating in the Pekina valley. Further, I believe that provision of reliable internet can be inextricably linked to high quality, reliable mobile phone coverage.

2. *What changes in demand, barriers or challenges need to be addressed when it comes to telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Australia?*

Mobile phone coverage should be recognised as an essential service. As such, there must be equitable access to a reliable network irrespective of the capacity of local agencies or local residents to contribute to funding costs. At Pekina, residents are currently required to spend several hundred dollars per year to maintain an unreliable landline. We also have the option of spending between \$1800 and \$3000 to install an antenna that

might possibly provide mobile phone access to a particular premises. This is an unacceptable inequity. Small local councils like the District Council or Orroroo Carrieton simply do not have capacity to fund mobile phone infrastructure.

3. *How have the Government's policies and programs affected telecommunications service outcomes in regional, rural and remote Australia? How can these be improved?*

The Mobile Blackspot program has been a useful initiative. However the program currently requires telecommunication providers to be the applicant for a particular project. In the case of places like Pekina where there is limited commercial incentive, telcos will too often have insufficient incentive to submit an application. This is a fundamental flaw in the program.

I appreciate that funding through the mobile-black-spot program has been allocated on a competitive basis, with proposals assessed against a set of criteria. However I stress again the issue of fundamental equity and the need for *all* settled parts of the country to have access to reliable mobile phone coverage. Critical black spots will not be fully eradicated without government commitment to address this on a thorough, ongoing basis.

4. *How do service reliability issues impact on regional communities and businesses? How do outages, including in natural disasters, impact on communities and businesses?*

Businesses in regional areas obviously rely on robust telecommunications as much as businesses in metropolitan Australia. Deficient telecommunications serves as a disincentive to invest and to relocate to regional areas.

Further, lack of reliable telecommunications is undermines the safety and security of regional communities. The near-death experience of my next-door neighbor is a good illustration.

5. *How might such impacts be addressed to ensure greater reliability? How can the network resilience be addressed in regional areas?*

I appreciate that funding for mobile network infrastructure may need to be co-funded by federal and state governments. However I do not accept that the onus should be on local communities to negotiate a co-funding arrangement. Government agencies and parliamentary offices have funded staff who are best placed to negotiate co-funding arrangements on a case-by-case basis.

Infrastructure should be designed so as to provide stable 4G or 5G coverage, with in-built capacity for upgrading over time as technology continues to evolve.

Given the evident frailty of the electricity network that services the Pekina valley, where we experience at least half-a-dozen extended power outages each year, it is essential that mobile phone infrastructure be equipped with auxiliary back up power.

It is essential that mobile phone networks do not limit access to subscribers of a single telco. The situations that occurs in many parts of rural Australia where mobile phone coverage is only available to Telstra subscribers in some areas and then available only to Optus subscribers in an adjacent or nearby area is ludicrous. Telcos should be required to share infrastructure so that all mobile phone subscribers have access to an available network.

6. *What role could innovation, including new models, alternative investors or new ways of doing business, play to encourage investment in regional telecommunications infrastructure? What are the barriers?*

I applaud the initiative to explore and utilise new infrastructure options such as 'small cells' to provide stable, good-quality coverage to black-spot areas with relatively small resident populations, assuming such technologies can actually provide an adequate and reliable service.

At a regional and local level, how can regional development authorities and local councils be kept informed of new technologies, so that they may play a role in development and implementation of new infrastructure?

7. *How can different levels of Government, the telecommunications industry and regional communities better co-ordinate their efforts to improve telecommunications in regional Australia?*

Telcos have limited interest in supporting small communities where commercial rewards are limited. (Actually, from our experience, telcos have limited interest even in maintaining the poor quality services that already do exist in regions like ours. When we protested Telstra's plan to remove the public phone box at Pekina they confessed to having no knowledge that our area does not have mobile phone coverage.) Government must therefore play the lead role in ensuring provision of services in areas like ours.

The frustrating experience of the Pekina community is hopefully instructive. For many years now we have for many years sought assistance to rectify the lack of mobile phone coverage in our district. We have made multiple direct approaches to our federal and state members of parliament. We have made submissions to our local Regional Development Authority and to our local council. We have had many discussions with representatives of the major telcos. Each of these agencies has frequently referred us from one to another. No-one has so far been capable of addressing the issue. Unsurprisingly, we are tired of well-meaning platitudes from people at all levels of government on this issue, none of which translate into action.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. McKinnon', written in a cursive style.

Malcolm McKinnon

Please note attachment –clipping from *Flinder News*, 26 February 2020

THE FLINDERS News

FREE

Tamworth award has Mid North flavour

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UPSET: Angry residents include, front, left, Tessa McNamara, Pauline McNamara, Ben Daniels, Barb Willoughby, Meg Daniels, Marilyn Moten, Angela Foulis and Shannon Rodda.

It's life-and-death

BY HARRISON SCHULTZ

IF IT were not for the timely visit of a local priest an elderly Pekina woman may now be dead.

After breaking her hip when she fell, 84-year-old Claire Daly was left stranded despite having an emergency necklace in her possession.

The reason? The landline phone service in the area was down and as a result no

notification was sent to Ms Daly's daughter Angela Foulis who would have been able to call an ambulance.

Ms Foulis, of Port Augusta, said that her Mum had fallen about 6pm on Wednesday, February 5, and lay helpless and in pain until the priest arrived at 12.30pm next day when he made an unplanned visit to say, "hello".

She said this breakdown of the landline was one of sev-

eral such incidents in recent times which had affected the area.

The outage in the area continued for nine days, leaving 30 Pekina properties without landlines and nearly entirely devoid of phone communication with mobile phone coverage being notoriously hard to receive.

Another outage has since happened 15 kilometres from the site of the first one

and was still being repaired at the time of this article's publication.

Pekina man Malcolm McKinnon said it was unfair that there were small towns in Australia which were not particularly remote, but lacked access to easy 21st-century communication.

He said that to even gain a single bar of reception often needed significant effort.

"I sometimes find myself parked on the side of the road three kilometres out of town because I have to go up there to check my email using my mobile phone," he said.

"Claims are made that mobile coverage is available, but they are simply not true. It is frustrating and a little bit baffling."

The lack of mobile coverage combined with landline

outages has been a constant pain for the Orroroo-Carristown District Council.

Despite council's lobbying of both state and federal governments, nothing has happened to fix the issue.

Orroroo-Carristown Mayor, Kathie Bowman said the fact that Ms Daly had been stuck on the floor for 18 hours was unacceptable.

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Injury dials up concern on phones

BY HARRISON SCHULTZ

WHY does the Pekina area have such a lack of mobile phone coverage?

Residents are desperate for better service - they need it to bring tourists to the hotel and ensure emergency communication is available.

Despite their cries for help, they have been left in the dark. After the incident involving the elderly woman who broke her hip, *The Flinders News* began talking to locals, asking whether they knew what was being done to rectify the problems.

The answer? Orroroo-Carrieton District Council has lobbied governments and locals have tried to include Pekina on the Mobile Black Spot Program, but with four rounds of the telecommunications roll-out completed,

the town still has received no help.

Their best hope now is that Pekina will be recognised in the final two rounds of the program from early this year.

Federal Grey MP Rowan Ramsey said mobile phone services in Australia were privately owned by companies requiring a return on capital which in turn was connected to the number of potential customers in the mobile footprint.

"To address this issue the federal government will spend \$380 million in six rounds toward the Mobile Black Spot Program," he said.

"The government contributes up to half the cost of a mobile tower and telcos such as Telstra and Optus tender to co-fund towers in black spots across the state. Towers typically cost more

than \$700,000 and it is not possible to provide every individual with services.

"Current technologies will never provide service to every last person, but there is some confidence that the imminent boom in Low Orbiting Polar Satellites may well open a new communications platform that may offer real solutions." Orroroo-Carrieton Mayor, Kathie Bowman said the incident involving Ms Daly "could have had dire consequences - a person of her age left on the laundry floor or similar is appalling".

Regional General Manager for Telstra in SA, Mark Bolton said the company apologised to the residents who have been affected by the outages. Meanwhile, residents gathered at the hotel to display a sign saying, "Who ya gonna call?"