

Submission to the Regional Telecommunications Review (2021) Committee

28 September, 2021

This submission is made to the Regional Telecommunications Review 2021 Committee (RTR) by, and on behalf of, the Walkerville Ratepayers and Residents Association Inc. (WRRRA).

About the WRRRA

The Walkerville Ratepayers and Residents Association (WRRRA) is an incorporated community organisation run on a voluntary basis by a committee elected from ratepayer and resident members.

The WRRRA represents the communities of Walkerville, Victoria and surrounding rural and coastal areas. Membership is derived from the settlements of Walkerville North, Walkerville South, the Walkerville Promontory Views Estate and surrounding farmland holdings in South Gippsland.

About Walkerville

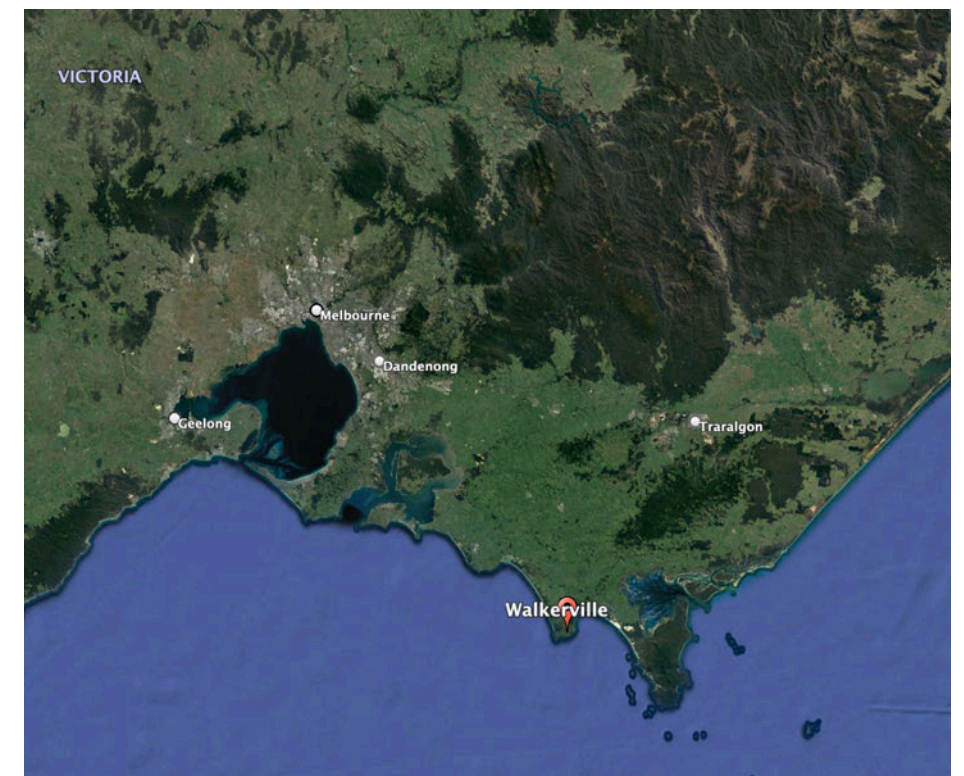
Walkerville is the most southerly, permanently settled, community on the entire Australian mainland. Originally named Waratah Bay, the township opened a post office in 1885 until its close in 1972. From 1878 to 1926, the quarrying of limestone was the staple industry of the township. Remnants of the old kilns, in which the calcium carbonate was fired, are still visible at Walkerville South and Digger Island.

Historically, Walkerville was primarily a coastal fishing and holiday village with approximately 200 dwellings (2016 ABS Census). Increasingly, with work-life and lifestyle impacts brought about through the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-21, the town has seen a rapid increase in the number of permanent residents. Throughout 2020 and 2021, a number of young families relocated from larger population centres to make Walkerville their permanent home. The town's total population, including those in the caravan and camping park, increases to up to a thousand during the summer holiday season.

In many respects, Walkerville would be typical of many small coastal townships located across Gippsland and southern Victoria. There is just as much interest by locals in creating and running online businesses from home as there is in other populated parts of Australia.

Why is the WRRRA making this submission to the RTR (2021) Committee?

The WRRRA and its wider community are concerned at the poor fixed broadband and poor mobile communication coverage of the area and would like to see this rectified.



Walkerville, Victoria - The most southerly, permanently settled community on the Australian mainland.

A

Fixed broadband services

The NBN coverage of Walkerville is by Sky Muster (satellite) access alone. The basic Sky Muster NBN 12 service has been found to be inadequate to support Zoom meetings or video streaming services – the most common broadband services that residents want to use, especially during the holiday season.

The more expensive Sky Muster 25 service can in principle provide 15 Mbps downstream in peak hours but many residents could not afford this as well as a mobile phone service.

The Sky Muster speeds provide a poor broadband experience compared to the NBN Fibre to the Node or Fibre-to-the-Home services available in suburban areas in most regional cities. Given that Walkerville has three suburbs, each having mostly contiguous premises, the provision by NBN Co of fibre-connected nodes to support these suburbs via the existing telephone conduits would provide a much better broadband service.

Alternatively, provision of NBN's Fixed Wireless services from a tower located strategically on high ground in the area could be a cost-effective solution to improving the area's fixed broadband services.

B

Mobile services

For mobile coverage, the whole of Walkerville is dependent upon a single Telstra 4G tower. Visitors including tradespeople who use phones on the other mobile networks find they have to drive to another town to get a useable signal.

The problem our community has experienced of poor or non-existent mobile coverage remains a year-round issue. The already poor coverage becomes even more acute during holiday periods when the permanent population swells with holiday residents, tourists and visitors.

Our area is undergoing an increase in both permanent and tourist populations, which brings an increased reliance on mobile telecommunications for work, health, education, tourism, local economy and for emergency situations. In addition, the surrounding densely vegetated coastal forest environment around the various Walkerville settlements means that the twin natural disaster threats of bushfires and severe coastal storm events are an ever-present threat. During these emergencies, having good mobile services becomes essential for emergency services to alert residents and visitors, and vice versa.

The WRRR therefore has a direct interest in seeing significantly improved telecommunications infrastructure in the Walkerville settlements and in surrounding areas. Though Walkerville is a registered mobile communications blackspot in the Federal Government's Mobile Black Spot Program, attempts to date to secure funding under the mobile blackspot funding program to improve Walkerville's mobile communications infrastructure have proven unsuccessful.

However, it should be noted that a weakness of the Mobile Black Spot program is that when it is implemented in an area, it provides mobile services there only via a single mobile carrier, since there is no mobile roaming available between carriers in most parts of Australia.

We make the suggestion that the federal government encourage NBN Co to provide shared radio towers in townships like Walkerville, towers which can be used to provide common infrastructure (including back haul) to all the mobile carriers as well as supporting NBN Co's Fixed Wireless services in that area. The reduced cost to carriers once NBN Co provides the shared tower and backhaul should be set to incentivise the other carriers to provide mobile services directly in the area.

C

Lived experiences of the Walkerville community

The RTR Committee has requested individuals and/or community organisations inform it of their ‘lived experiences’ regarding access to telecommunications infrastructure.

The following paragraphs are a sample of such ‘lived experiences’ provided to the RTR Committee by the residents and ratepayers of Walkerville.

‘We tried both mobile broadband [...] and our neighbour’s satellite NBN at their house and neither was sufficient to enable a successful working from home experience.’

Resident 1 – *We have a house at Bayside Dr, Walkerville North, and did spend a lot of January down there which was lovely. Our experience of the mobile coverage and also the satellite broadband at the house next to us was terrible and meant that we couldn’t feasibly work from Walkerville over January. The lack of reliable internet coverage through a broadband network (whether satellite or cable) significantly impacts our ability to work from our secondary place of residence in Walkerville North.*

For example, over January 2021, we were required to work for a large proportion of the time during school holidays and had planned to do that over the 5 weeks that we were hoping to stay in Walkerville North. However, the problematic coverage (for video meetings in particular) meant that we cut our trip short and had to head back to Melbourne after only 2 weeks.

We tried both mobile broadband (hot-spotting from a mobile phone, with Telstra as the provider) and our neighbour’s satellite NBN at their house and neither was sufficient to enable a successful working from home experience.

This has impacted subsequent decisions about where we would live and work (and where our children could undertake remote learning) during much of 2021. Without reliable coverage, it is just not possible to have the confidence that we can meet our work commitments from Walkerville.

‘...we experience this service degradation issue annually when the Christmas crowds arrive, impacting our Education, Work and Safety.’

Resident 2 - *My personal experience, as related to the key issues, is:*

- a. *Since COVID, I now have an increased need for communications to support Education, Work and Safety in my regional home*
- b. *These services are accessible to me – which I do via mobile (4G), chosen as satellite options did not give me service affordability – e) – comparisons available online between 4G and satellite services*
- c. *These services are available to me - which I access via Fish Creek Optus tower – 20km away, with booster ariels – costing one-off ~\$500 to setup, on my steep roof*
- d. *And these services are generally reliable (with exceptions – eg. in June storms, towers did not work and I was out of communications (for Education, Work and Safety) for 4 days*
- e. *And these are affordable, which it is for me at \$70/month on 4G with 500 gig, after spending the \$500 on the arial setup on a steep rooftop– noting, I know that if too many people do this, the service will degrade, impacting d), unless the towers are upgraded to handle more volume.*

We experience this service degradation issue annually when the Christmas crowds arrive, impacting our Education, Work and Safety.

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Lived experiences of the Walkerville community

'As a writer, I need the internet running all the time to check facts and conduct research. I am online all the time... When I have a project with a deadline I have to return to my place in Melbourne.'

Resident 3 – *In Waratah Street, the NBN option for me is only via a satellite dish, so I use my Telstra mobile to make a wireless hotspot when I need the internet. As a writer, I need the internet running all the time to check facts and conduct research. I am online all the time.*

For daily reading news, listening to Melbourne radio, and email (I get about 100 a day) I need reliable internet. I only ever watch free-to-air television at Walkerville due to the expense of going online. Things work well using my Telstra mobile, I get fast speeds from (I assume) the tower on Wilson's Prom.

That is, until summer, or school holidays — whenever Tidal River camp ground fills up. If it's a wet day, and all the holidaymakers are stuck indoors, the internet slows to a crawl. I manage my day, downloading mail and newspapers before the crowds wake up.

When I have a project with a deadline I have to return to my place in Melbourne. I'd love to have better quality internet, but an extra \$55 per month, plus the setup costs associated with installing a satellite dish, is beyond me.

'Our [teenage daughter] is reluctant to join us on the weekends at Walkerville as she is unable to study effectively due to the lack of connectivity. As a result, we limit how often we visit Walkerville.'

Resident 4 – *We have a property at Acacia Road Walkerville and our lived experience is as follows:*

Education: *We have two teenage daughters, the eldest of which is currently undertaking year 11 inclusive of a VCE subject. She is reluctant to join us on the weekends at Walkerville as she is unable to study effectively due to the lack of connectivity. As a result, we limit how often we visit Walkerville.*

Work and Business: *Both my wife and I have roles where we can and do work from home, but it is not possible to do so effectively from Walkerville. We have even purchased a 4G+ wi-fi router to do so, but this is still slow and patchy. As a result we do not spend as much time (and money) in the Walkerville community.*

Daily Living: *There is less of an impact in this regard, however the two points above are diminishing the value we get out of our property, given we can not be as flexible as we would like to be.*

'The speeds are so slow it is hard enough to read a newspaper or download simple emails.'

Resident 5 – *In holiday season, the mobile network becomes so overloaded it can't be relied on for data. The speeds are so slow it is hard enough to read a newspaper or download simple emails. And its impossible to do anything that is more data-intensive.*

I have seen the latest ACCC report on internet access showing the average NBN user downloaded 355GB/month at the end of 2020. And there are a variety of guides on working from home suggesting a download speed of 100Mb/s is highly desirable.

If this is what an average Australian household requires, people in the Walkerville region have a long way to go before they get anywhere close to something like a 2nd class status!

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Lived experiences of the Walkerville community

'I am over 80 years old, and really need reliable communications, for reasons of safety and general health and wellbeing.'

Resident 6 – Last year before lockdown I bought a property in Walkerville Prom Views Estate and am in the process of moving down here. This is my only residence, not just a holiday destination. As a newcomer, I was unaware of the difficulties of connectivity throughout Prom Views Estate.

I am over 80 years old, and really need reliable communications, for reasons of safety and general health and wellbeing. This is particularly the case now under COVID regulations, which prevent me from visiting my family in Melbourne, and prevent them from visiting me here to give support.

My daughter had hoped to spend some of her working week here if she had reliable internet connection. Living alone as I do, I may possibly need to ring emergency services by day or night. At present I have to go out onto the veranda for either phone or internet, and this becomes impossible under adverse weather conditions, and is not convenient or advisable at night.

'...the phone and internet services are our only link with her; in the case of a medical emergency, we have genuine fears that she will be completely cut off and unable to call anyone for help...'

Resident 7 – My mother-in-law, who is over 80 years of age, early last year purchased a property in Walkerville, situated on the Prom Views Estate. Once lockdown finished and my partner and our children were able to leave Melbourne and spend some time at the property, we found the difficulties of poor telecommunications (phone and internet) a frustrating and significant inconvenience.

Far worse, on the occasions that my mother-in-law was staying at the property alone it became a cause of considerable concern as her safety and her ability to communicate easily and readily with us were significantly compromised.

Since she has decided to move permanently to the house these concerns have escalated considerably as the phone and internet services are our only link with her; in the case of a medical emergency, we have genuine fears that she will be completely cut off and unable to call anyone for help, let alone us. On top of this, the poor telecommunications mean my partner cannot consider working from the house, where she would have liked to combine work from home with assuming the role of principal support person to her mother.

'...I have had to scale back my business ambitions due to poor mobile communications at Walkerville.'

Resident 8 – I own a property at Walkerville and have been attempting to run my design business from both my Melbourne and Walkerville properties. I was hoping I could spend part of the working week at each property and, in time, build up to the point where I could largely run my business from Walkerville and only occasionally commute to Melbourne.

Regrettably, I have had to scale back my business ambitions due to poor mobile communications at Walkerville. The reception is often too poor to hold a telephone conversation for business let alone conduct business via online video meeting platforms such as MS Teams, etc. My capacity to send and receive documents and design drawings, or to peruse documents loaded onto project sites such as SharePoint or Aconex, etc, is extremely limited due to the poor capacity of the mobile system. Even if I wait till 6.00 in the morning or very late at night before I upload or download drawings at times of low mobile network demand, it remains unreliable and slow at best, but more often quite impossible.

It's a great pity because I really would like to capture the benefits that modern telecommunications could supply to my knowledge-based business. However, my plans are hamstrung due to the poor mobile communications coverage and reception in Walkerville.

D

WRRRA Responses to questions posed in the RTR 2021 Issues Paper

In addition to Walkerville residents' 'lived experiences' texts above, the WRRRA provide our further views and responses to a number of specific questions posed by the RTR in the publicly released **Regional Telecommunications Review 2021 - Issues Paper (July 2021)** as follows:

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?

We see the need for 5G mobile communications services, and for fixed networks providing broadband speeds of 50/10 Mbps and higher, for the businesses and residents in our area. We expect that tele-health services will increasingly demand these higher broadband speeds. We also note that business transactions and community service transactions in our community are increasingly 'in-the-field' or 'on-the-road' and not tethered to offices or homes.

There have been instances where the WRRRA's membership has been unable to meet together physically due to government mandated Covid-19 lockdowns. Where we have attempted to hold virtual meetings via Zoom, a number of our members are unable to attend due to poor mobile or fixed broadband communications coverage at their homes or due to lack of any 'pay-as-you go', on-demand or 'pay-per-use only' broadband service options in our community.

There is no adequate NBN broadband service at Walkerville. A number of our community cannot afford to have both mobile communications service plans as well as in-home, satellite broadband service plans (e.g. Telstra SkyMuster).

2

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

Cash payments for goods and services are becoming a diminishing, indeed non-preferred economic transaction in our communities. Tap-and-pay technologies (through cards, phones or smart-watches) rely on good, consistent mobile or broadband communications coverage. There have been several occasions of prolonged mobile outages in our communities rendering tap-and-pay, point of sale terminals completely ineffective, including banking, fuels and food.

The Covid-19 pandemic has meant long periods of lock downs in metropolitan Melbourne and throughout all of Victoria.

Such periods required the use of virtual meeting and remote learning technologies for schoolchildren, work-from-home for parents and an increasing use of tele-health services. These demands have placed increased need for and reliance on mobile and broadband communications coverage. Our community's view is that many of these demands will remain after the pandemic lockdowns, particularly the increasing trend to work-from-home, tele-health and the delivery of other government services such as courts and tribunals.

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WRRRA Responses to questions posed in the RTR 2021 Issues Paper

3

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

NBN Co's allocation of a satellite footprint to Walkerville does not make a good fit for its population density and its broadband communication needs. This could be improved by offering upgrade paths to better NBN access technologies, perhaps with co-investment via State and Local governments, since the land values of properties will be improved by better NBN speeds, with tax benefits to those governments.

The current Black Spot program provides a virtual monopoly to the successful bidder to implement the extra mobile towers needed, serving only its own customers. This could be improved by providing a policy direction to NBN Co to provide shared radio towers and backhaul infrastructure in areas such as Walkerville where the satellite footprint could be augmented or replaced by fixed wireless services and where only a single carrier currently has a radio mast. The aim would be to reduce the cost barrier to additional mobile carriers providing a presence in these areas.

4

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

Telecommunications reliability are a critical component of our community, particular in times of crisis or natural disaster.

In June, 2021, Walkerville surrounding regions experienced fierce storms and gale-force winds which caused telecommunications and power outage emergencies.

There was no telecommunications infrastructure for over 4 days and many areas were without power for considerably longer.

During this time, Walkerville residents were completely cut off from all forms of communications and, also being without power, were unable to source even basic information as to what was happening, request assistance from family, friends or neighbours, emergency services, health services or police.

Without communications, shops in nearby townships were unable to access eftpos banking or other point-of-sale services rendering those without cash reserves and relied on credit or eftpos cards unable to purchase goods or services during a critical time.

Many residents were assisted by neighbours, also without telecommunications capacity, taking it upon themselves to drive through the community to check up on the elderly and frail and assist where they could.

In addition, service reliability is crucial in order to attract more people to our area to grow and maintain the viability of South Gippsland . Residents need to have confidence that they can work efficiently and maintain safety in their homes.

It is not just reliability, but speed and affordability of communication that needs to be addressed.

Power and telecommunication outages continue to be a part of living in this community. Living without bank and fuel access recently, (for over a week for some) was extremely difficult and distressing.

Case example 1: University students, who could otherwise study on line from home, maintaining connectedness to family and community have been forced to leave to live in Melbourne, or travel daily to local libraries (an hour each way) to continue with studies.

Case example 2. Running Webex meetings where lessons are being taught, is near impossible during lockdowns for teachers and students, as people lose contact and flicker in and out.

Case example 3. Local people spend a huge amount of money in order to upgrade their system, by building small towers on their roof tops. Typically people pay \$ 50 a month for 25 gigabytes of data, running at 5-10 M.B.P.S.

Our community need affordable coverage to ensure that they can access work, education and health services, from their homes.

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WRRRA Responses to questions posed in the RTR 2021 Issues Paper

5

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

Greater reliability would be achieved by enabling:

- a. Removal of mobile black spots with the existing sole mobile carrier (Telstra), and
- b. Introduction of mobile competition through shared backhaul infrastructure, as suggested in our answer to Question 3 above.

Greater resilience would be achieved by not only the presence of a second mobile carrier but also the greater penetration of fixed network services, currently inhibited by either price sensitivity or the perceived poor speeds on satellite services.

6

How did the use of digital services change for regional consumers and businesses during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic? What insights for future service delivery does this provide?

The Covid-19 pandemic has meant long periods of lock downs in metropolitan Melbourne and throughout all of Victoria. Such periods required the use of virtual meeting and remote learning technologies for schoolchildren, work-from-home for parents and an increasing use of tele-health services.

These demands have placed increased need for and reliance on mobile and fixed broadband communications coverage. Our community's view is that many of these demands will remain after the pandemic lockdowns cease, particularly due to the

increasing trend to work-from-home, tele-health and the remote delivery of other government services such as courts and tribunals.

7

What can be done to improve the access and affordability of telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Indigenous communities?

See responses to 3 and 5 above.

8

How can investment in telecommunications infrastructure work with other programs and policies to encourage economic development in regional Australia?

See responses to 3 and 5 above, and 9 below.

9

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?

There would be potential for co-investment by the local shire (South Gippsland) and State government with NBN Co and the major mobile carrier infrastructure divisions to establish better telecommunications infrastructure across the shire. As improved NBN access speeds lead to improved property values, the local and state governments can expect to reap the benefits from increased local rates and state land taxes.

10

To what extent will new technologies enable significant change to the delivery of telecommunications services in regional Australia over the next 5-10 years? Are there any barriers to accessing these technologies?

Low Earth Orbit satellites may provide continuous connection to transport vehicles traversing the continent, and for commercial shipping and commercial aircraft, but they are unlikely to have a competitive advantage over mobile carriers in serving residents and other small businesses.

11

How can Government better support the rapid rollout of and investment in new telecommunications solutions in regional areas?

Co-investment with local and state governments is one solution; co-investment with local businesses is another.

12

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

- See response to 9 above

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WRRRA Responses to questions posed in the RTR 2021 Issues Paper

13

What changes to Government investment programs are required to ensure they continue to be effective in delivering improved telecommunications?

The Mobile Black Spot program could be modified to allow for shared infrastructure between mobile carriers and NBN Co.

NBN Co's upgrade offerings (from 'Fibre to the Node' to 'Fibre to the Premises') currently only apply to businesses located within designated business areas, in return for a commitment to a three-year service contract. A similar upgrade offering should be considered for residential areas where sufficient individual residents are prepared to make that three-year commitment.

14

How can regional consumers be better supported to identify, choose and use the best connectivity options for their circumstances, as well as to understand and use their consumer rights?

A free and well-designed online training program, targeted at consumers having little prior knowledge, would be very useful. Perhaps a reputable, independent consumer-supporting organisation like Choice could be funded to prepare such a training tool.

15

To what extent is public information on connectivity options, including predictive coverage data and speeds, sufficient to help regional customers make informed decisions? What other information is needed?

The various service providers, including NBN Co, provide this kind of information. However what is needed is vendor-independent data and advice based upon consumer experience, especially on contested topics such as the actual speeds and outages experienced.

Perhaps the government could encourage consumer organisations like CHOICE and ACCAN, with an amount of government subsidy, to join forces in providing more comprehensive and up to date information to help regional customers make informed decisions.

16

What other matters should the Committee consider in its review and why are they important?

Telecommunications infrastructure while vital is just part of much broader infrastructure (such as affordable housing, schools, public transport, emergency services, health delivery and ageing services) which will need to be upgraded within any policies to encourage further migration from Australia's overcrowded cities to its regions, as well as ensuring sustainability and protection of the environment.

Conclusion

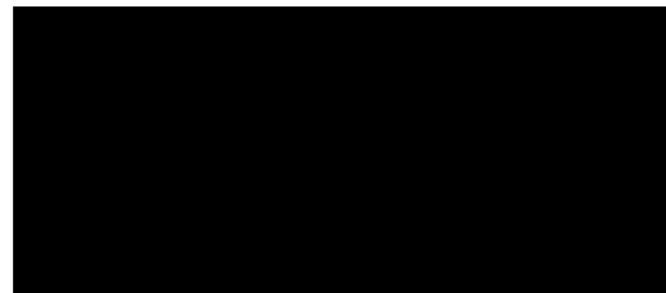
The Walkerville Ratepayers and Residents Association thanks the Regional Telecommunications Review (2021) Committee for the opportunity to make this submission to it.

In our submission, we have engaged with our wider community to gather and present a number of individuals' lived experiences regarding the poor telecommunications infrastructure we endure at Walkerville as a daily reality.

We have also given thought and consideration to the wider questions posed by the RTR Committee and hope our responses may be of assistance to it.

We are happy to assist the RTR Committee with any further queries or discussions it may wish to have.

Yours sincerely,



Paul Katsieris
Hon. President
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