

Richard Eke & Siobhan Mahoney

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St Albans NSW 2775

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Dear Committee

We live in St Albans in the Macdonald Valley in the Hawkesbury, part of Greater Sydney, but quite rural, and surrounded by national parks. Like everyone in Australia, we are heavily and increasingly dependent on telecommunications for all aspects of our lives, our work, our recreation and our overall mental wellbeing. Further, we rely on telecommunications for our safety during fires and floods.

While improvements in telecommunications have raced ahead in metro areas, they have moved at a snail's pace in St Albans and the Macdonald valley, and in relation to the basic copper-based telephone service have got worse. While metro areas enjoy the benefits of 5G mobile coverage, we have no mobile coverage. We do have basic ADSL though the performance is poor and the connection unreliable. Distance from the exchange, wet weather, trees on lines and sharing limited bandwidth with multiple households all impact our overall experience. Covid and working from home have necessitated our use of skymuster which is helpful, but while download speeds are a distinct improvement on the ADSL service, they are still very poor compared with those available in metro areas, and uplinks speeds often render the service unusable (e.g. for conference calls). Skymuster is expensive and its reliability is impacted by the weather, and while it works for us, the terrain of our valley means that many of our neighbours cannot access this technology.

On top of all of this we have recently heard that Telstra plan to abandon the copper wire network, without which we would have no landlines and no ADSL. With the lack of mobile coverage, and much of the valley without access to skymuster, this means there are NO reliable communication channels during emergencies. And yet, the answer is very simple, a couple of mobile phone towers in the valley would provide reliable high performance voice and data communications at a reasonable cost for all valley residents and visitors. It would contribute to the safety and prosperity of the residents, support local tourism and business, and provide greater working flexibility.

Ironically, a dedicated fibre optic cable has recently been installed by Telstra costing many millions of dollars, to connect the exchange to our local public school. If this money had been invested in 5G the whole valley could have benefited.

At present we have no visibility of any plans or timetable to address this situation. The future of this key infrastructure should not be in the hands of commercial organisations and their vested interests. A plan that addresses the needs of all Australians with a

timeline and the commitment of all relevant parties, government and commercial, is required.

We look forward to this review addressing this.

Richard Eke and Siobhan Mahoney



Thank you for giving us the opportunity to make a submission to the 2021 Review into Regional Telecommunications.

Overview

We have had a property (which includes an operating cattle stud) on the outskirts of the village of St Albans, on the northern fringe of the Sydney metro area, for twenty years.

We are entirely dependent on both land line phone and ADSL internet for our ability to live and work there.

The hilly nature of the terrain north of the Hawkesbury River means that even though we are classified for planning purposes as part of Greater Sydney, we have much less reliable communications than for virtually all of Greater Sydney, including most rural areas.

There is no mobile coverage in St Albans and landline services (which are notoriously unreliable) are delivered from local exchange serviced by a microwave link to a tower on Simpsons Hill, near Wisemans Ferry some 15kms distant as the crow flies.

We understand that Telstra intends to abandon its copper wire network which alarms us greatly as there is currently no alternative.

Solution

As an initial and overriding observation, the solution to the severe and unrelenting problems outlined below is readily accessible.

In 2020 Telstra spent over \$10 million of NSW state tax payers' money laying a state-of-the-art fibre optic cable running presumably from the local exchange to the Macdonald Valley Primary School which has approximately 15 students.

While this use of funds, which we assume came from Education budgetary allowances, is commendable it seems that a readily available communication network which could benefit all residents of the Macdonald Valley, including those of St Albans, is being overlooked.

The overriding message of this submission is that ALL residents of the Macdonald Valley in reasonable proximity to the cable must be given immediate connectivity rights. This course of action is readily achievable, cost effective, practical and equitable. This solution is the answer to most of the formal questions set out below.

Background

When we arrived in the Macdonald Valley, Telstra landline services were good. Regular checks on the physical infrastructure took place, and even when there were blackouts, backup power supply at the local exchange meant that at the very least, local calls were still possible. In an emergency, we could call a neighbour, or the fire station in the village, or the emergency services.

However, over the last five years or so regular maintenance of the network has effectively ceased, and now, even repairs to damaged infrastructure are subject to lengthy delays, often measured in weeks.

We have endured, on many occasions in recent years, weeks at a time without either or both land line and internet services. This has involved weeks of neither access to phone or internet rendering us entirely without ANY means of communication with the outside world. This is entirely unacceptable when we are part of Greater Sydney and living in 2021!

To take just one example out of many possible, if you take a drive from the Webbs Creek Ferry along St Albans Road towards St Albans you will see firsthand the appalling state of the telephone line infrastructure. Frayed cables, line hanging limply off trees and poles, visible damage to cable etc.

During the 2019-20 bushfires, the backup power supply to the telephone exchange at St Albans failed, and we were left for much of the danger period without either phone or internet. The phone was completely dead as was the internet. This remained so for over a week.

Then, during the severe flood in early 2021, the problem was the same. We lost the telephone and internet altogether, apparently because once again there was no effective backup supply of power to the St Albans exchange.

This situation demonstrates, in my view, a dangerous lack of concern for the health and safety of the people of St Albans, most of whom are Telstra customers.

Most recently during the Covid crisis, when people have been compelled to work from home, the internet service has been so weak and normal communications have often been so difficult that we have been forced more than once to travel into Sydney just to find adequate data connections, against the spirit of the health orders, merely to transact everyday business.

Calls to Telstra service personnel to report faults are difficult to make, very time consuming and rarely result in any prompt action.

It must be said, though, that on the rare occasions when technicians do come, they are invariably helpful and appear just as frustrated by the situation as we are all.

Even a charitable critic would agree, I suspect, that Telstra's service obligation is not satisfactorily being honoured at St Albans.

I offer the follow answers to the questions your review is seeking to answer.

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?

The experience of our own regional community – which paradoxically is not strictly regional at all, but part of greater Sydney – is that telecommunications services must offer at the bare minimum a reliable telephone and an internet connection at all times which at least offers the download and upload speeds of ADSL2+. There must be responsive and regular maintenance backup programmes which protects the service in case of floods, fire power outages and damage to infrastructure.

It is also absolutely imperative that there is a useable mobile network providing both voice and data. It is unacceptable in this day and age that there is no mobile access throughout the Greater Sydney area.

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

The major barrier we face here in St Albans is that there is no effective mobile coverage and Telstra's decision to stop supporting the copper wire network without providing an alternative.

Satellite NBN is NOT an alternative – because of problems with high latency, low speeds and the lack of unlimited data plans. It is also prohibitively expensive for many people, and unreliable in bad weather.

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

Our telephone and internet service is meant to be protected by a statutory Commonwealth service obligation placed on Telstra. In practice, this obligation is meaningless to us on the ground. The most obvious way the Government could support our telecommunication services is to ensure that the service obligation is not only met in the first instance but is also carefully and continually policed. This would be a good first step.

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

During the recent catastrophic bushfires, and then floods, the total failure of our telephone and internet systems at St Albans raised risk levels for residents to unacceptably high levels. During the floods this year, the lack of any form of communication meant that it was neither safe nor prudent to remain in place.

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

Providing effective and reliable mobile phone coverage including proper, regular preventative maintenance, and ensuring that proper backup power systems are in place at the local telephone exchange.

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?

Work from home was very difficult. The unreliable and low speeds associated with ADSL2+ , and in particular, low upload speeds, meant that for much of the working from home period, online video conferencing was impossible. Also, the absence of effective mobile telephone coverage significantly exacerbated the problem.

7 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?

There are no effective options and therefore there is no choice! What rights we should have and what choices we should have are illusory.

8 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?

This question assumes that proper services and choices exist. Currently they do not.

Thank you for reading this submission. I am happy to provide the Review with any further information it might require.

Maxwell James Green