RE: Australian Government Regional Telecommunications Review

Context

Mount Wilson is a village located within Greater Sydney in the Blue Mountains region of NSW, approximately 100km west of Sydney. Together with its sister village, Mount Irvine, the villages comprise approximately 300 full and part-time residents. This figure is however deceptive as the population fluctuates significantly during the year with the villages receiving over 60,000 annual visitors for farm gate visits, open gardens, canyoning, school groups and bushwalkers.

Risk

Mount Wilson and Mount Irvine are fire-prone and susceptible to severe storms. They are relatively isolated with a single road in and out of the villages. The risk to residents and visitors with inadequate telecommunications is significant.

Since the COVID19 pandemic the residential profile has changed significantly with many residents making Mount Wilson their main residence and their primary location for business.

Whilst this submission is specifically focused on the service and customer experience within Mount Wilson, The Committee should note that separate and complementary submissions will be made by the Mount Wilson/Mount Irvine Rural Fire Brigade (on behalf of NSW Rural Fire Services) and by the Mount Irvine Progress Association.

The Mount Wilson Progress Association (MWPA) notes the terms of reference for this review and accordingly has consulted with residents and visitors to prepare the following submission:

1. **Adequacy and Equitable Access to Telecommunications (Terms of Reference 1 & 2)**
   Despite being part of Greater Sydney, Mount Wilson has inadequate 3G and 4G mobile coverage, with the service effectively being available only to approximately 20% of residents. This is despite network coverage maps indicating full coverage for this area. The fire trails which surround the village have little to no mobile telephone access.

2. **Service Reliability & Impact on Customers and Communities (Terms of Reference 4d)**
   Due to the lack of adequate mobile coverage, the community is dependent on fixed line services, however the ADSL services are temperamental and inadequately maintained resulting in regular service outages for the community. This is compounded by the ADSL technical support structure which is directed through a call centre which insists on a lengthy triage process. This can take many hours to secure a booking with an engineer to visit the exchange or a property for what is usually a routine ADSL service problem.

3. **NBN Services – Sky Muster - Not fit for purpose. (Terms of Reference 5a)**
The community does not have access to a true reliable NBN service, relying instead on the Sky Muster satellite services. Whilst this provides a good solution for voice, the latency in the service means that the user experience is often poor in web browsing, video, and video conferencing. Moreover, the Sky Muster services can be negatively affected by weather and smoke.

   The committee should note that the three service weaknesses noted above were exacerbated by the 2019 Fires where inadequate telecommunications represented a high risk to the community and limited the effectiveness of the emergency services to operate optimally during that period. This is covered in detail in a separate submission from the Mount Wilson/Mount Irvine Rural Fire Brigade

4. **Regional Development and Decentralisation. (Terms of Reference 5c)**
The village profile is shifting to a younger demographic that is seeking to work and run businesses from their regional location in Mount Wilson in preference to the city. To support this shift and to ensure local businesses can develop and thrive, we need a comprehensive change to the service coverage and reliability of the telecommunications services to the village.

Recommendations:

We would appreciate if the committee could note and act on the following:

1. The priority for the community is comprehensive 4G services. The community was previously advised that an expanded 4G service would be provided from Mount Tomah as part of the Black Spot Tower programme. This was abandoned in 2020, and we would like this to be re-addressed.

2. Secondly, we would like a review of resilience and reliability of the ADSL services in the village, specifically regarding the Telstra Remediation and Network Strengthening programme discussed at the Community Consultation meeting.

3. A speedier and more localised approach to fixed line/ADSL technical support would be welcomed given the remoteness and inherent vulnerability of the community.

Finally, MWPA welcomes the opportunity to play an active part in the ongoing strategy for improving the telecommunication and broadband services for our area.

For further information contact:

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Mount Wilson