Friday July 8, 2016

State Government move sparks opportunity for improved services in rural communities

For the first time in local government history, the State Government has agreed to consider the level of services needed by all Victorians to achieve a reasonable standard of living.

The government has agreed to join a working group formed by the local government-led RURAL LIVING campaign to create a list of minimum services all Victorians are entitled to. RURAL LIVING campaigners are continuing to pursue the Federal Government to also join the group.

The list will outline the essential services needed by all communities, both rural and metropolitan, and will include roads, aged and disability services, waste management, recreational services and libraries.

Buloke Shire Mayor Reid Mather said this was an historic occasion and a huge opportunity for Victoria. Having the State Government on board was a major step towards addressing the inequality that existed between services in rural and metropolitan areas.

"If we want to grow the prosperity of our regional areas we have to invest in services that make these areas attractive places to live," Cr Mather said. "People love coming to regional areas to have a better lifestyle for their families but they need a base level of services or they won't stay."

Cr Mather said the things which made an area liveable were access to sporting facilities, meeting places, parks and playgrounds, home and community care services, youth services, child care and kindergartens.

He said smaller regional communities were working hard to keep themselves going but the level of community volunteering needed to deliver services that local government was unable to deliver was not sustainable.

"Rural communities aren't asking for Olympic pools, aquatic centres and door to door community transport but we need changes in funding structures from higher levels of government so we can make our rural communities more liveable."

He said the growing divide between cities and rural areas had been caused over many years with successive Federal and State governments increasing legislated responsibilities of local government, while reducing financial support to deliver services. At the same time rural populations had often decreased, along with the community's capacity to pay.

"Rural shires effectively have been left with two options: reduce or remove services. When services are lost in small rural towns and regions, quality of life is also lost."

Cr Mather said 20 councils were backing the RURAL LIVING campaign, with Benalla City Council in Northeast Victoria and the metropolitan council of Hobsons Bay the most recent to join. The Victorian Farmers Federation also supports the campaign.

"Having a strong united voice has helped us reach this point; this is a major step forward in our campaign for equal services for rural people. We now have acknowledgement from higher levels of government of the inequality in services, but more importantly, we have agreement from the State Government to work with us to create change. It's important the Federal Government is also part of this process and we will continue to lobby for their involvement."

- For more information about the Rural Living campaign contact Cr Reid Mather on 0428 772 264 or Buloke CEO John Hicks, JHicks@buloke.vic.gov.au 0429 955 995.
- The attached map shows all the councils which support RURAL LIVING.

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