

Summary Report
Regional Development Australia (RDA) National Forum 2015
Working Together to Strengthen Economic Growth in Our Regions
19 – 20 August 2015, Canberra ACT

Introduction

The RDA National Forum (the Forum) is an event hosted by the Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development. The Forum brings together the Chairs, Deputy Chairs and Executive Officers of the 55 RDA Committees across Australia with representatives from relevant Australian; and state government departments; and the Australian Local Government Association. The Forum also includes an official networking dinner. The theme for the 2015 Forum was *Working Together to Strengthen Economic Growth in Our Regions*.

Purpose of the Forum

The 2015 Forum provided an opportunity for RDA Committees to:

- examine models and initiatives to support economic development;
- share and learn from case studies and strategies that have supported the growth of Australia's regions;
- gain a stronger understanding of preparing a successful proposal and business case for projects; and
- build links with each other and across the three tiers of government.

Report format

This report was designed as a brief summary of the key Forum presentations and workshop feedback. More detailed information on the event, including; the programme; the opening address; speaker's presentation notes; photographs; and the evaluation questionnaire summary are available at rda.gov.au/members/index.aspx

The opening address for the RDA National Forum 2015 was provided by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Infrastructure and Regional Development, the Hon Warren Truss MP,. 30 speakers presented material during the two day programme over 12 sessions, including two interactive workshops, to over 170 participants.

Day One

Day one of the Forum presented three themes; Setting the Scene; Partners; and Strategies and Practical Solutions.

Opening Address

The Deputy Prime Minister set the scene for the Forum during the opening address, expressing the Australian Government's commitment to working with communities to build a stronger Australia.

He made clear the Australian Government's expectations of RDA Committees and their essential role in economic regional development. RDA Committees are instrumental in shaping the future of their regions by facilitating policies and innovative programmes and projects that can improve productivity, give greater access to markets, build regional comparative advantage and increase business competitiveness. The RDA Committee's role strongly aligns with the Australian Government's vision for growing and developing vibrant Australian regions.

Although expressing his disappointment in not being able to achieve his preferred tripartite model uniformly across Australia, he gave the Australian Government's continued support of RDA Committees where states have indicated their intention to develop or maintain their own regional consultative arrangements.

The Deputy Prime Minister announced the appointment of Dr Jen Cleary as the Chair of the RDA Chairs' Reference Group (the Reference Group). The Reference Group's role is to provide a consolidated voice from the national RDA Committee network to the Australian Government. It will meet directly with the Deputy Prime Minister up to twice a year to provide information and advice on the critical issues in their respective jurisdictions on regional economic development matters.

Theme 1: Setting the Scene

Dr Jen Cleary, in her new role of the Chair of the RDA Chairs' Reference Group, started the Forum by talking about the purpose and intended outcome of the Forum. She shared her experience as a Chair and talked about the successes, challenges and strategies facing RDA Committees and how the Forum could develop a shared understanding of RDA Committees' experience in supporting regional economic development.

Her address was followed by updates from the Chairs of RDA Committees in each jurisdiction who gave an overview of the operating environment of RDA Committees in their states and territories. Their short presentations highlighted the RDA Committees priorities, relationships with government, sources of funding and the contextual environment in their jurisdiction.

Theme 2: Partners

Delegates had the opportunity to hear about the importance of developing strong mutually beneficial partnerships with the private and public sector from:

- Mr Gordon McCormick, General Manager, Regional Programmes Branch, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development;
- Mr Michael Slater, Chair, RDA Hunter (NSW);
- The Hon Rob Kerin, Executive Chair, Regional Development South Australia;
- Mayor Troy Pickard, President, Australian Local Government Association; and
- Mr Alan McCormack PSM, Chair, RDA Central West (NSW).

Presentations used practical examples to demonstrate the importance of developing successful business cases to secure private and public funding and strategies used to support mutually beneficial partnerships with local government. This session was followed by lively questions and discussion.

The clear message of this session was that RDA Committees need to be sure of their role in supporting projects that invigorate their communities and to be proactive in seeking partnerships.

Theme 3: Strategies and Practical Solutions

Case study examples of effective solutions that addressed different issues in RDA regions were given by:

- Cr Keith Ellis, Chair, RDA Perth (WA);
- Dr Jen Cleary, Chair RDA Far North (SA); and
- Mr William Jaboor, Chair RDA Western Melbourne (VIC)

The presentations were followed by round table discussion looking at identifying each jurisdiction's top three issues and three possible solutions. A compilation of the emerging themes by jurisdiction is available at rda.gov.au/members/index.aspx. The themes were as follows:

- Investment/industry attraction;
- Education/skills;
- Effective relationships with other stakeholders and RDA Committees;
- Prioritising regional projects;
- Infrastructure needed;
- Evidence/research; and
- Population – declining and retention.

This session was then followed by panel presentations from Australian Government representatives from six Australian Government Departments. The session received positive feedback from the delegates because of the opportunity to clarify future directions, priorities and policy intentions with the representatives especially in light of the previous session and emerging themes.

The final session of the day was a round-table discussion looking at practical solutions to address the key challenges that were identified in the previous sessions. The session was facilitated by the RDA Chairs to further progress the issues raised in the earlier round table discussions and build on the possible solutions. A compilation of the issues and solutions is available at rda.gov.au/members/index.aspx.

Day Two

Day 2 of the Forum presented the final theme of Better Business and concluded with two concurrent workshops on Effective Governance for RDA Committees and Contributing to Government Policy.

Theme 4: Better Business

The opening session, *Using Data to Build a Successful Business Case* was presented by Dr Ian Byron, Director, Regional Economic Policy, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development and Ms Lisa Conolly, Director, Regional and Migrant Statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Delegates had an opportunity to hear about how to source, interpret and use data to develop sound and robust project proposals including commentary on economic forecasts and trends, how to recognise appropriate data. The key message of the session was the value of nationally consistent data and information management frameworks.

Building Partnerships with the Private Sector was the focus of the next session. Case studies presented by RDA Chairs included the Future Gold Coast project, the South East Region of Renewable Energy Excellence project, and the work of RDA South West in building partnerships with organisations such as the South West Development Commission.

The case studies demonstrated how RDA Committees engaged the private sector in regional development activities to diversify economies. The speakers touched on:

- collaborative relationships with corporate sponsors; regional corporations; and businesses to attract financial investment;
- the benefits of optimising shared regional advantages;
- strategies used to develop the creative industries sector; and
- trade and marketing opportunities in the agricultural sector.

Mr Rob Jones, the Executive Director of Regional Programs and Recovery, Regional Development Victoria, presented a state-wide perspective outlining the approaches of Victorian RDA Committees in facilitating engagement with industry, big business and the community in developing projects.

The session was followed by round table discussions with delegates self-selecting to discuss the three top issues and suggested solutions on the following topics:

- Telecommunications/Broadband;
- Future skills/Education;
- Freight/Roads/Transport;
- Tourism
- Business Development and Growth
- Agriculture

A record of the round table discussions of these topics is included in the compilation of issues and solutions at rda.gov.au/members/index.aspx

Ms Kate Charters, Convenor, Sustainable Economic Growth for Regional Australia (SEGRA) and Mrs Justine Linley, Deputy Chair, RDA Grampians (VIC) asked delegates to consider the necessary steps towards developing rigorous project proposals in the session *From an Idea to a Rigorous Proposal*.

Ms Charters' presentation provided insight into the methodologies for selection and development of economic development projects that make a difference. She looked at developing robust business cases and forming effective project partnerships. Delegates were reminded of the valuable work of SEGRA and how its activities could inform RDA Committee strategies for facilitating project proposals.

Mrs Linley, talked about the Northern Grampians Shire Council's successful application under the National Stronger Regions Fund for the *Stawell Underground Physics Laboratory*. Her presentation demonstrated how the project developed from an idea to "fill a big hole in the ground" to the first underground physics laboratory in the southern hemisphere.

Ms Robyn Fleming, Executive Director, Local Government and Territories Division, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development gave a summary of the of the Regional Development Australia Programme. The delegates discussed the forward agenda for the program in a *Where to from here?* session.

The conference ended with two concurrent workshops - one on Governance and the other on Policy Influence.

Mr Andrew Johnson, General Manager, Local Government, ACT and RDA Branch, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development addressed the workshop on governance - *Effective Governance for RDA Committees*. The workshop assisted delegates to gain a stronger understanding of contemporary governance arrangements.

Ms Robyn Fleming facilitated the workshop on policy influence – *Contributing to Government Policy*. The workshop addressed the ways in which RDA Committees can inform the development of Government policies, programmes and initiatives.

Forum Evaluation Questionnaire Summary

Delegates were asked to complete a Forum Evaluation Questionnaire to assist in planning for the next Forum. A summary of the Evaluation Questionnaire is available at rda.gov.au/members/index.aspx.

In brief, comments from respondents on the Forum and suggestions for the next Forum included:

- access to speaker presentations;
- more on success stories and failures;
- more interaction with Departmental staff;
- less speakers;
- futurist speakers;
- more breakout, networking and Q/A time;
- no more butchers paper; and
- a practical focus, including re: NSRF, with separate workshops for EOs and Chairs.

In summary, the conference was an opportunity to celebrate the hard work of RDA Committees across Australia, was a vehicle for identifying the future direction of the RDA Programme and a networking and information sharing opportunity for Chairs, Deputy Chairs and Executive Officers.