



12 March 2017

Director Regions, Western
PO Box 58
DUBBO NSW 2830

Dear Sir/Madam

Far West 2036 Regional Plan

I write on behalf of the Lightning Ridge Tourism Association board (the membership of which consists of forty local businesses and individuals). We have read and considered the Draft Far West Regional Plan and wish to comment as follows:

Lightning Ridge is at the northern boundary of the Far West Region. Our official population is 2,492 (2011 census) however anecdotally we believe the actual usual population to be between 4,000 and 5,000 as many persons live in remote "camps" on the opal fields not connected to electricity, water or telephone; and certainly not on any gazetted roads, hence making a census collector's job virtually impossible. We also believe we have some 50 nationalities living amongst our town.

Subsequent to the discovery of opal in the 1880's, our area has now evolved and transformed into dual use (farming/cropping and opal mining), all supporting a town centre which contains the base retail and commercial enterprises required for residents and visitors alike.

The 2011 census also notes that opal mining employs 5.9% of the population, however many opal miners are part time with jobs in other jurisdictions, so it is likely they have identified their primary occupation as other than opal mining. In addition, opal mining is a small scale solitary occupation requiring minimal labor for potentially substantial reward. One gemstone can change your life!

Lightning Ridge black opal is coveted around the globe as the best quality opal in the world. Black Opal is not found naturally occurring anywhere else in the world (save for a miniscule pocket in the Coober Pedy area), hence we are proud to say that we are the sole commercial source for natural black opal on the planet. Australian opal gemologically is the most stable in the world, and in addition, Lightning Ridge Black Opal has patterns, colors, contrasts and brightness in combination unmatched by any other opal from anywhere else.

Opal is Australia's National Gemstone, and Black Opal is the NSW Gemstone Emblem.

Lightning Ridge is a place that is identified by people everywhere; either they associate with the town for historic reasons, have known or wish to identify with someone who lived here or still lives here, desire to visit here, or just romanticize with the whole notion of opal, opal mining and Australian outback living. Black Opal and Lightning Ridge have an enormous top of mind recall all around the world.

Over the past twenty or so years since the last substantial opal mining boom, tourism has become the primary generator of population growth and financial opportunity. Not yet quite enough volume-wise to restore commercial flights to the town, however we remain optimistic based upon our observations below. Opal mining production varies from year to year as it is an elusive gemstone to find, hence for our economic survival we must maintain focus attracting and then growing the diverse businesses that complement and/or supplement tourism and opal mining activity; in addition to not over burdening miners themselves with unrealistic regulation so they may continue to uncover new opal producing fields in order to increase production to meet world demand.

Officially we record in excess of 25,000 visitors a year through our visitors information centre (this requires an individual to physically present at the centre and have their details noted down). Anecdotally though based upon the forecast occupancy rates of accommodation houses in town, we believe the true visitor figure to be over 100,000 persons a year (we boast numerous iconic commercial tourism facilities and have two full time local bus tour companies – all of which would not be economically viable if overall numbers were not of this order).

Tourism is a vital and substantial element of our economy - and the retail, commercial, education and health services which employ 50% of our official population would be decimated if tourism (and mining) ever declined.

We are a "can do" town and over the decades have achieved many projects to supplement our unique landmarks and tourist offerings, for example:

Artesian Baths – free and open to the public 24 hours a day every day of the year. A magnet to thousands of visitors for the healing qualities of the hot highly mineralised waters.

Water Theme Park and Olympic Diving Pool – a decade long project undertaken entirely by locals to build a multi million dollar indoor Olympic class diving facility in the outback (including 10 metre high board) hosting national and international events and growing in stature every year.

Australian Opal Centre – a project gathering additional momentum which was born two decades ago, wherein a group of locals became determined to build the first ever national centre to celebrate opal from every Australian opal field located in the heart of the best opal in the world. The existing Australian Opal Centre museum in temporary accommodation, already houses the largest collection of opalised fossils in the world and is busy fundraising for a \$30 million permanent complex here on the opal fields, having secured iconic architects Wendy Lewin and Glenn Murcutt who have already designed a world class environmentally friendly cutting edge technology building that will blend in to the surrounding opal fields. The new facility once built will have a massive economic benefit to the town and surrounding area.

Lightning Ridge Easter Festival – born forty years ago with "goat races" and still one of the most significant events on the NSW outback calendar each year, effectively doubling our population for the Easter weekend and injecting hundreds of thousands of dollars into the local economy. Every accommodation house is at or over capacity, booked often years in advance, and the entire festival is created, managed and delivered by volunteers with no external cash funding from any level of government.

We are concerned that the draft paper has underestimated the history, achievements and importance of Lightning Ridge to the Walgett Shire and Far West Region economy – current and future. Pages 24 and 25 of the report discuss the benefits of tourism to the Far West Region, and despite all of what we have achieved materially, economically and culturally; Lightning Ridge is not even mentioned. This town has the allure and magnetism to the northern Far West Region (nationally and internationally) that Bondi Beach does for Sydney, Kakadu does for the NT and Longreach does for QLD. (Sadly notwithstanding all of the above, the words "Lightning Ridge" are seen only five times in the document, whereas "Broken Hill" receives over fifty mentions).

With over 100,000 tourists a year we believe that Lightning Ridge has earned the right to be reconsidered in the plan before the final version is produced and we are willing to meet with whomever you choose to provide context to the above comments. The current benefits of tourism and future potential we believe, deserve a greater focus by the review committee as we see the opportunities for the outback to be substantial.

We are happy to meet and discuss anything contained in this letter with whomever you wish. We strongly suggest a re-visitation to Lightning Ridge so that we can properly acquaint you with our opal heritage, amazing facilities, diverse attractions, incredible opal museum and innovative tourism offerings – all of which appear to have been entirely overlooked in the 2036 Vision.

PS Please note errata on page 32 of the report. *"..Lightning Ridge and Wentworth currently have National Broadband Network access.."* This is not correct. Some residents in the opal fields have just been provided access to fixed wireless under NBN (between 10 – 20 mbps), some further outlying residents have access to Sky Muster, however the heart of the town itself which comprises light industrial, commercial, educational, medical, tourist and retail facilities plus numerous permanent residents is still on ADSL2 (between 5 – 8 mbps, often lower than 5 mbps). According to NBN Coⁱ, fibre to the node will not be available until Oct – Dec 2017.

We trust our comments will be taken on board positively by the review committee and are happy to answer any questions.

Best Regards



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ⁱ <http://www.nbnco.com.au/connect-home-or-business/check-your-address/in-planning.html>