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To whom it may concern,

Submission to the Draft Illawarra Shoalhaven Regional Plan 2041

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the *Draft Illawarra Shoalhaven Regional Plan 2041* (the draft Plan).¹

As the peak business organisation and the regional chamber working across the Illawarra-Shoalhaven, the Illawarra Business Chamber (IBC) is supportive of the overall intention of the plan for a region that made a \$23.9 billion contribution to the state economy in 2019.

As Transport for NSW (TfNSW) is currently consulting on a separate *Draft Illawarra - Shoalhaven Regional Transport Plan*², detailed commentary on major infrastructure will be contained in a submission from the IBC in early 2021.

Commentary on the draft Plan

Precinct activation

Continued attention to precinct activation is welcomed, and the Plan is commended for specifically identifying the Health and Sports and Entertainment precincts in Wollongong for specific action, and for acknowledging the important role that Wollongong City Council will play in the future planning of the commercial core of the city.

The role of the private sector in activating both precincts should also be acknowledged, and the IBC looks forward to continuing to represent this perspective to both state government and council as these ambitions are pursued.

Education, innovation and research

Wollongong's strength as an education, innovation and research hub is also acknowledged, and while the responsibility for expanding this attribute is assigned to Wollongong City Council, the IBC submits that TAFE should play an active role in the activation of its campus at West Wollongong proposed within the draft Plan, and that the University of Wollongong's future growth strategies be reflected in the draft Plan; including its planned Health and Wellbeing Precinct.

Metro strategies

The proposed role of TfNSW in contributing to much-needed improvements to Metro Wollongong's amenity and aesthetic is noted and welcomed. The IBC submits that a

¹ Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, *Draft Illawarra Shoalhaven Regional Plan 2041*, <<https://www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/draft-ISRP>>, accessed 8 December 2020.

² Transport for NSW, *Draft Illawarra – Shoalhaven Regional Transport Plan*, <<https://future.transport.nsw.gov.au/plans/draft-plans/draft-illawarra-shoalhaven-regional-transport-plan>>, accessed 8 December 2020.

specific plan for the revitalisation of the precinct surrounding Wollongong Station should be included in the proposed Wollongong Place-based Transport Plan.

The Gong Shuttle is an integral part of city's internal transport network, and a service that the Illawarra business community fully supports.

The draft Plan's objective to grow regional centres of Nowra and Shellharbour is welcomed, as is the work prescribed for the game-changing Nowra Riverfront Entertainment and Leisure Precinct.

We hope that the proposed development of a Nowra City Centre Strategic Roadmap will help guide greater activation of the rest of city, and will be developed in consultation with both the business community and its representatives.

The importance of Shellharbour City Centre in supporting surrounding residential growth areas is also highlighted and the opportunity for it to grow as a 'smart working hub' is more prominent now due to the disruption to work practices caused by COVID-19.

Port Kembla and transport connectivity

The importance of Port Kembla as key economic asset is highlighted in the draft Plan, and its current and future uses are of regional and state significance. These include its central role in the steel-making supply chain and in exporting coal; its function as the state's only vehicle import port and its principal grain export port, and a growing role in the importation of construction materials.

Into the future, the business community supports and looks forward to the development of the gas import terminal and the proposed development of hydrogen production facilities.

However for the Port to realise its capacity overall, improvements to road and rail links connecting to Port to its markets must be up to the task.

The IBC has worked with government to see planning progress for two key road projects to future proof connectivity to Port Kembla; namely the Picton Road motorway upgrade and the Mount Ousley Interchange project, based on advocacy and evidence produced by the Illawarra First program³.

Unfortunately there are no defined plans for much-needed enhancements to the region's freight rail connectivity, and the Maldon to Dombarton corridor continues to be mentioned in routinely general terms in successive Plans without timeframes for the commencement of even elementary planning works.

It is lamentable that the credible evidence base, in the form of two research reports⁴ ⁵ contributed by the IBC on behalf of its members has not been reflected in an acknowledgement of the South West Illawarra Rail Link proposal (which is to add passenger services to freight along a future line connecting Port Kembla through to the Main Southern Rail Line), nor has the reasonable timeframe for delivery of this project which is 2036. The IBC will reserve more detailed feedback for its submission to the draft Transport Plan.

³ Veitch Lister Consulting, Upgrading Road Connectivity between the Illawarra and Greater Sydney, <<https://www.nswbusinesschamber.com.au/NSWBC/media/Regional/Illawarra/Illawarra-First-Road-Study-May-2018.pdf>>, 2018

⁴ University of Wollongong (SMART Infrastructure Facility), South West Illawarra Rail Link, <<http://www.nswbusinesschamber.com.au/NSWBC/media/Illawarra/SWIRL-Report-November-2020.pdf>>, 2020

⁵ University of Wollongong (SMART Infrastructure Facility), Upgrading Rail Connectivity between the Illawarra and Sydney, <<https://www.nswbusinesschamber.com.au/NSWBC/media/Regional/Illawarra/Media%20Releases/Master-Final-Report-Rail-Research-July-2017.pdf>>, 2017

Activating employment lands

Objectives to activate employment lands for economic growth and working with Councils to attract new employers to the region are laudable, as is the commitment to continue to build on the Illawarra-Shoalhaven's strength in defence and advanced manufacturing.

The investment of \$16 million at Shellharbour Airport to further activate the facility and surrounding employment lands is a welcome initiative that will solidify the region's offerings to new employers and tourism opportunities alike and maintain its competitiveness.

The draft Plan includes welcome references to the evolution of retail and the need for city centres to evolve in turn. It is noted that Councils are encouraged to respond through their local planning frameworks and encourage developments to activate town centres.

The important role of mining, together with its history in the region, is acknowledged and the draft Plan notes that, "as the region grows the continued extraction of resource lands should remain a priority."

While responsibility for leading the strategy to protect these lands and associated infrastructure is passed to Councils, the IBC notes the central role of the Department of Planning Environment and Infrastructure in overseeing the approvals regime for these projects.

As we have previously submitted to the Independent Planning Commission, the IBC remains strongly of the view that the time taken to consider applications is overly long and does not serve the needs of either the community or the proponents.

Housing a growing population

One of the fundamental challenges to the Australian economy is the relative expense of developing – and procuring – housing. The flow-on effects impact various segments of the economy through workforce shortages, which are of significant concern to IBC members in almost every sector of the economy, particularly agriculture, hospitality, aged/health/disability care and tourism.

The pandemic-induced flight from capital cities to regions has impacted the Illawarra-Shoalhaven as much as any region in the nation, and now vacancy rates across the area are well below two percent (at which point housing can be considered in shortage), while median house prices have risen considerably.

With 51,000 new houses expected across the region by 2041, there is welcome progress in addressing this shortfall, but the IBC submits that it must be accompanied by a proportion of affordable housing and that connecting and social infrastructure must be developed ahead of time in accordance with projected demand.

The proposed establishment of an Illawarra Shoalhaven Affordable Housing Roundtable is welcomed, and should benefit from representation of non-government stakeholders, including community housing providers like The Housing Trust.

While the need for infrastructure is acknowledged in the draft Plan, the IBC is concerned that further planning for passenger rail services to connect this growing population to jobs has not progressed beyond the welcome \$125 million to duplicate the rail line between Berry and Gerringong.

Again, the South West Illawarra Rail Link proposal contains the most cost-effective solution to connect the residents of the Illawarra to economic, recreational and educational opportunities in south-western Sydney and vice versa.

Recommendations

1. Acknowledge the vital role of the private sector in activating key precincts in the region's centres, including the Health Precinct and the Sports and Entertainment Precinct;
2. Include both TAFE and the University of Wollongong in strategies for the future growth of the education sector;
3. Ensure TfNSW delivers a specific plan for the revitalisation of the precinct surrounding Wollongong Station in the proposed Wollongong Place-based Transport Plan;
4. Develop the Nowra City Centre Strategic Roadmap in consultation with the business community and its representatives;
5. Acknowledge the South West Illawarra Rail Link proposal as the necessary future passenger and freight solution to the region's growing rail congestion;
6. Commence planning for the Maldon to Dombarton section with a view to completion by 2036;
7. Ensure that the Illawarra Shoalhaven Affordable Housing Roundtable has representation from community housing providers; and
8. Note the need for a timelier process for the consideration of mining proposals in order to safeguard this important industry.

Conclusion

While the draft Plan does not provide a complete overview of the aspirations and requirements of the region, I am confident that the ongoing work of the business movement, through Illawarra First and other platforms, can mount effective evidence-based advocacy to influence government decision-making in favour of economic development needs of the Illawarra Shoalhaven.

Throughout the five-year life of the draft Plan, the IBC will continue to advocate in the interests of the business community on projects and issues of strategic importance, recognising that policy decisions and timelines are fluid and subject to the decisions of government.

Please do not hesitate to contact my office via info@illawarrabusiness.com.au or on (02) 9466 4620 if any clarification, follow up or further discussion is required.

Kind regards,

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Illawarra Business Chamber and Illawarra First