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My name is Gae Swain. I am a long-term resident of the Gunnedah Shire, living here for almost 55 years, having married a local farmer.

I thank the IPC for the opportunity to present my personal thoughts and I'm here to speak in favour of the Vickery Expansion. I understand my presentation will be recorded and will be on the Panel's website.

I would like to declare I have several family members working in the mining industry and I am also the Independent Chair of the Werris Creek Coal Community Consultative Committee (which is a voluntary position).

I have registered to speak today because I feel I can provide the Panel with a unique understanding of the history and experiences the town and district has gone through over the last almost 30 years. I have served on the Gunnedah Shire Council since 1991, having held the position of Mayor for nine years, served as the Deputy Mayor for eight years and currently serve as a Councillor.

As I said my husband and I have two sons, a grandson and a son-in-law (all young farmers) who are working in different mines here in different roles - underground as well as open cut.

Their work in the mines supplements an income which allows them to continue to maintain and operate their farms - never more so than at this present very distressing time of drought. I am aware of many others (male and female) who do likewise - functioning as farmers as well as miners. The two industries are not naturally exclusive! Gunnedah has a proud history of mining and agriculture working side by side for over 100 years.

In our area (as you would be aware) at the present time, drought is having a devastating effect on not only the farming community but also to some extent, the small businesses.

However when I look around at our town, I am aware that the mining sector is the one positive influence on the business activity at the moment. The main street is busy, the shopfronts are practically full, and there is a sense of busyness everywhere.

We are a strong agricultural area but I am keenly aware that farming has the naturally occurring cycles of drought, wet weather and even floods - never more evident than back in the late 1990's and early 2000's.

During that time (I was Mayor) our abattoir closed, we suffered drought, followed closely by an extremely wet summer just at harvest time, when the very small crop which was able to be harvested, was so badly damaged by weather and so severely downgraded, as to be almost worthless.

That was an extremely distressing time for Gunnedah. We were all reminded of the vagaries of our weather – and following the many meetings held across our Shire attempting to determine how to 'survive' – our community clearly identified, that for Gunnedah to remain strong and active, we could no longer rely on one industry – we had to have diversity of economic activity if we were to survive and indeed, grow.

That scenario is being played out at the moment (but minus the flood) where the farming community is struggling with not many farms being productive such that there is not the economic flow-on to businesses with the purchase of chemicals, tyres, tractor parts, fuel etc. during this extremely dry time.

Several business owners have commented to me that, if not for the mines they would be stretched to the utmost financially - and that was exactly the scenario during late 90's and 2000's when we didn't have the mines to fill in the gaps for our businesses and employment.

Today - I am excited for the many and varied job opportunities for our young people – both men and women – new and greater opportunities to work either on farms or industries which service that - or in the mines – and the many and varied industries which service the mining sector.

I have long been concerned that many of our younger generation had to leave Gunnedah for further training or employment opportunities – but now they **have** a choice – either to stay and settle down and make their lives in their own hometown – or move away for further education – but at least they **have** that choice. Many of them are now choosing to **move back** to settle near family and friends, following tertiary studies, because of the extra and varied employment avenues available. There is also the added bonus of new and exciting opportunities for employment for their spouses and partners – both male and female.

There is great opportunity for apprenticeships also for those choosing to study a trade and not move on to University – but as I said, they now have the choice.

We are also experiencing a real growth in the many and varied jobs that service the town (child care, retail, cafés etc) and which attract more people for the lifestyle that is now on offer.

There are not only the economic but also the social benefits of the extra opportunities flowing at the moment -

It's as simple as people walking around with t/a coffee –

- (Can't believe how many people now have to 'start their day with a coffee' from the many coffee shops here (in keeping with big city-siders!) – I can well remember the alarm here when McDonalds first put in the DA for their business, and residents thought we could not survive – “all the cafes would close” – but now – lots of cafes with the lifestyle that offers.

- Our many new residents attracted by the mining and associated jobs, bring the benefits of active lifestyles – we now have fitness clubs, with the need for walking and cycle ways, lots of sports being enjoyed - (golf, touch footy, various football codes, tennis etc) –
- They are actively participating in the many teams which can be seen around at the sporting fields during the week, as well as at weekends and which do much to generate and support the social wellbeing of a community.
- New professionals coming in are contributing to the community service as well as the economic cycle of our Shire, joining Service organisations (such as Rotary, Apex and Lions) and these younger members will ensure the clubs can continue to work for our residents now and into the future.

Environmental guidelines are important and being the Independent Chairperson of the Werris Creek Coal Community Consultative Committee, I'm well aware of the rigorous Environmental Guidelines, within which the mining companies have to operate and I know these are strictly enforced. These are far more strict than for any other industry I know.

I'm comfortable that the processes put in place do address the concerns of the community and requirements of the relevant authorities.

The issues of the late 90's and early 2000's demonstrated to us that rural communities such as ours could no longer depend for their livelihood on one primary industry.

Our community clearly expressed that opinion and urged that Council work at attracting whatever industries we could to shore up the economic activity for our town and district.

During that time we had many media outlets seeking comment - asking "how bad it really was" - and "give us a comment about how your town is dying etc". There were so many vacant shopfronts in the main street, and anyone could have 'bagged a park' anywhere – there was such little turn-over for our businesses. That was an awful time for Gunnedah!

Times are tough for some people now through this drought and we will go through them again – but Gunnedah is reinventing itself – as Sir William Deane said in 1996 – "The past is never fully gone. It is absorbed into the present and the future. It stays to shape what we are and what we do" – and Gunnedah has always been a 'doing' community. During our bleakest times as I mentioned we didn't ever complain – we always said we "didn't need a hand-out – we needed a hand-up" – to help us be the best community we possibly can be, for our families.

I have had the opportunity to speak to many other Council representatives at various Local Government forums and they all say their communities would give their 'eye teeth' to be in our position.

We are the envy of others because of our economic diversity - and the flow on effect it is having for our residents and district. I know that we have a strong future – but we have to be allowed the opportunity to grow.

I am proud of what our residents are achieving and I look forward to seeing what the future brings for our town and shire.

Thank you for the opportunity to present here today.