

Introduction

Good afternoon Commissioners and staff of the IPC. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

By way of background, I am a member of the Boggabri Business & Community Progress Association and the Narrabri & District Chamber of Commerce and have business interests in Gunnedah (Gunnedah Shire Council), Boggabri, Narrabri and Bellata (Narrabri Shire Council).

Also, employment wise, I am the Executive Officer for the Association of Mining & Energy Related Councils NSW Incorporated and have a consultancy practice involved in Work Health & Safety (WHS), Human Resource Management, Governance and Auditing throughout NSW.

I have previously occupied senior roles in Local Government and have had experience with the current NSW planning processes and negotiating Voluntary Planning Agreements (VA's) whilst a General Manager for a Council.

I am here today presenting my own views, which are not those representing any of the aforementioned entities that I am or have been associated with. I am not a member of any political party.

Background

Having read the myriads of documentation from the proponent and their consultants; the Councils, the DPE, the submissions from those in support and those against etc., I shudder at the thought of how those farmers and individuals that are affected in a major way by this development, in the immediate vicinity of the project, how they can marshal sufficient capacity, resources and emotional strength to match the might of the wealthy and prosperous Whitehaven machine in order to protect their business interests and families. Nevertheless this is democracy albeit not perfect.

Given the number of people present today, the number of speakers and submissions is clearly based on the inactions of the past by miners and regulators in the local areas around Boggabri. Add the concern for water and the environment and how it is currently being dealt with, no wonder there is so much "distrust" in the planning and consultation processes and an attitude of a lack of "social and economic benefit" with the EIS and how the proponent is going to deal with them.

Gunnedah Shire Council does not speak for Boggabri legally as they are under the jurisdiction of Narrabri Shire Council under the NSW Local Government Act and EPA Act.

Mayor Redding, GM Todd and the Manager Planning & Regulatory Services Boyce from Narrabri Shire Council, pointed out in the transcript that there is a “trust deficit” and mentioned in their discussions with the IPC on 19TH December 2018 that the Boggabri Business & Community Progress Association in their submission indicated “that there will be little or no benefit to the community of Boggabri from this extension. Rather, we will have a serious overload of our infrastructure and ongoing issues that are not being addressed”.

These “distrust” concerns are common throughout the submissions from those opposing the project based on their doubts that the proponent will do what they propose or be enforced to do what they propose by the DPE probably causes that.

Vickery South extension is the one closest to Boggabri being only 6 kilometres from the town, nearby we have Tarrawonga, Roclen, , Maules Creek and near Turrawan, Narrabri Coal all Whitehaven and Boggabri Coal (Idemitsu) mines above and below ground.

Boggabri suffers a cumulative impact from all of these being so close to the town and rural areas and this will escalate unless there is a cooperative approach to the implementation of the Social & Economic Impacts Plans in Appendix R and the actions therein.

The proponent has outlined in the EIS in Appendix R what needs to be done by them but this risk assessment approach needs to be tested by the locals and I query the “How, Who, What and When” aspects which need to be addressed and included in a Implementation Plan to ensure they occur.

Narrabri Shire Council has done an excellent job in their evaluation of the social and economic issues in the EIS and their meetings with the panel, particularly the assessment by the Manager Planning & Regulatory Services and comments by the Mayor on behalf of Boggabri.

They have rightly identified the critical issues that affect Boggabri from a social and economic perspective and the overall planning process that they are concerned about that I agree with:

Current Situation at Boggabri

Herein is the problem we have at Boggabri which some of the earlier speakers have referred to in part today.

A walk around the town or talking to the locals or business houses will demonstrate to anyone that there has been a decline in services, the closure of key businesses, service clubs struggling for numbers, a growing aged population, not a lot of young families living in town, plenty of land to build houses on, people leaving town to find work that couldn't get a strat in the mines, young potential employees working away, a lot of promises to upgrade facilities but not done, etc.,is this a town that has benefitted from mining over the past years or so? Not by appearances or in business terms or by population growth or social and economic issues.

Why is that so one may ask, the answer most probably lies in the responses to the following questions which they panel should pursue:

- Is the social fabric of the community still the same as what it was before mining came, has it declined or improved?
- How many of the mining workers and contractors have moved into the town to live and bring their families?
- How many, if any of the mining workers, have been involved in the community, joined the service clubs, participated in social events, played sport, have their children attend the schools, be part of the church groups that exist, participate in community fund raising projects, do they buy their food and groceries locally?
- Have the mining companies fulfilled their obligations as proposed in the consent conditions?
- Have the current VPA's with Boggabri Coal and Whitehaven been implemented as promised, what is the status?
- Have the environmental conditions of consent been implemented by the miners and enforced by the regulatory bodies, what is the status?
- How much money is actually spent in Boggabri by the mining workers, can this be determined via survey or interviews, etc or at all?

- How many new businesses have moved to town to set up, how many have closed down, can any more mining related businesses be attracted to set up in Boggabri?
- Have the Community Consultative Committees met the stakeholder's expectations and followed the Guidelines?
- What is the level of complaint made and % followed-up and complainant satisfied through to the miners?

Problem is none of us in the community know the answers to the foregoing. It appears that these questions cannot be answered fully because there is no accurate figure or a transparent structure or a perceived fair process in place that the Boggabri community can have confidence in, to do so.

The community only have the 2011 and 2016 ABS figures and some local Council projections for their overall Strategic direction in their Operating and Delivery Plans they may have on their web sites.

If the information is in existence it hasn't been relayed to the community so that they know that the promises made and issues raised are achieved and dealt with by the miners, Council, government regulators, CCC's, etc. This creates mistrust and needs to be addressed.

I can confirm this attitude towards the government, regulators and miners to be correct from my attendances at the Boggabri Business and Community Progress Association, the Narrabri Chamber of Commerce and the EIS meetings at Emerald Hill and Boggabri in late 2018.

Without the foregoing information being received and assessed for the true impact of mining on Boggabri to date, there will never be any change and Boggabri will diminish even further than what it is now and the affected farmers will be forever upset.

Without a information sharing, cooperative and respectful approach to the community, Boggabri will never be a vibrant and prosperous community where people want to live and grow their families, set up businesses, integrate with the community and so forth.

Structural Issues

The following points are my observations that the panel need to consider as I believe they could be impediments to the current processes being implemented successfully, unless they are altered and in the past they may have contributed to the current mistrust and lack of confidence in the EIS and the social and economic situation of Boggabri from past mining development decisions:

1. The current process of consultation for a State Significant Development, although an improvement, is too cumbersome and difficult for the average person to comprehend, often consisting of complicated modeling and poor consultation sources. The locals know the facts but the consultants appear to only ask for input through higher level sources such as Chambers of Commerce, Progress Associations, Councils, Government Agencies, Community Groups, etc. There is insufficient participatory consultation with those that know the issues, area affected by them and have the solutions at a lower level which the consultants for the proponent and DPE have not done – refers comments from speakers today.
2. VPA's exist for some of the newer existing coal mines near Boggabri. The details are not clear to all as to what is supposed to be done already for the Boggabri community or even completed by now from the VPA's already in place with the Council and the miners eg developing the Boggabri Caravan Park, Pool, a Child Care Centre, housing, town improvements, etc., The community has had some frustrating experiences with the slow implementation of the VPA's, is this going to be the case with this extension is a concern as 3 below refers;
3. The VPA process for this project is through the two Councils involved in the impacts of the mining (Gunnedah and Narrabri Shire Councils) and the miner - will the parties to the VPA's be able to agree on the split should it be 70:30 Gunnedah Shire v Narrabri Shire or vice versa or a 50:50 compromise with Whitehaven, what does this mean for Boggabri, more or less money for the infrastructure, social and economic benefits, etc or elsewhere. There are issues with quantum and compensation for impacts in both LGA's which will take a while to sort out;

4. The state government's "Resources for Regions" programs have changed with the current government, where royalties from mining were initially supposed to be reinvested in mining affected communities through the local Councils but now go into consolidated revenue for the state government to spend wherever. Now, there is a co contribution up to 50% of the approved infrastructure project, so if the Council doesn't have the money to put up, the mining affected communities such as Boggabri miss out, therefore there is a situation where the Council currently does not provide a lot of support for infrastructure affectation from mining for Boggabri through this source, it doesn't have the money!!!;
5. A better approach would be a "Resources for Regions" approach like they have in Western Australia where a set % of royalties being returned direct to the Councils or regions where the mining resource was sourced from, for their re-investment in infrastructure. Alternatively, have the miners pay direct to the Councils through the VPA process so the community infrastructure is not disadvantaged by the mining activity;
6. The local miners pay a lot of money to the state government for royalties and the NSW Minerals Council (Whitehaven is a member) support a Royalties for Regions approach to ensure their money comes back to the mined areas, this would be a big help to the revitalisation of Boggabri and Narrabri Shire Council if the government adopted this approach;
7. Both Boggabri Business & Community Progress Association (BBCPA) and the Narrabri & District Chamber of Commerce (NDCC) do not liaise harmoniously with their local Council to put it mildly, this needs to be improved by both parties making a concerted effort to do so. I am in favour of both entities working closer together for the betterment of the communities affected by mining;
8. There is no Councillor on the local Council representing the town and community and this needs rectification at the next Council elections in 2020 to improve consultation and support levels for the Boggabri community – up to the people;

9. Narrabri Shire Council does not have anyone regularly attending the two monthly meetings of the BBCPA & NDCC despite having an active Economic Development team within the Councils Department of Planning & Economic Development – this can be easily changed by agreement with the parties;
10. Narrabri Shire Council has over many years developed several Economic Development Plans for Boggabri (after consultation with the community) to stimulate the town. Very few of these plans have ever been implemented. This appears to be due changes in leadership in the Council over the years, which would have helped Boggabri cope with the presence of mining and business development to benefit the community – this can be changed;
11. Boggabri is on the boundary of the State seats of Tamworth and Barwon and part of the Federal seat of Parkes which the latter are large electorates to cover with smaller populations in them than east of the boundaries and appears to be forgotten politically with grants and therefore relies heavily on the miners providing contributions, donations and VPA funds for the town;
12. The community of Boggabri is more aligned to Gunnedah Shire Council yet are not in the Gunnedah Shire Council LGA, three large buses transport children to school in Gunnedah, they rarely go towards Narrabri for any outside shopping or very many activities as they go to Gunnedah and if they could, the majority of people would welcome being part of Gunnedah Shire Council, because of the community of interest, but this is a process that must be undertaken through the NSW Local Government Act, not the EPA Act;
13. Narrabri Shire Council is not part of the Namoi Unlimited Joint Organisation of Councils that Gunnedah Shire Council is. Narrabri has recently joined the New England Joint Organisation of Councils, which is further north of the coal mining belt for reasons best known to them. Also it is not part of the Association of Mining & Energy Related Councils NSW that Gunnedah Shire Council is a member of. This demonstrates the differences in political direction which may have had an impact on solutions to the issues of Boggabri in the past and possibly the future;

14. Therefore Boggabri relies heavily on locals, government agencies and the Councils involved in the mining sites to police the consent conditions, the Council and CCC's for interaction with the mines and the attendance at the BBCPA meetings of the miners – Whitehaven & Boggabri Coal for any communication on what is happening, who are quite obliging and amenable people pleased to assist. However more needs to be done to improve the situation of compliance checks as Narrabri Council indicated “more feet are needed on the ground”.

15. Finally, the community rely on entities like the IPC to look at all of the issues objectively so that Boggabri gets a fair go, the issues raised with environmental issues are addressed and if the development is approved strategies are put in place to ensure Boggabri can prosper.

Implementation Plan

In order to do so, the community needs an implementation plan agreed to by the proponent and stakeholders, to ensure what the EIS as outlined will actually be done, particularly in relation to the town of Boggabri, to restore confidence and trust.

The proponent has outlined in Appendix R the strategies it proposes to undertake to address the social and economic impacts of the extension that has been risk assessed and the actions therein identified.

It was not clear who was going to do all of these actions with Whitehaven or who is to police them – DPE, CCC, the Council?.

It appears by looking at the town of Boggabri to me that the current processes to implement solutions to social and economic issues in Boggabri have failed in the past. They haven't worked, if so Boggabri would be vibrant.

There is an opportunity here to reach outside the current processes and adopt another approach, by using VPA funding to set up a steering committee or working party or advisory group or through the BBCPA.

To appoint a Community Development Officer (as outlined in the Boggabri Business and Community Progress Association submission) that reports to either the BBCPA or the Council or another entity to drive the project from the community perspective working with the miner.

Alternatively, engage an external entity to ensure the action plan proposed and liaison with the proponent, on behalf of the Boggabri community stakeholders is undertaken appropriately to make a difference at Boggabri, working with businesses, potential workers, contractors, community groups, etc and to ensure information is exchanged and everything is transparent with implementation.

I realise that more work will need to be done with this idea in view of the legalities of the Local Government Act (Section 55 area possibly) and the VPA under the EPA Act, but is worth pursuing and has been raised with the Mayor and General Manager of the Narrabri Shire Council with some interest at a recent meeting with the BBCPA.

Conclusion

I have focused on the Social and Economic impacts section of the EIS and outlined the barriers that may have affected peoples trust with the mining companies and acknowledge the good work they have done with donations and contributions. The community would be lost without their support.

It's time for a change by being positive and co-operative, to work with the Narrabri Shire Council and the stakeholders if this project is approved, if not then something still needs to happen to lift Boggabri and we need to find ways to do that to get a better result for the community and to ensure the mining operations continue to provide jobs and economic opportunities in a more balanced way as outlined.

The Report from the Federal Government House of Representatives Inquiry into the Impacts on Regional Businesses of Mining (December 2018) is worth looking at for the panel to understand the impacts of mining on communities and businesses regionally and locally – it recommends a Royalties for Regions approach and some excellent strategies to assist Boggabri!.

The current approaches from the miners and the Council is not good enough for Boggabri and needs changing. I believe I have proposed ways to do it. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

Greg Lamont.

