

Geelong Advertiser

Geelong

Stalled NBN rollout is holding Geelong back, say city leaders

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Greg Dundas Geelong Advertiser

GEELONG is losing out to regional rival Ballarat because the rollout of the National Broadband Network has stalled, city leaders say.

NBN Co maps show the information superhighway has bypassed the state's second largest city, with all lanes leading to the smaller goldfields town.

Geelong's few NBN services are restricted to new large housing estates, whereas Ballarat appears to have near-blanket coverage.

In reality, NBN Co told the *Geelong Advertiser* about 10,000 of Ballarat's 50,000 homes and businesses had already been connected, and thousands more connections are being prepared.

But difference between the services available in the regional cities is growing wider as more broadband ports in Geelong's suburbs are being maxed out.

The rollout began in Ballarat in 2012 under the previous federal government's commitment to build fibre to the premises, so customers have been enjoying that level of connection since the switch-ons started in January, while outlying areas have NBN wireless service.

Ballarat ICT executive officer Ian Fry said NBN crews could be seen working in the city almost every day, and he was using the new-found connectivity to lure businesses.

"We have noticed an increase in businesses relocating to Ballarat, and it is also very helpful because it allows more people the opportunity to work from home," he said. "If people are looking for a sea change, or in our case a tree change, especially in business, that (internet service) is one of the most important factors."



Cr Rod Macdonald says Geelong is missing out.

Cr Rod Macdonald, the knowledge economy portfolio holder on the City of Greater Geelong council, said Geelong was being short-changed.

“I know of businesses in Geelong that are looking to expand but are unable to because they haven’t got the internet service they need,” he said. “My worry is that we haven’t got the service we need to be that smart city we want to be. We are crucifying the people trying to do smart business.”

With large manufacturers closing in Geelong and unemployment rising, a host of business leaders told the *Geelong Advertiser* it was vital the city was the top priority of the next rollout of the reliable, high-speed internet service, likely to be detailed before Christmas.

The city was originally scheduled to have the service rolled out in existing suburbs midway through last year, but the election of a new government with new NBN policies last year forced a schedule reassessment.

NBN Co said last week it would employ a “multi-technology model” for future rollouts in an endeavour to deliver the high-speed service “at the least cost to taxpayers and as quickly as possible”.

That means fibre-to-the-premises connections will be completed in areas where the rollout is already under way, but the bulk of new connections will be by fibre to a neighbourhood node and then via existing cables.

Committee for Geelong CEO Rebecca Casson said Geelong's present internet services were "embarrassing" and holding the city back, and would be a hot topic when her organisation sends its lobby group to Canberra this month.



Herne Hill resident Rachel Drady is flanked by Corio MP Richard Marles and the Federal Opposition's Communications spokesman Jason Clare. Picture: Greg Dundas

RACHEL FAR FROM CONNECTED IN HERNE HILL

FORGET about the NBN, Rachel Drady just wants a decent landline.

Ms Drady lives in Herne Hill, about 4km from Geelong's city centre, but she cannot get a broadband or cable internet connection.

She has tried all the telcos but the exchanges are full, there are no waiting lists and none of the providers are expanding their infrastructure until the NBN arrives.

"It's so frustrating," Ms Drady said.

"I had better internet in early 2000.

"And you just know it's getting worse.

"Geelong is growing and people are subdividing, so there are more people trying to connect all the time."

Ms Drady accesses the internet at home by "hotspotting" from her mobile phone.

But that is slow, costly and she cannot watch videos or download documents.

"All I can do, really, is surf the net a little and check the weather," Ms Drady said.

“There’s no chance of studying or working from home.”

After taking her frustration to her federal MP, Richard Marles, Ms Drady was invited to an internet forum with the Opposition spokesman for Communications Jason Clare last week.

The MPs said Geelong was being short-changed, and the Government’s plan for fibre-to-the-node NBN was a “second-rate” solution.

Mr Marles said the situation had been made worse by Ballarat’s fibre-to-the-premises NBN.

“Even in the best case scenario, what we will get will put us at a significant disadvantage,” he said.

“It is essential Geelong gets fibre quality NBN as a matter of urgency.

“It’s the single most important piece of modern infrastructure we can develop.”

Mr Marles said the NBN was planned for Geelong last year until the Coalition took office.

Corangamite MP Sarah Henderson said Labor had failed to sign contracts. “Our government is working hard to get the NBN on track and deliver fast broadband more quickly and cheaply,” Ms Henderson said.

“The situation in Ballarat illustrates how badly our region was treated by Labor.”

Ms Henderson said fixed wireless had already been delivered to outlying and under-served country towns in her electorate, such as Dereel, Linton, Rokewood, Smythesdale, Cape Clear and Ross Creek.

She told the *Geelong Advertiser* in February last year: “In places like Ocean Grove and Torquay, the NBN is not being rolled out until 2015 — we will roll it out much more quickly and more cheaply (than Labor).”