

**Monday 13 February 2023**

## **A lot at stake – Business Hunter launches state election campaign**

Thirty per cent of small businesses across the state will have to close if the next NSW Government does nothing to improve business conditions, a recent survey of 900 of the state's enterprises has revealed.

A startling 43% identified housing as a barrier to accessing skilled workers (whether it is availability or affordability).

The region's peak business body, **Business Hunter**, has today released its *We Mean Business* election campaign, urging progress on issues including access to housing, workforce availability, manufacturing, new energy opportunities, and connective and enabling infrastructure.

Business Hunter CEO, Bob Hawes said there was a great deal at stake over the next four years, not just in meeting the region's ambitions, but those of the state and the nation.

"Some of the initiatives will build and turn big wheels in the economy whilst others will ensure the smooth running of ones we already have. This is reflective of the economy and business fabric in the Hunter," said Mr Hawes.

Business Hunter's [2023 NSW State Election Platform](#) calls for 24 actions from the incoming state government, including a new blended training centre aimed at developing a pipeline of skilled workers for the new energy economy, leveraging the combined training power across University, TAFE and vocational providers, and industry.

"Our knowledge and capability in energy and resources across this region is immense. This could be harnessed into a collaborative skills centre that could become the designated home and exemplar for this type of training for the state," said Mr Hawes.

With 51 per cent of businesses indicating they have ambitions to reach net zero, yet no idea how to get there, Business Hunter has also urged for programs to support SMEs to decarbonise.

"If we are to achieve respective energy and carbon reduction targets, we need to assist business at an individual level via new programs aimed at supporting efficiency and conversion to renewables," said Mr Hawes.

To deal with crippling housing shortages, Business Hunter has prescribed a Hunter Growth Infrastructure Fund worth \$500M to unlock the existing pipeline of 41,800 dwellings urgently required across the region.

Enabling and connective infrastructure across a range of rail and road projects, the Port of Newcastle Container Terminal and Clean Energy Precinct, Hunter Park and upgrades at Newcastle Airport detail some of the efforts required to realise prosperity for the state.

“In 2023 and beyond, our region has a major role to play in the success of NSW. To do this, we must not only restore our business-as-usual conditions, we must also realise the enormous ambition in key strategic areas of growth for the economy. However, we face a growing set of interconnected challenges that threaten our momentum.”

“Our Platform, like the interests of business, is quite broad at 24 recommendations. Some are straightforward, some are more complex, but in our view it’s not unreasonable to think government couldn’t commit to six per year across their first term,” said Mr Hawes.

“The pathway is actually quite fragile, more fragile than it may seem, despite the range of great initiatives in play across the region. There’s no time to waste.”

The recommendations presented by Business Hunter in their 2023 State Election Platform were formulated in response to consultation through their network of 4200 local business and industry leaders as well as insights gleaned from quarterly business conditions surveys, offering a cohesive agenda for the incoming NSW Government’s first term.

Mr Hawes said Hunter businesses had spoken, and the key opportunities and constraints were clear.

“If the region is to bloom, it will take a collaborative effort on the part of government, business, and the community to succeed,” said Mr Hawes.

Mr Hawes said as the campaign indicated, Business Hunter means business this election when it comes to delivering the types of value-led investment that will fortify and enhance our economy and ensure the Hunter’s contribution continues to resonate well beyond the region.

“Our region is at a fork in the road, and we’re asking the next state government to work with us on the actions we’ve outlined as a roadmap to success for the region and beyond.”

**The 24 recommendations for the incoming state government are:**

**Workforce and skills development and attraction**

- Fund a Hunter New Energy Skills Centre modelled on the Institute of Applied Technology at Meadowbank to develop a pipeline of skilled workers for the new energy economy, leveraging the joint training power of the University of Newcastle, TAFE, vocational providers, and industry.
- Provision for an advanced science and technology academy high school at the University of Newcastle Callaghan campus to help develop the STEMM skills pipeline.
- Reform tertiary sector payroll tax to enable higher education providers to redirect payroll tax and associated administrative costs toward new course development and delivery.
- Fast track approvals for Newcastle student accommodation to provide an additional 500 beds for students.

**Industry development and the new energy economy**

- Support the NSW Government's Electricity Infrastructure Roadmap and rapidly accelerate the approvals for large scale renewable energy projects to ensure energy security for businesses.
- Provide State Significant Infrastructure status by default to all renewable energy projects and energy storage projects.
- Develop new government programs to support small and medium enterprise (SME) energy efficiency and conversion to technologies to support renewable energy inputs and advise businesses on how to achieve net zero.
- Provide support and 'preferred supplier status' to local industry in relation to government procurement and supply chains.
- Provide the same priority and support for business and industry wishing to establish or diversify into manufacturing of materials required in renewable energy production such as solar panels and wind farms.
- Ensure great ideas that emerge across our wealth of research institutions and start-up ecosystem can stay in our region, by providing incentives for regional manufacturing.
- Provide matched funding committed by the Federal Government for the establishment of a Clean Energy Precinct at the Port of Newcastle that will create

- space for the large-scale production, storage, transport and export of multiple sources of clean energy.

#### **Housing availability and affordability**

- Deliver on planning actions and fund economic and social infrastructure consistent with the strategic plan objectives and priorities to facilitate the opportunity for diversity in the housing supply pipeline.
- Create a Hunter Growth Infrastructure Fund and commit \$500m to the delivery of enabling infrastructure to unlock the existing pipeline of 41,800 dwellings.
- Resolve biodiversity issues to unlock existing pipeline and grow capacity of the development-ready pipeline.

#### **Infrastructure facilitation and action plan**

- In recognition of, and building on the decision of the NSW Parliament in late 2022, remove any further impediments that could hinder the development of a container terminal at the Port of Newcastle.
- Unlock significant potential at Newcastle Airport:
  - Support and extend the aviation attraction fund to assist the airport in attracting an international carrier
  - Support to grow the Astra Aerolab
  - Support measures to ensure the new terminal can become an exemplar in sustainable design, becoming a 'green gateway' to the world
  - Provide catalytic infrastructure funding for an air-freight facility that will complement the growth of international services
  - Make Newcastle the electric aircraft hub for regional routes
- Fund and construct Stage 2 of the John Hunter Health and Innovation Precinct.
- Complete the feasibility and business case for faster rail between Newcastle and Sydney and based on the assessment, commit funding to plan and construct the required upgrades and new infrastructure.
- Complete the corridor planning and property acquisition for the Newcastle Freight Rail Bypass.
- In concert with completion of the programmed improvements to the M1, improve connecting links to the Newcastle Airport precinct.
- Progress, facilitate and provide the balance of funding to the upgrade of Mandalong Road and utilise committed federal funding for the project.

- Re-introduce and resource the portfolio of a Minister for the Hunter.
- Commit to the Hunter Park precinct, addressing the following funding and project elements as priorities:
  - the relocation of the Harness Racing Track
  - the construction of a new entertainment centre
  - procurement of the associated public domain infrastructure
  - extension of the light rail to service the precinct to coincide with completion of the new entertainment centre.

**Delivering for business and the community**

- Increase planning certainty and delivery as well as public service efficiency by embedding regional intelligence and decision making into:
  - Prioritising, committing, funding and delivering the key projects and transport connections aligned to and identified in the Hunter Regional Plan 2041, the Hunter Region Transport Plan 2041 (when completed) and the Greater Newcastle Metropolitan Plan 2036.
  - Delivery of Transport NSW services to the Hunter region – greater autonomy in regional decision making
  - Commitment to flexible land use planning and adaptive re-use of former power station and mining lands and corridors to support new industry and employment opportunities.

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