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Hunter left wanting as election approaches

Peak business body, **Business Hunter**, has pointed to a lack of new commitments on big ticket items for the Hunter region as voters head to the polls tomorrow.

Business Hunter CEO, Bob Hawes, said there had been no real debate locally on major issues confronting the region.

“The muted response from the major parties in terms of announcements of initiatives and commitments directly impacting the Hunter region means we will be carrying forward a significant regional agenda into the first term of the new government following the election this weekend”.

“Based on this election, we observe that both sides of politics have set high level policies and priorities and targeted commitments in other voting communities across the state,” said Mr Hawes.

Mr Hawes said critical issues affecting the region’s business and the community, such as energy transition and certainty, housing availability and affordability, and workforce skills and availability had been met with an underwhelming response.

“We’ll be relying on the flow of impact from state-based policies and settings to get value here in the Hunter,” Mr Hawes said.

“They’ve circled but haven’t hit us. Apart from the Manufacturing Centre of Excellence proposed by Labor, measures promised and announced for the Hunter have been largely local and not big issues that will impact the region as a whole.”

“Our examination of the lists and costings published by the Parliamentary Budget Office reveal there are no headline initiatives specifically targeting our region in the regimen of items proposed by either of the major parties,” Mr Hawes noted.

“There has been silence on direction and commitments for the Newcastle Airport, Hunter Park, housing in the region, and the John Hunter Health and Innovation Precinct.”

Mr Hawes said energy certainty was a chief concern, not just for the region, but for businesses and households across the state.

“We’re simply not driving projects in the new energy economy fast enough,” he said.

Among seven recommendations to support manufacturing and clean energy, Business Hunter has called for State Significant Infrastructure as the default status for all renewable energy projects.

“Pervasive uncertainty over which providers will be leaving or entering the energy market, offtake options, and lengthy approval and planning processes all add risk and further volatility to the marketplace and investment settings, contributing to an environment where the only certainty we have is when traditional assets will be switched off,” said Mr Hawes.

“Volatility manifests as skyrocketing bills, in turn placing incredible pressure on businesses, in some cases directly impacting staff headcount, expansion plans, or their ability to keep the doors open. Proposed schemes that provide small sugar hits in the form of incremental energy bill rebates to business do little to remedy the issue in the long term and are a band aid at best.”

Mr Hawes said he welcomed moves by both sides to uphold the commitment to remove impediments at the Port of Newcastle, to not retract support from previously committed regional road projects, and Labor’s commitment to reinstating the Minister for The Hunter.

Mr Hawes said Business Hunter and other local advocacy groups had presented a well-considered and united front this election, creating little doubt over the priorities and plan for the region.

“If there were no clear plans being put forward for the region, or conflicting perspectives on priorities, I could perhaps understand the lack of action, but the message in the Hunter has been united, purposeful and clear,” said Mr Hawes.

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