

## MEDIA RELEASE: GLOUCESTER RESIDENTS IN PARTNERSHIP – 15 February 2009

On Monday 9th February more than 850 people gathered in the Gloucester Recreation Centre to express concern about coal exploration on Gloucester's doorstep. This was one of the largest community gatherings Gloucester has ever seen.

The crowd unanimously endorsed Gloucester Council's position that three coal exploration licences held by Gloucester Resources Limited (GRL) not be renewed so that no coal mining can ever occur in those areas.

George Souris (State member for Upper Hunter) will present a petition to State Parliament asking the Legislative Assembly to revoke Coal Exploration Licences held by GRL upon their expiration and declare the area covered by those licences exempt from all future coal exploration and mining. There are now over 1,100 signatures on the petition.

Following is a summary of the presentations which all received sustained applause and supporting comments from the floor.

**Gary Ferris, President of Gloucester Residents In Partnership (GRIP)** emphasised the need for sustainable, balanced development. He noted that Gloucester has an integrated set of industries that together are in balance. They include mining and gas, food production, agriculture, water management, commercial development, and tourism. These sectors bring money and people to the district. It is this diversity that makes Gloucester so special and a place of such enormous future potential. The prospect of a mine on Gloucester's doorstep was of immense concern and would come at enormous cost and disrupt the existing balance representing years of development.

He referred to Brian Wingett's (Managing Director GRL) reported statement: *"While one of the licence applications covered an area just kilometres from Gloucester people should not be alarmed. One cannot even contemplate mining so close to town. If people are concerned...we welcome any enquiry. We want to keep people apprised of the process"* (Gloucester Advocate 25.1.06). Mr Ferris explained that GRL's current mode of operation failed to openly engage and consult the Gloucester public.

GRL's advertisement in the Gloucester Advocate stated: *"GRL Exploration Project – NOT Mining Project"*. George Souris observed that exploration licences were *"more or less an indication by the Government that eventually a mine will come to fruition"*. GRL's conduct - their extensive land purchases within the exploration areas, and their reported connections and negotiations with overseas coal interests in India and China – makes it hard to believe this company is not positioning itself to sell off, mine or collaborate with a mining company, in order to ultimately profit from a mining operation in Gloucester.

Against this most uncertain background GRL states it *"is totally committed to having more JOBS, more FAMILIES, and more EMPLOYED YOUNG PEOPLE in the Gloucester Region."* But at what cost? Re-location enquiries are already down, property sales have not eventuated. Why? Because retirees and tree-changers don't want to live with a coal pit next door. Our \$28M tourist industry relies on the balance and beauty we have.

Much is said, with little evidence that mining will bring better incomes for some people. GRIP believes that an independent study is needed to determine the economic and social benefits that might or might not flow through to Gloucester and the wider region as a result of an expansion into mining and the development of other important economic sectors. Such a study needs to be driven by the community and supported by Council. It needs to be completely independent of GRL and any other mining company. Mr Ferris suggested the State Government might contribute to the funding of this important study.

**David Marston** has 35 years experience in farming, catchment management and community development for both the government and private sectors. He spoke of the need for balanced development and the need to have a proper assessment due to the many possible impacts of mining in the exploration areas such as:

- Landscape scenery damaged forever;
- Water availability for urban and rural areas;
- Water quality all the way to the fishing industry in the Manning estuary;
- Air quality;
- Noise;
- Employment – increasing some short-term types and reducing other long-term types;
- Agriculture – it is not possible to undertake profitable, intensive agriculture after open-cut mining;
- Tourism;
- Soil and vegetation quality in mined areas;
- Wetlands and other ecological communities
- Road conditions; and
- The quality of life.

He went on to say that when an exploration licence is issued there is:

- no consultation or participation with stakeholders (which includes the community);
- no real opportunity to object;
- no consideration of the many likely impacts;
- no assessment of current and approved land use or planning; and
- no regard for the existing lifestyle of the community.

Mr Marston cautioned the community: *"Do not be fooled by any statement that says 'this is just an exploration project, not a mining project'. There is only one reason for exploration and that is as a first step to a mine if at all feasible."* The Department of Primary Industry website states that the data from an Exploration Licence *"ensures that the Department can support a development proposal in so far as it maximises the resource (coal) recovery of the area"*. This lopsided, authoritarian approach is a large part of the problem.

Marston's key message was warmly received by the audience: *"We need balance. Do not destroy existing or other potential developments for the sake of coal. Longer term developments such as agriculture, tourism, rural residential housing and active retirement also bring jobs and economic development. Potentially they are far more sustainable than coal."*

In closing he stressed the need for effective lobbying and continuous action to ensure an outcome that benefits the community; an outcome that ensures the environment is not degraded and one where the local economy prospers and lifestyles improve.

**Mayor Julie Lyford** informed the community that a council delegation recently met with Ian Macdonald (Minister for Primary Industries, Energy, Mineral Resources, State Development) to request the three exploration licences not be renewed. The Minister stated *"we will renew the licences unless there are compelling circumstances not to"*. When asked about protecting our valuable food producing and agricultural land, McDonald stated that it can co-exist with mining. The Mayor raised concerns about economic deficits with the decline of agricultural productivity, residents moving away, reduced tourism opportunities and 'Tree Change' migration.

Minister McDonald instructed the Mayor to: *"hose the community concerns down"*, stating that the Development Application stage is the point at which council and the community can represent their views. Mayor Lyford informed the Minister about the Gloucester community's strong, passionate, articulate, intelligent and strategic opposition to the exploration licences and the prospect of mining so close to the Gloucester township.

Mayor Lyford informed the community that agricultural land (food producing) is not protected from mining throughout NSW. When attending a Regional State Government Cabinet meeting, Mayor Lyford asked Ministers and Dept heads if the Gloucester Housing Strategy was relevant to Dept Mineral Resources in decision making. A senior Dept manager said *"if there is a resource there, we shall harvest it"*.

Gloucester Shire Council is continuing to request the State Government assist with a strategic review of all economic, social and environmental indicators that support our community and commercial viability. This is an important and vital inquiry for the future of our Shire.

Mayor Lyford urged the community to continue working together and supporting each other, irrespective of differing views and personal circumstances.

**Dr Pauline Roberts** of the Caroon Coal Action Group (CCAG), presented forthright observations and advice from the Liverpool Plains experience. *"The NSW Government wants to turn our food bowl into the next Hunter Valley. We (CCAG) are fighting for the future of food production in this country; the right to clean water; clean air; our life-giving alluvial top soil; property rights and thereby against the State Government's Planning Laws which allow coal mining on such lands, and the planning processes which are fundamentally flawed,"* she said.

The CCAG are not anti-mine but reject wholly inappropriate mining development on prime agricultural land. Dr Roberts explained *"It is NOT the mining companies that are the problem; they're just doing what they are allowed to do by the State Government. Mining companies work on a 'divide and conquer' programme"*. Exploration Licences are NOT simply for exploration. *"What you are facing here is fast-track, mine development."*

*"Coal isn't clean and never will be"* Ms Roberts stated: *"In Australia we lag other first world countries in our understanding, management and political will to do anything about these important health issues related to coal."*

Dr Roberts stressed the need to get *"the importance of food and water security on the busy radar of all Australians. We cannot afford to lay waste to these SCARCE National Assets – only 6% of Australia is farmable"* Dr Roberts said these issues were worth involvement from the whole community and urged the audience not to leave it to others.

**John Radford** has lived in the Gloucester district for 72 years and been a dairy farmer all his life. John warned that coal mining so close to town would exclude other industry developing and disturb the balance in the local economy which is so important to Gloucester's future. He is very concerned about coal dust and pollution should a mine ever develop close to town. He said the impacts of coal mining on dairying in the Upper Hunter were significant and *"special provisions had to be made in the milk room to keep the coal dust out – at the farmer's expense"*.

**James Laurie** is a fourth generation grazier from Moppy to the southwest of Gloucester and he believes the current balance makes Gloucester a wonderful place to live. He told the audience *"the continued expansion of coal mining threatens the dynamics of the town"*. He said coal mining expansion at the expense of other industry was an unacceptable outcome.

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