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MEDIA RELEASE

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Auslink Presents Renewed Opportunities To Regional Australia

The Independent Member for New England, Tony Windsor has welcomed the emphasis placed on transport infrastructure in the 2004-05 Budget through the much awaited Auslink programme.

However Mr Windsor is also expressing concerns about the process of establishing which road and rail routes will be regarded to be of national and regional importance and therefore be eligible for the upgraded funding.

Mr Windsor has further concerns about the reduced capacity of all local governments to access the new Roads to Recovery program on an equitable basis.

“The emphasis for access to Auslink funding must be placed on both passenger and freight transport within country regions combined with a strong focus on the transport of export products from the country production centres to port.

This must be the focus rather than simply a big spend on “capital city-to-capital city” transport.

Getting this emphasis right will be the first test that Auslink needs to pass and I urge local government and other regional groups to participate by responding to the June 7 white paper,” Mr Windsor said.

Mr Windsor says that another issue that must be addressed is the diversion of the Fuel Sales Grants Scheme (\$270 million per annum) into the Auslink programme.

“The Fuel Sales Grants Scheme was introduced with the introduction of the GST to ensure country fuel prices did not rise as a result of the application of the GST.

Country Australians are now in the position of providing significant additional funding at the bowser (1-3 cents per litre or \$270 million per annum for projects that were previously funded by Treasury,” Mr Windsor said.

Mr Windsor confirmed that the Roads to Recovery program has been re-funded for four years from 2005-06.

“The continuation of the Roads to Recovery Program is good news but this needs to be tempered by valid questions that are yet to be answered by the Government on the changes to the Roads to Recovery funding formula.

These changes will quarantine one third of the funds (\$100 million per annum) from the existing Roads to Recovery pro rata grants formula and will mean that smaller Local Government areas will have to compete for funds by proposing projects that have strategic regional significance.

This will inevitably lead to some local governments receiving one third less funding under the new Roads to Recovery program, with these lost funds being spent on Auslink style projects by other councils.

The existing Roads to Recovery formula has allowed so called low priority local projects to be funded and I question the need to re-stamp one third of the Roads to Recovery funds into an Auslink style formula,” Mr Windsor said.

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