

PETER DRAPER

INDEPENDENT MEMBER FOR TAMWORTH

MEDIA RELEASE

17 December 2003

Half Staff is a Half Baked Idea – Draper

Member for Tamworth Peter Draper has greeted advice that the NSW Government will not provide funding to meet identified policing needs for Tamworth over the Country Music Festival with anger.

“What sort of a half baked idea is it, to cut police resources in half when we are expecting some 80,000 visitors for the 2004 Festival?” Mr Draper asked.

Following a PACT meeting in Tamworth, Mr Draper wrote to Police Minister John Watkins expressing concern that the funding to be provided by the NSW Government would be insufficient to meet projected needs. Mr Draper spoke to Minister Watkins during the last sitting of Parliament, and has held a number of discussions with the Ministers staff since, in an attempt to address this issue.

“While acknowledging my concerns, the Minister has not provided sufficient financial assistance, or indeed adequate policing solutions for the 2004 Festival,” Mr Draper said.

“In addition, for Western Region Commander Assistant Commissioner West to describe a halving of the budget for the 2004 Festival as “more prudently spending taxpayers money”, displays a very concerning attitude to regional needs by such a senior police representative.”

“Would it have been “more prudent” to halve police numbers at the Rugby Grand Final?” Mr Draper queried. “It appears once again that city interests take precedence over country concerns.”

“I would like assurances from the Minister that the residents of Gunnedah, Quirindi, Walcha, Werris Creek, Nundle, Manilla and other smaller surrounding towns will be able to feel secure during the Festival.”

“Redeploying all available police resources from our smaller communities to bolster Tamworth will leave them vulnerable, and feeling rightfully concerned that their policing needs have been sacrificed for the Festival period.”

The Oxley LAC will bring officers in from Barwon and New England commands to boost numbers, however as there is no funding for accommodation, officers with friends or family living in Tamworth are the only ones being considered.

www.peterdraper.com.au

Media Contacts: Peter Draper mob. 0417 290 376 Electorate Office ph. 6766 1422
Parliament House ph. 9230 2341

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“To put the LAC in this position is an inditement on the Minister,” Mr Draper said. “Given that there is no funding for additional staff, I am informed that a total of 7 additional officers are available who can provide their own accommodation without any additional expense to Police.”

“By penny pinching and having to defer police leave, the entire region will feel the impact of this lack of vision by the Minister for months to come. Stations from around the electorate will need to run on skeleton staff levels until May to catch up on leave.”

“It is not as if the Festival was an unexpected surprise for the Minister. This is an annual event that should be planned for. From an estimated 440 shifts needed for the Festival, this Government is only prepared to fund 220.”

“It is an absolute disgrace to discover the true value that the Minister puts on regional tourism initiatives, and the safety of country communities.”

There has also been speculation in the community that highway patrol officers will be taken off duty to assist in boosting beat patrols around Tamworth, leaving the main arterial thoroughfares surrounding Tamworth without highway patrol coverage for parts of the Festival.

“This is a situation that should not be allowed to occur,” Mr Draper said. “This holiday period is traditionally one of the most dangerous all year. We need every highway patrol officer where they can be most effective – on the highway.”

After the Festival finishes in late January next year, Mr Draper intends calling for a meeting of stakeholders and Council to discuss any issues arising from the reduction in police numbers, as well as considering implications for other emergency services organisations during this period.

“For the 2004 Country Music Festival, the Government has clearly demonstrated that it is not prepared to assist regional communities fund necessary police levels during major events. We need to examine options to protect the future of the Festival.”

“To ensure we are not put in this position in years to come, the community needs to take the initiative and examine what happened in 2004, then immediately start planning for what is needed in 2005.”

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“We must put this issue at the forefront of the community’s agenda,” Mr Draper said. “We need to continue growing the Festival, and therefore need to urgently address the threat of inadequate funding for future policing needs.”

End Release

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