

Gunnedah Week of Speed Festival.

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GUNNEDAH WEEK OF SPEED FESTIVAL

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Mr PETER DRAPER (Tamworth) [12.10 p.m.]: I take this opportunity to highlight the town of Gunnedah in my electorate and a unique upcoming event for the community. Gunnedah is an agriculturally based town on the banks of the Namoi River with a population of around 10,000. During the last decade it suffered badly with the closure of its abattoir and the termination of a number of coalmines in the area. The town almost had its heart and soul ripped out as jobs were lost and many families moved out of town to seek other job opportunities, taking with them schoolchildren, and professional and skilled workers. Most importantly, this had a serious effect on the local economy.

Of late, however, Gunnedah has bounced back strongly, using tourism as a powerful tool to draw people back to the town and district. Events such as the national tomato contest, which is held annually in January, and Ag-Quip, the largest agricultural field days in the southern hemisphere, have always brought many thousands of people to the town. More recently, Gunnedah has adopted the mantle as the koala capital of the world. People can go to Gunnedah on any day of the week and see koalas in the trees; it is a wonderful thing. This has spread the word nationally and internationally about this wonderful community. Visitors can even take home a beautifully packaged bag of koala poo as a permanent memento of their trip.

I wish to draw to the attention of the House the upcoming Gunnedah Week of Speed Festival. Held during March each year, the Week of Speed Festival is just that: a festival boasting a wide range of speed and speed-related activities. The week-long festivities showcase everything from cars, bikes, go-karts, athletics, yachts, greyhounds and horses, to mention but a few. For extreme enthusiasts, this year even yabby races have been included in the program. It is a unique festival. The Week of Speed Festival is now in its eighth year. When the festival is officially opened on Saturday 13 March thousands will be present to witness the opening parade down Gunnedah's Connadilly Street. I was fortunate to be able to attend the event last year.

The benefits of the festival are obvious. It brings thousands of visitors to the town, which injects a lot of money into the local economy. Local hoteliers report full occupancy, and restaurants and other retail outlets are inundated with visitors. Events such as this have not only financial benefits but also important benefits such as increasing the community's morale. Every event or festival that brings people to Gunnedah and into contact with its residents is another step towards recovering the ground lost during the early 1990s. Gunnedah is a much stronger community for having the success of festivals such as the Week of Speed on its calendar.

However, Gunnedah residents who cast their eyes over this year's festival program are quick to note is that a much-enjoyed event is

missing. Due to increases in public liability insurance premiums the extremely popular go-kart races held in the streets surrounding the memorial pool complex have had to be moved out of town to Balcary Park Raceway. While it is an extremely good venue, it does not have immediate access for visitors who have to travel out of town. Residents have expressed a great deal of disappointment that such a popular event has had to be removed from town. The organisers are not to blame; they simply cannot risk holding the races in the streets surrounding the pool complex without adequate insurance.

The Gunnedah community cannot sustain the enormous insurance premiums required to insure an event such as this, which is an unfortunate situation. This highlights an issue that is coming to the fore in many regional and rural communities. Increases in public liability insurance premiums is ripping the social fabric out of many such communities. Question marks were raised about the Great Nundle Dog Race, until the Lions Club came to the rescue with its public liability insurance. A small tennis club in my electorate has had to close down. Many thousands of dollars have been spent upgrading the club's facilities, but because the club has a very low membership it cannot afford public liability insurance.

The Manager of Tourism and Economic Development in Gunnedah Shire Council, Chris Frend, is very excited about the upcoming festival. The program is bigger than ever, and it is anticipated that the festival will bring even more visitors to the town. I commend the organisers of the festival for their fantastic efforts in promoting it and bringing visitors to the town. I encourage everyone in the wider community who has an interest in speed and speed-related activities to visit Gunnedah to experience a wonderful little country town and get a taste of real country life.

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