

# UNI HUB FAIL

Mt Barker misses out on university hub despite funding promise

## **LOUIS MAYFIELD**

A commitment by the previous Federal Government to fund a \$1.5m Regional University Centre at Mt Barker has been broken by the Labor Government, in a decision that has been labeled "extremely disappointing" by a key stakeholder.

Two applications were lodged for funding for Regional University Centres (RUC) at Mt Barker and Victor Harbor by Regional Development Australia Hills, Fleurieu and KI (RDAHFKI) after the previous Federal Government committed to establishing the hubs in Mayo.

However, both applications were rejected by the Federal Department of Education after the election, meaning

Mayo missed out on hosting any of the eight new RUCs funded across the country.

The RUCs provide a space for university students to study while living away from their chosen campus, and in SA they will instead be established at Port Lincoln and Roxby Downs.

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### OPINION

## Hubless Hills

The decision by the Federal Government to renege on the previous Government's commitment to fund a university hub at Mt Barker is a missed opportunity for a city tipped to become the State's second largest within the next decade.

It appears key stakeholders worked very hard to secure a funding promise for the Regional University Centre, but have been left empty-handed despite assurances by the previous Federal Government that the money would be available.

As highlighted during the infamous sports rorts scandal, it is important that grant funding goes to the most deserving applicants.

But it is nevertheless disappointing that a promise of funding for this facility was made, just to be overturned.

Everyone is aware of the congestion on the freeway and the public transport needs at Mt Barker.

And, since the former State Liberal Government scrapped its flagship Globelink election promise, which was supposed to solve the freeway's woes, one of the solutions spruiked by multiple stakeholders has been to keep would-be commuters, such as employees and students, in Mt Barker instead of forcing them to drive down the hill.

Giving students the opportunity to study closer home could help relieve congestion as travelling into the city wouldn't be necessary.

While it is a positive step for the Government to deliver on a promise for eight Regional University Centres across Australia, they have again missed an opportunity to provide vital infrastructure for the anticipated growth at Mt Barker.

One would hope this decision was not based on politics, and was made purely on merit, as the Department of Education claims.

It is disappointing to see another opportunity passing Mt Barker by, as it inches closer to becoming the State's second largest city.

# Mt Barker misses out on uni hub

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RDAHFKI chief executive Damien Cooke said the applications for RUCs at Mt Barker and Victor Harbor were lodged in good faith based on the previous Government's commitment.

"We lodged those applications prior to the election, we had several discussions with the Department of Education ... with the understanding those applications were going to be approved," he said.

"It was only four or five weeks ago that we finally received formal notification that those applications would not be approved."

Mr Cooke said the funding application took around two years to put together with the assistance of the Mt Barker and Adelaide Hills councils, so the rejection meant they had burned an "enormous" amount of time.

"We've been in discussions with many of the councils looking at the options for tertiary education centres within the region for in excess of nine years now," he said.

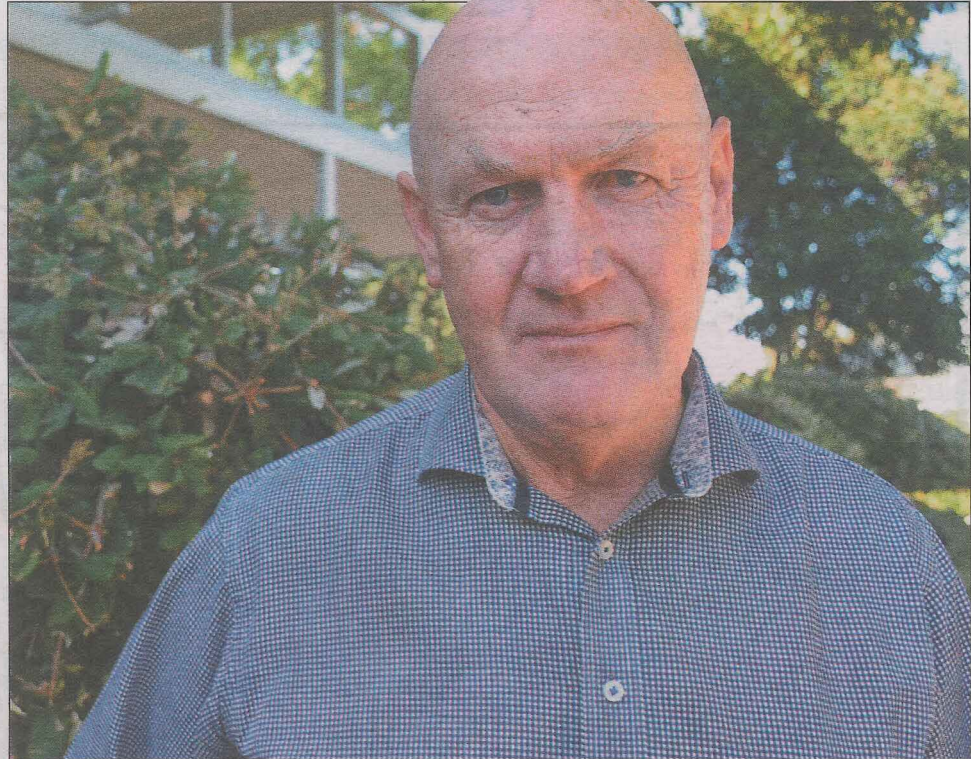
The business plan for the Mt Barker RUC notes that the region has no face-to-face support options for higher education.

It states that transport is more difficult for students working part-time and studying at campuses further afield such as Flinders University.

"With the rapid expected increase in population at Mt Barker, demand for a (Hills-based centre) is likely to increase over the next decade and beyond," the plan states.

Mayo MP Rebekha Sharkie said the region was "desperately" in need of the centres, but the Government had reneged on a promise by the former Liberal Government to deliver them.

"The previous Federal Government



*Regional Development Hills, Fleurieu and KI chief executive Damien Cooke.*

gave a firm commitment to establish the two centres in Mayo," she said.

"These centres would have provided a university education for local Mayo constituents who may now not go on to a tertiary education because of this decision.

"I'm sure the Mayo community would want to know why their education is no longer a priority to this Government."

Mt Barker Mayor David Leach said an RUC would have been a "logical" first step towards a "much needed" university presence at Mt Barker.

"The time and cost impediment of traveling for university study can be a significant barrier to some," he said.

A Department of Education spokesperson said the decision was based on a "competitive application process". "An assessment panel made up of senior departmental staff and Regional Education Commissioner, Fiona Nash, assessed all eligible applications against the assessment criteria," they said.

"Based on this assessment, the Australian Government (is funding) the eight highest ranked applicants."

Along with the two university hubs in SA, three have been funded in Queensland, two in WA and one in Victoria.