E-DEMOCRACY – GULF STYLE
A WORKING PAPER

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At the recent SEGRA Conference, GSD presented a paper on the value of investment in development of the social capital of the Gulf region – it pays off in the long term. In that paper we touched on the processes that we were employing to broaden the horizons of the Gulf residents and expand their networks and experiences.

This paper deals in more detail with the specific programs we are delivering to expand the usage of IT in the region. IT is a tool we are deploying to build the social capital of the Gulf region, to enable residents to take maximum advantage of opportunities presented in the increasingly global economic and social environment. What we intend to do is discuss how we have used the IT infrastructure and provide an initial evaluation of projects to look at effectiveness, impact, identify barriers and some concerns.

OUR ORGANISATION

Gulf Savannah Development (GSD)[1] is a not-for-profit regional development organisation with a charter to foster the economic and social development of the Gulf Savannah region in a sustainable manner. The members of GSD include the Shires of Carpentaria, Croydon, Etheridge and Corporate and associate members include the adjacent local governments of Cloncurry, Flinders and Herberton.

THE GULF REGION

The Gulf region[2] covers 186,000 sq km, with vast flat plains around the southern Gulf of Carpentaria stretching to the south, with rising uplands in the east and southwest. The southwest of the region is heavily mineralised, a part of the northwest mineral province. It is an area 80% the size of Victoria with an annual runoff almost 30% of the national total and larger than the Murray Darling basin.

Pastoralists moved into the Gulf in the 1860's and spread across the region developing the cattle industry. The history of settlement and of the competition for land between the settlers and the indigenous occupants has influenced the nature of the community today.

The region is still relatively isolated – the tyranny of distance, with the added impact of seasonal events such as floods and cyclones. There was no sealed road to Normanton until 2000 and still no sealed road to Burketown and Doomadgee. As a result, the Gulf was generally regarded as an outpost and left to its own devises – and many in the region wish that were still the case. This has shaped the nature of the small communities as they generally bond closely together, often family related. New comers find it difficult to break into the close knit society.

Demographics

The population of around 8,000 people is concentrated in a number of small towns and Aboriginal communities, with Indigenous people comprising over 50% percent of the population.

As at 2003, the population was increasing in some parts of the Gulf and declining in others. Key population centres are Normanton, Karumba, Croydon, Georgetown with smaller centres at Mt Surprise, Forsayth and Einasleigh. The Indigenous communities of Doomadgee and Mornington Island are generally increasing in size.

When considering the distribution of IT facilities and services across the region we are

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[1] See www.the-gulf.info
[2] For details see Gulf Savannah Queensland, Development Potential, Inside Intelligence Regional Profile, Invest Australia, June 2003

immediately faced with a challenge. Many do not and may never own or know how to use a computer. Incomes are low in relation to the Queensland and national average. There is no secondary industry and a shortage of investment capital. There is a high unemployment level hidden within the CDEP figures and a heavy reliance on government funding, grants and subsidies. Education standards locally are below par with those of urban areas, with schooling to Grade 10 in only two centres.

Locally delivered training is difficult to access. While areas of training priority are in business skills and business management, IT, hospitality and trades skills this training is not accessed by the majority of the population.

Employment creating initiatives associated with the development of the Savannah Way themed adventure drive linking Cairns and Broome are a priority.

Recent technological developments

Networking the Nation changed the IT face of the Gulf region, with heavily subsidised satellite phones, delivery of broadband and cheap IBM computers available for all properties beyond the reach of the mobile telephony range, improved fibre optic cable to the key centres and mobile phone access in all larger centres. This was rolled out during 2003, the last centre to be connected being Croydon at end October 2003.

NTN projects included:

- Mobile phone bases in Georgetown, Croydon, Normanton, Karumba, Burketown

- Development of a Gulf web forum, now revamped by GSD as www.the-gulf.info and forms the basis for the delivery of e-governance and e-democracy to the region

- Gulf- connect – IT video conferring by health department

THE PROJECTS

E-democracy – the web portal

As communities regularly commented that 'no one ever asks us about what we want' GSD

embarked on an e-democracy project to foster a greater community involvement in regional governance. The east coast community forums had been established which enabled community representatives to access government ministers, the western boundary for the forums being the Great Dividing Range. We felt there was a need to fill the communications gap in some way.

We aimed to develop information flows between the community, the regional body and government, increase the inter regional contacts and encourage people in the Gulf to feel at ease using the Internet and develop networks and linkages beyond the region.

The web portal provides discussion forums and chat rooms, a survey centre to canvass local views on a range of issues such as the sale of Telstra, an articles section, news both regional and national, weather, cattle prices and linkages to a wealth of other Internet sites. Other federal and state agencies are now using the portal to communicate with the region.

The aim of the project was to develop and trial a prototype for community e-forums in remote regional Queensland. The concept has been slow to take off in the Gulf but has had success among businesses and tourism operators. The challenge now is to extend the range of contact and try and bridge the 'digital divide'.

E-democracy/e-governance is now an ongoing component of GSD planning and will be applied to all our projects, to encourage and facilitate community engagement in the full range of regional development activities.

ACTIVITIES

- **Surveys**

GSD has developed a number of short surveys, which are targeting specific issues for the region. One addresses the IT usage; another, slightly longer survey, assesses business confidence in the region; and a third which will be trialled over the next few months will ask business people about the difficulties they are having with government regulations and requirements.

- **Links**

The web site provides for links to a number of other sites which are of interest to the people in the region. Some of these include road updates and access, cattle prices, national news links, government agencies and industry.

- **Small town renewal and community development**

During the year GSD conducted a small town renewal and community development project. This examined the current capacity of the communities and assessed their capacity to strengthen and grow. One of the major ways of involving the communities in the diverse range of project activities was to report through the web portal. The project has established and developed strong networks between the communities and their usage of the web portal has increased because of their greater understanding of themselves and each other.

REGIONAL COORDINATION

- **Savannah Way Visitor Information Centre Cluster**

The Savannah Way is a themed tourism route that extends across northern Australia from Cairns to Broome. GSD has been instrumental in getting the concept accepted as a national destination. To effectively market and promote the destination requires coordination between the numerous centres along the route - centres that have traditionally been parochial, with a silo outlook. This is understandable as in the past community and business interaction across the vast distances and along some pretty terrible roads has been extremely difficult, particularly when impacted by seasonal conditions of flooding and cyclones.

To overcome this we are in the process of setting up a Savannah Way VIC Cluster or Network which involves representatives from all centres across the north of Queensland. This will ultimately extend across NT and WA to Broome. After the initial face to face communication to put personalities to names, the ongoing communication and maintenance of the network will be by Internet and email, something not imagined a decade ago.

Hence, IT is breaking down barriers, opening new horizons and providing opportunities never before available. Businesses and residents are also finding the web portal an avenue for expressing their concerns on a range of issues such as signage, identifying problem spots on the route for travellers (which we can then pass on to Main Roads) and lobbying for improvements.

- **Regional Planning – Action Tracker for Gulf Regional Development Plan**

The Gulf Regional Development Plan, signed off by Cabinet in 2000, is the blue print for the future development of the region. For 3 years the community has expressed cynicism about the process claiming that they are left in the dark about what is happening with progressing the Plan.

Now they can monitor the progress on every action listed under the GRDP, through accessing the site linked to the Gulf portal. While this has only been operational for 2 months we anticipate it will increase community interest in regional planning. We also expect that the level of community commentary on the rate of progress will swell as we will be incorporating usage of the site into our IT training.

Environmental – fire management technology

Property owners now have access to broadband and the Internet via satellite, which enables them to monitor fires in the region and on their properties using the Arc Explorer software. Basic satellite fire information is supplied providing information on fire hot spots, fire movements and fire scar summaries. This greatly enhances the capacity of land owners to manage property and also develops a data base of fire movements for future planning and fire management practices.

Regional Business Advisory Services – e-commerce

The Regional Business Advisory Service provides a supporting framework for businesses in the Gulf. Traditionally the service has been provided on a face –to –face basis which has limited the contact with the clients in the region because of the distances and difficulties of access. However with the

increase in technology in the region the Service is going to establish regular chat sessions with the businesses as a means of extending the contact and services. Also in 2004 the service is targeting the development of e-commerce and introducing businesses and individuals to the opportunities within e-commerce.

NEW PROJECTS:

Consumer representation – fault reporting

Federal funding was received for this project to be completed early 2004. GSD is working with an IT agency to develop a web forum linked to www.the-gulf.info, specifically to handle Gulf regional telecommunications issues to include:

❑ An error tracking system to enable users in the remote Gulf to report on faults and difficulties being experienced with all forms of telecommunications. Error/fault reports received would be referred to GSD advisers

❑ A help request service would be created within the web site to cover all aspects of telecommunications, including such areas as e-governance and e-business. All requests would be archived and be set up as an FAQ file to be accessed by all users. This would provide GSD with a body of information on Gulf telecommunication needs and concerns for relaying to government and telecommunications providers.

❑ The system would be self administering, either automatic or with administrative supervision, but with no ongoing development costs.

Once the web site is created GSD will undertake an education program to alert residents/users in the region to the service, how to access it and use it. This would be done in several ways:

❑ Advice through the existing Gulf.info web site

❑ Production of web based and hard copy advisory material

This project will also develop a text messaging capability to provide a link from mobile and satellite phones through a gateway server to a home base computer to access web sites. As an example of its relevance for the remote region we hope this will enable a property owner to access basic fire information from a satellite phone at any location.

BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Here lies the big challenge. In the recent "E-Government for All" e-conference one commentator said "accessibility is a big deal…not only being able to get to a computer or the Internet but understanding the basic tools and how to navigate…"[3]

GSD has applied for funding under the Technology Survival Skills program, although we will endeavour pursue the following project, whether or not funding is received.

We are aware that a large number of Gulf residents do not have access to IT equipment or understand how to use it. The aim is to introduce these people to the equipment and provide training in basic computer functions and internet access and usage. This will give them the basic skills to access the publicly available computers in the town libraries, councils and schools.

Usage of the web portal has demonstrated that familiarity with IT tends to be limited to those with a business interest in its application. Informal surveys and anecdotal evidence indicates that few people use the internet for social or personal organisational purposes or to link with external agencies, government departments etc. There is a reluctance to use the publicly available internet access points in councils for fear of making a mistake.

The current E-democracy project has clearly demonstrated to GSD that there are a large number of disadvantaged residents in the Gulf who do not own a computer. While the e-democracy project has had considerable success in enabling businesses and many residents to network and develop linkages to external agencies and sources of information, a significant part of the community has not been involved. The e-democracy project is going a

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[3] E-Government for All, Week2 Item 3 "Public Use of E-gov.: Citizens Perspectives"

long way towards strengthening the social capital for the region however we seek to avoid the creation of a divide between those who have computers and those who do not.

Past experience has shown that the most effective training is delivered in the region and provides one on one mentoring and small group interaction.
The target groups will be: Indigenous organisations and individuals, community groups and small business.

We aim to achieve sustainability through selection of local mentors who will be supported by GSD over the ensuing years through the capacity building and e-democracy programs. The objective will be the creation of small self help groups supported by mentors and developing where possible, groups with mutual interest in IT, e.g. creation of IT clubs to provide sustainability in each area. The first step is to build an interest in IT and demonstrate how it can be a simple and yet valuable tool for people to manage their lives.

OUTCOMES

GSD sees use of IT as a vital tool in strengthening the social capital of the region and assisting people and groups to develop networks beyond the region. Use of **IT can overcome the imposition of remoteness and distance.**

There is a critical need to expand the knowledge of IT and computer usage and awareness of the benefits that can follow, even if people never own a computer. It will be essential to avoid creating a digital divide in the region and ensure that the bulk of the community can keep pace with global developments and changes.

There is a need to help people feel comfortable with the technology and to feel confident to access the publicly available terminals should they need to. As a consequence this project will also target those who do not (and who may never) own a computer for personal economic reasons, but who should not be denied the means of accessing the technology.

The benefits to the community will be a strengthening of the bridging social capital, enabling people to communicate beyond the immediate bounds of their town. The e-democracy project has demonstrated how this knowledge and capability can empower a community and individuals to take greater control over their affairs.

Our ongoing IT and e-democracy projects will need to take into account the disadvantages of the community and adopt a social approach to IT rather than a more formal training environment.

The approach will be one of capacity building the community to be in a position to continue the knowledge and engagement with external support from the regional organisation (GSD).