



## **An Australian Government Initiative**



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### Major Tourism Boost for the Central West of NSW

Warrumbungle Shire Council and community were overjoyed when the announcement came recently, that they had been successful in securing close to half a million dollars in Federal Government funding to develop the World's Largest Virtual Solar System Drive.

Local astronomer, John Shobbrook came up with the idea back in 1997, said Bob Geraghty, General Manager Warrumbungle Shire Council, and through a lot of hard work and consultation, the project will now come to fruition. Five virtual solar system drives will be created along the five main roads that lead to Coonabarabran. With the Anglo-Australian Telescope dome at Siding Spring Observatory providing the model with the Sun and central point, planets will be located along the drives, scaled in distance and size so that travellers might experience a virtual tour of our solar system. The three dimensional planet models will be fixed to large signage billboards which will be located along the road side in rest areas or at Visitor Information Centre's to allow cars to stop so travellers can learn about the solar system and the unique features of each planet. The solar system models will be 37 million times smaller than the real solar system. This model is unique in that this solar system actually ends up at a world class astronomy research facility and all planets are accessible and easily seen as visitors drive by. It has been recognised that whilst we can all learn about the size of the solar system in text books, there is no better way to appreciate the immense size and scale than actually travelling through it. Tourists will be able to see how small Pluto is relative to Jupiter, and how close our very own Earth is to the Sun.

The focus with the project is to develop a sustainable tourism industry, said Mr Geraghty, and there will be many other benefits for the region. While the project will undoubtedly support Coonabarabran's branding as Astronomy Capital of Australia, it will also lengthen the stay and spend of the majority of visitors who come here. That can only increase the prospects for business throughout the shire and region.

Only four major projects in NSW were funded under AusIndustry's Australian Tourism Development Program last year said Michael Grieve, AusIndustry Regional Manager, and the program is highly competitive. The strength of this project is its potential to deliver benefits to a wide range of stakeholders. The project is very much what AusIndustry is looking for under the ATDP. It will be an exciting and significant regional tourist attraction of national significance which has been developed through extensive industry and community consultation and collaboration. Nine local government areas will be involved and benefit. Educational material will be developed to increase the travelling experience for children and adults to gain an appreciation for all things astronomical. Indigenous interpretation of our universe will be incorporated where appropriate. The project reinforces the road safety campaign of stop , revive and survive and the co-operation of visitor centres has been forthcoming throughout the region. A range of product development opportunities and new services can be developed and other attractions in the region like Narrabri's Australian National Telescope and the Parkes 'Dish' Telescope will benefit through the interest that this project creates.

The World's Largest Virtual Solar System Drive should be completed by the end of 2007.

*Media Note*

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