SMART idea for economy: Sims

By GREG ELLIS

WOLLONGONG'S SMART infrastructure facility has an enormous contribution to make to the economy, according to Australian Competition and Consumer Commission chairman Rod Sims.

Speaking at the inaugural SMART corporate dinner, Mr Sims said it could benefit society, policies and regulation by linking infrastructure services.

"Infrastructure is just so important," he said. "It plays a role in all parts of our lives.

"It is road, rail, electricity, water, telecommunications. It is everything, and yet the way we do it is by discreet people working on it in different ways.

"But because it is discreet there is no linkage. So bringing it together and having people look at it in a broad way and trying to integrate it ... I think can be tremendously helpful."

The $65 million Simulation, Modelling, Analysis, Research and Teaching facility, opened at University of Wollongong (UOW) in 2010, is the national centre for infrastructure solutions.

Senior officials from the NSW and federal treasuries, government departments, universities and infrastructure-related organisations were among the delegates at the inaugural event.

Mr Sims said he felt honoured to be the first keynote speaker.

Welcomed by UOW Vice-Chancellor Paul Wellings on his first visit, he said that considering what SMART represented, it would definitely not be his last.

Mr Sims said there were many things the SMART facility could do to better integrate services such as road and rail.

"It is easy to say but hard to do. "You have not only got to put the intellectual grunt behind it ... you have got to have enough critical mass of people to think through how to communicate with policy makers and make it happen," he said.

Mr Sims said that having a facility that brought so much brainpower together to do that work was one thing.

The other exciting thing was that the team led by SMART's chief executive Garry Bowditch was also keen to find ways to propagate the ideas.

"You need the critical mass to do that and I am quite excited by that," he said.

"I think this is a great idea ... because it is the community that ultimately benefits."

Mr Sims said people often told him how hard it was to get good policy decisions.

It was often because the case was not strong enough.

But the great thing about a facility such as SMART was that it could bring everything together to make a logical argument on issues such as pricing for infrastructure congestion or electricity usage.

Ms Sims said some infrastructure networks only operated at full capacity a couple of times a year.

They had to be built to accommodate such demand even though it was inefficient.

But he said the great thing about the SMART facility was that it might be able to identify ways to reap benefits for everyone by reducing peak demand.