It's the SMART end of town

By MICHELLE HOCTOR

THE Illawarra’s metamorphosis is well underway with a growing cluster of creative minds and industries helping to regenerate the region’s skills base, according to Federal Minister for Infrastructure and Transport Anthony Albanese.

The minister was in town yesterday to officially open the University of Wollongong’s $62 million SMART Infrastructure Facility.

Mr Albanese joined a succession of speakers who left no doubt that while the region’s traditional industries were on the wane, the research and technology sectors were leading the way forward.

Operating since February, SMART (Simulation, Modelling, Analysis, Research and Teaching), is one of the largest infrastructure research facilities in the world.

Its key functions are to use modelling to develop future infrastructure, and to ensure systems upon which we rely, such as water, electricity, telecommunications and transport networks, operate at optimal efficiency.

Cunningham MP Sharon Bird, who is also chairwoman of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications, said the future of the nation was tied to development of transport and communications infrastructure.

The Illawarra, through SMART and the National Broadband Network rollout, was at the forefront of this revolution.

“As a region we often make the headlines for the difficulties that we face, this place has put us on the map nationally and internationally as a place of opportunity,” Ms Bird said.

Mr Albanese said SMART’s location in a major regional university that was already home to the Innovative Materials Centre and the Sustainable Buildings Research Centre, was helping to regenerate the region’s skills base.

“We already know that this university produces more PhD graduates than any other in the country. As centres such as this grow and flourish, it will mean more jobs for local graduates and a retention of the brain power that comes with those young and energetic minds.”

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SMART INFRASTRUCTURE FACILITY?

Anthony Albanese, Federal Minister to Infrastructure and Transport

It means a better future for the Illawarra, with jobs being created due to the activity. What we’ll see coming out of this facility is a mix of ideas that will become accepted as everyday practice in our lives but ones which, in 2011, we can’t envisage.

Prof Gerard Sutton, UOW Vice-Chancellor

Instead of project management in infrastructure, this is about the whole of the infrastructure in the country. It needs to be integrated and that’s been the problem for the whole of Australia, ever since Federation. This fixes the problem.

Dr Ken Henry, chair of the SMART Advisory Council

This is an extraordinary opportunity to lift our knowledge of infrastructure to a new level in Australia. It will have not just an Australian impact but, over time, an international impact.

Nick Greiner, chair of Infrastructure NSW

It has a chance to be a truly national and international leader in knowledge and expertise in infrastructure and that is obviously a fantastic thing for the region and, importantly, for Australia.

David Farmer, Wollongong City Council general manager

It puts us near leading-edge thinking in terms of infrastructure systems and can assist in the planning of the city. It’s another set of knowledge-based, high-skilled jobs in our community and part of the continuing transformation of our economic base, away from direct heavy industry.

KEY AIMS AND BENEFITS

CEO Garry Bowditch lists the key aims and benefits of the SMART Facility.

1. Using infrastructure to improve liveability.

2. Ensuring infrastructure encourages productivity and competitiveness.

3. Protecting systems such as water and energy so that if a part of it fails, not all of it fails.

4. Rail and transport - we need corridors so we can put in infrastructure. You could avoid doing something too late but you just have to upskill some things because we have to create options for future growth.

5. Using superannuation to finance infrastructure. Australia has more than $1.4 trillion worth of superannuation savings. We’re going to do the research to ensure that some of this money is freed up to better serve the community.

For the Illawarra

1. Jobs - we expect to have employment for more than 150 researchers and administrative employees. That could escalate to hundreds of jobs as we bring national projects here for research. If you’re a scientist, there will be lots of opportunities, whether it’s communications, food or hospitality.

2. The Illawarra has a huge amount to offer in terms of its skilled workforce, mineral resources and its university, but we need greater connection. This will be assisted by the roll-out of the NBN.

3. Modelling for redevelopment of the CBD.

We would have something to offer on that terms of what does it take to attract people naturally to the CBD.