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Draft Environment and Liveability Strategy

Council is to be commended for preparing the draft Environment and Liveability Strategy and for seeking public comment. The overall thrust of the document is supported while certain assumptions are challenged. Commentary is offered on a number of aspects:

Sunshine Coast as an “emerging city”

The draft strategy makes reference, on a number of occasions, to the Sunshine Coast as an “emerging city”. The notion of the region aspiring to be an “emerging city” is questioned and would venture to add that such an aspiration would run counter to the image that many stakeholders hold of this part of Queensland. A perpetuation of the notion of an “emerging city” would run counter to the region’s green image and would negate much of what is proposed in this draft strategy. The notion of an “emerging city” has very negative overtones and would reinforce the concerns that many have in the community that the current elected Council has an overly pro development bias that would lead to the Sunshine Coast becoming “another Gold Coast”.

It is recommended that this descriptor is removed from the strategy document.

Inter and intra urban breaks

The maintenance of the inter and intra urban breaks as a key objective is strongly supported. The “regional inter urban break” and the “sub regional inter urban breaks” definitely need to be maintained to protect the Sunshine Coast image. The draft strategy includes a map that identifies where the inter urban break is located. It is strongly recommended that the Environment and Liveability Strategy also includes in its final version a series of maps that identify where the intra urban breaks are (or should be) located and also a map or maps that clearly identify where the urban footprint is. If the urban footprint is determined by the State Government then this information should be sourced to the relevant State Government document (e.g. SEQ Regional Plan or other relevant document).

The landscape and character of the Sunshine Coast is the essence of our region and helps define our identity and character

To avoid the creep of urban sprawl Council should clearly define which areas will be protected to act as buffers between population areas. For example, one would assume (hopefully correctly) that the area north of Stumers Creek and east of the Sunshine Coast motorway will remain as a green buffer. The site at Yaroomba (currently owned by Sekisui) should never have been allowed for mass urban development. Sites such as these provide crucial urban breaks.

The spatial layout of the region

Professor Mike Hefferan, Sunshine Coast University, presented at the 2012 Sunshine Coast Futures Conference. He noted that one distinct feature of the region, replicated in few others, was its urban layout (of about 15 villages and townships) and suggested that the long-standing spatial layout of the region could become an important contributor to a new economic and community approach. The diversity of the various villages and townships must be maintained and new construction must be suitable to the area. Policy and strategies should be developed to capitalise on this diversity.

“Greening” of arterial roadways

The vision of “corridors of green connecting our biodiversity to our neighbourhoods and green fingers connecting our neighbourhoods to our people” is welcomed and should also be reflected in the manner in which our major and arterial roads are “landscaped”. The Environment and Liveability document should include a specific strategy that would ensure that any development (residential, commercial or industrial) should be well back from arterial and significant roadways. There should be a mandatory and significant green buffer between major roadways and any development. The Canberra model is a case in point. Major roadways linking major centres such as Woden and Tuggeranong have development well back from the road system. This ensures that road users are not subjected to travelling through endless urban build up.

The Nicklin Way from Caloundra north to the Mooloolah River is an eyesore and does nothing to promote the concept of liveability. Development to the edge of the roadway should never have been permitted.

The current native habitat buffer between the current development / expansion of Peregrine Springs and the motorway is plainly inadequate. Dense revegetation should be a pre requisite of any such development. Should the development of Twin Waters West proceed then it should be mandatory on the developer to ensure at least a significant, dense buffer between the development and the motorway. The “greening” of that buffer should commence well before any development.

Car parking

Transportation, and consequential to this, the issue of car parking has a major impact on the liveability of an area or region. As the population grows, more and more pressure will be placed on those areas of the Sunshine Coast that residents and visitors wish to access. Access to beach areas or to entertainment and retail precincts is a case in point. While increased car park facilities is an unattractive

proposition the only alternative is for adequate transport systems such as light rail or electric buses. If the State Government imposes a population target on the Sunshine Coast it is beholden on elected councillors to demand a quid pro quo from the State Government in the form of support for adequate transport systems. (See comments below on the “growth mantra”).

Prof Hefferan in his paper (“Rethinking Sunshine Coast Villages”) to the 2012 Sunshine Coast Futures Conference reiterated the point that substantial proportions of the workforce will continue to commute to parts of Brisbane daily. This, he said, needs to be facilitated by a concentrated effort to secure transport infrastructure upgrades, particularly in public transport. This argument applies not just to the Sunshine Coast’s relationship with Brisbane. If we are to maintain and support the distinct, viable towns and villages that make up the Sunshine Coast, then there has to be significant transport infrastructure upgrades to facilitate commuting from these habitats to business centres such as Maroochydore and the proposed economic corridor to the south.

The “growth mantra”

The Sunshine Coast strategy and planning documents are based on the assumption that the Sunshine Coast will have a population of 500,000 by 2041. I understand that the forecast population figures are drawn from the Queensland State Government’s Shaping SEQ policy, the draft planning document designed to manage the growth of south east Queensland into the future.

What is not clear is whether the population figure of 500,000 is a target which the Sunshine Coast Council sees as a desirable objective or whether the target figure is one that is being imposed by the State Government.

If the figure represents a growth target which Council sees as desirable then the draft Environment and Liveability Strategy does not go far enough in identifying radical strategies to manage that growth. Based on a current approach the draft strategy seems to assume that increased vehicular traffic is a given and that, ipso facto, more roads / increased road lanes will be required to accommodate this increase.

If, as referred to above, the population target of 500,000 is being imposed by the State Government and is not a desirable or achievable target for the Sunshine Coast Council, then the elected Council needs to “push back”. If a growth target of 500,000 is going to place unacceptable strains on the community and its infrastructure then the State Government needs to accept its share of responsibility.

“Liveability” is more than the environment

While the overall thrust of the draft strategy is welcomed it should be acknowledged that this is only one aspect of “liveability”. Council needs to encourage community engagement and recognise the diversity of views and opinions that exist within the community. Governments – including local government – do not have all the answers nor do they necessarily have the right solutions. Some academic literature makes the point that to be successful, economic and community planning must take

into account regional differences and accept that the fundamental “building blocks” are local and not necessarily sectoral or national. The development of the Sunshine Coast should be driven by local needs rather than State or national requirements. Strategy should be locally based capitalising on the diversity of communities and linking the aspirations of individuals as well as the community and business. Liveability will be more readily achievable if shared values are recognised and built upon.

The success or liveability of a place is dependent on many factors. But generally speaking the “place” has to have a purpose; a *raison d’être*. It could be a university campus or a market centre for example. In this regard the proposed plans by Sekisui for the Yaroomba site are confusing and contradictory. What is the purpose and function of the Yaroomba site? Is it tourism, in which case the massive residential component sits awkwardly with that “sense of place”. If the purpose of the site is just another residential development then what are the linkages with the surrounding communities?

The proposed Yaroomba development is mentioned as an example to illustrate the importance of sense of place and to illustrate that the creation of a sense of place needs to reflect community values as much (if not more) as the commercial values.

Contemporary research on urban planning and related issues suggests that getting the physical component right is essential to communities and economies that are successful and sustainable.

Individuals, households and communities have an affinity with particular places and any strategies developed to facilitate liveability needs to identify what the criteria is that makes a particular place “liveable” and build on those aspects. Recognising how each community lives and interacts is critical. My concern is that developments such as that proposed by Sekisui will be “sterile” and lack a sense of place.

John Hare
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