



23 March 2016

On-line submission

http://planspolicies.planning.nsw.gov.au/index.pl?action=view_job&job_id=7402

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SUBMISSION ON THE DRAFT HUNTER REGIONAL PLAN AND DRAFT PLAN FOR GROWING HUNTER CITY

The Tomaree Ratepayers and Residents Association (TRRA Inc) represents the interests of the 26,000 people living on the Tomaree Peninsula located at the northern extremity of Port Stephens LGA. Our key objective is to act and be a representative voice in all matters that will enhance and protect their residential amenity and the local environment, both natural and built.

The Tomaree Peninsula is a unique strip of land surrounded by the Stockton Bight, Tasman Sea and Port Stephens water ways, mostly a declared marine park with Nelson Bay Road the only access road connecting the Peninsula to Newcastle some 50km away, the Williamstown RAAF and airport/aerospace complex, Medowie, Raymond Terrace and the Pacific Highway.

Most of the area is either listed as National Park, State Forest or high Environmental value land as shown in Figure 11, which has resulted in all the limited available land being developed around the major centre of Nelson Bay and a number of smaller villages such as Shoal Bay, Salamander, Soldiers Point and Anna Bay.

TRRA has been concerned about uncontrolled population growth and development on the Peninsula and welcomes the concept of a Regional Hunter Plan to provide a framework for the next 15 to 20 years.

We are frequently seeing developers attempting to push the existing restrictions on building heights and density or land use zonings under what we believe at times to be questionable justification of population growth or to be economically viable. There are however a number of issues that we feel the Draft Hunter Plan fails to address.

1. General Nature

The draft appears very general in its proposed approach to virtually all the key planning issues, often citing broad State or national level plans or policies as the basis for the Regional plan. It does not



take the next step of clearly articulating the implications of these generic statements for particular localities within the Hunter.

2. Implementation

Councils already have a number of more detailed land use plans particularly for elements such as environmentally sensitive land which should be included in this overriding plan. As a result of the general nature being proposed, it appears that it will be left to the councils to provide the detail or undertake the hard work. With 11 local councils covered by this plan we question how the general guidelines proposed will be implemented consistently across the region and if in fact some Councils will have the financial or technical resources required.

An advantage of greater detail being developed at the Council level, if done properly with true consultation at all levels of the community and strength of local knowledge, better planning can be achieved than from the regional level.

Based on our experience we are not convinced and are very concerned however that **without stronger guidelines that are presented in this draft** developers and pro-development councils after Section 94 contributions will dominate policy at the expense of the environment (both natural and built).

The Council officers faced with pressures from pro and anti- development groups will be faced with almost no policy direction. If the guidelines are to remain general in nature, then strong governance or true community consultation with rights of appeal need to be provided in great detail.

3. Economic Future

The draft Plan is very light on relating to how the desired growth in population or jobs will be achieved. We might reasonably have expected some attempt to identify potential growth industries and their locational and infrastructure needs.

Overall, the draft Plan appears to be looking backward to the old Hunter economy rather than forward to a new industry/employment mix. There is still a strong emphasis on protecting access to mineral resources and the potential for coal to drive growth in regional communities such as Singleton. Earlier this month we have seen another coal mine, Mount Arthur near Muswellbrook close with the loss of 290 jobs.

There is only passing reference to the recent signs of a long term switch away from fossil fuels worldwide. With such a major reliance of our current regional economy on this resource we would have expected some detailed economic analysis of the future of this industry and the planning needed to meet the challenges which could accompany a longer term transition from the coal industry. The CSIRO research facilities in Newcastle are not mentioned.

We would welcome greater analysis of the potential employment growth around the Newcastle Airport from the aeronautical/defence industries.



In primary Industry there could be potential for very intense food and other cropping as is emerging with the large scale Tomago glasshouse. There are locational advantages being close to the Sydney market and Newcastle Airport.

The recent experience of the private airport at Toowoomba is a lead. This has opened up a major export market to Asia for horticulture and other food products. We now only use Bolwarra flats for turf cultivation! There are many other rich agricultural areas in the Hunter which are now used far less intensively that they could be.

Tourism is a significant economic driver of the Hunter region, particularly for the Tomaree Peninsula, more discussion is required about the extent of its significance and what will be the key markets, domestic, international (projected growth from newer markets such as China and India). What type of hotel or resort developments will be required (3, 4 or 5 star), how many and where should they be located?

An awareness of the necessity to protect the natural environment (land and water) needs to be stated clearly. This is the main tourist attraction but has the potential to be lost at the expense of providing more facilities for visitors.

There are potential tourist development sites once the Tomaree and Stockton centres due close in a few years and the opportunities explored. Should certain areas, such as along the Nelson Bay Road, be protected from becoming a long strip of tourist developments extending from Williamstown through to Anna Bay?

The future direction and infrastructure needs of the wine industry deserve more attention in the plan. What is its scale and economic importance and where is it headed?

4. Consultation

Many of the 'levers' available to governments to implement strategic plans lie with a range of State agencies and increasingly privatized infrastructure providers. We question whether the draft Plan has brought together enough of the key players to ensure agreement on an integrated and coherent implementation programme. It will be too easy for separate decisions to be made on such matters as road and other transport infrastructure, water supply etc.

5. Population Predictions

We understand that the figures for future population and employment are predictions based on historical trends and are not targets set by the State Government.

The draft Plan assumes, and provides for, very significant growth in the region's population and economic activity. We are surprised that there is no preliminary discussion about whether this is either necessary or desirable in the context of ecologically sustainable development.

There will be many in the community who, while not necessarily 'anti-growth', nevertheless question both the scale of the proposed growth and the relative enthusiasm for it relative to other objectives within an ESD framework, which we thought has been accepted as the basis of the planning system.



We suggest caution needs to be applied for using historical growth predictions for the Tomaree Peninsula now that all planned land releases have been fully developed. We believe the community are not ready at this stage to support a significant increase in the density through infill and taller developments within the urban areas.

On page 84 covering the North East Coast, under Support robust regional communities we support the first point to “strengthen the roles of existing communities and the accessibility and vibrancy of town centres and main streets, particularly within Forster-Tuncurry and Nelson Bay”. However there is no detail on how this will be achieved or who will provide the funding.

The second point “support urban infill and the regeneration of town centres that build on coastal village identity and form..” However it is the very nature of the coastal village that attracts the tourist, retiree or second home buyer and although regeneration is necessary it does not necessarily follow that significant growth is required or desired.

6. Crown Land

The relevance of Crown Lands and their future use does not get a mention. There are extensive areas across the region. We are already seeing pressure on caravan parks located on Crown land to provide more revenue, or other potential uses of Crown land surrounding urban centres. The role of National Parks is not mentioned nor is there discussion of the adequacy of their land allocation.

7. Education

As in the existing (but outdated) Lower Hunter Regional Strategy, there is insufficient discussion of the role of tertiary education (TAFE and Universities) and the potential for business and employment opportunities linked to them.

8. Transport

There is no forecast or recommendation on the relative share among the transport modes. We would have expected more emphasis on the public interest in a modal shift towards public transport. A large number of Tomaree residents commute to Newcastle and the Hunter Valley for employment. What extent will the private car remain the major mode, or can car-pooling, park and ride facilities be developed?

A major planning document for the region should address the role of a proposed high speed rail (within the outlook period, at least in terms of reserving a corridor) and the extent the light rail proposal for Newcastle CBD could be extended to include at least the hospitals, university and extending to Williamstown to access the airport and RAAF base with its 3500 employees.

9. Utilities

The draft plan appears weak on provision of essential infrastructure to support development – particularly water and sewerage, but also electricity and gas supply.



While general reference is made to improved telecommunications, there is surprisingly little emphasis on the potential of the NBN to support home based or remotely located businesses catering to a national or even international market, Tomaree already has many such businesses.

10. Housing

The draft plan does not seem to adequately address the very significant issue of affordable housing, including for the very large retired population in our area, and including the role of mobile/relocatable homes. The draft seems to encourage 'more of the same' except for a half-hearted plea for some increase in medium density.

There is no discussion of the ever present and contentious issue of high rise development in strategic locations such as Newcastle CBD, Nelson Bay and Forster. What is the plan to resolve conflicts and try to reach a consensus on appropriate locations for high rise, and on areas where low rise character should be preserved? Will this be driven by Councils, local residents or left to developers?

We have similar concerns about piecemeal developments on rural zoned land adjacent to urban areas and marginal flood prone land that do not appear to be discussed in any detail to provide guidelines.

11. Environment

While the draft Plan identifies areas of high environmental value (Figure 11: High Environmental Values, p 46), it does not appear to provide adequate protection for those areas – many of them also remain subject to mineral exploration licences.

Proposals for maintaining habitat connectivity appear to rely heavily on private sector initiatives, including mine rehabilitation. These are not guaranteed – and there may be a looming crisis in how to deal with mining voids. However these projects offer employment opportunities and enormous recreation and tourism potentials.

The draft Plan appears to rely heavily on bio banking and offsets. This policy appears to have many shortcomings – surely some areas are too precious to lose and where offsets cannot be an adequate substitute for protection, particularly where they are not 'like for like'? If bio-banking is to occur, perhaps areas along the green belt should be identified as areas to be purchased as an offset, rather than other sites that perhaps would never be developed or have little environment value.

The draft Plan appears not to adequately address protection of drinking water catchments, either from mineral exploration/extraction or from development. We are surprised that the major issue of contamination from the Williamstown RAAF base does not rate a mention.

The draft Plan fails to address seriously the implications of climate change, in terms both of necessary changes in the local economy (away from fossil fuels) and of adaptation, including the constraints on land uses due to the predicted rising sea level, and increased flood risk, where the precautionary principle should apply.

There does not appear to be any mention of the regions significant but declining koala population that is reaching a critical point through piecemeal developments encroaching on their habitat.



12. Governance

Local communities are increasingly demanding greater participation in strategic planning decisions – more and more decisions seem to be being taken out of the hands of democratically elected local Councils and given to unelected appointed bodies, or decided remotely by the State government. The draft Plan proposes a Coordinating and Monitoring Committee (p.11) with representatives of local councils. There will be understandable fears that this is a relatively weak governance mechanism leaving a major ‘democratic deficit’.

Draft Hunter City proposal

The plan proposes an arbitrary region defined as ‘Hunter City’ extending to Medowie and Raymond Terrace in the north, with a buffer region identified as the Hunter City Hinterland extending to around the Salt Ash area. This results in the Tomaree Peninsula lying just outside the area, within the Hunter North East Coast. There is little detailed rationale for its boundaries, we can only assume that this was based on current population/employment and travel times to the existing Newcastle CBD.

No data is supplied about the number of Tomaree residents that commute to the Newcastle city area for employment or the frequency of trips that are made by others for medical/social/cultural or shopping activities.

We note that there is no discussion of linkage to the Government’s proposed Council merger proposals. In the State Government proposal, it is argued that there is strong links between Newcastle and Port Stephens with a recommendation that the two councils should merge. This has been met with very strong opposition from Port Stephens residents.

If the proposals for a Hunter City are to be matched by a proposal for a metropolitan LGA with similar boundaries, this would however have left the eastern part of Port Stephens (outside Hunter City) effectively cut off from other regional/rural areas.

We have a particular interest in how the Hunter City proposal would affect the Tomaree and Tilligerry peninsulas, and the implementation of the wider Hunter Regional Plan in this ‘remnant’ fringe area. While it is included in the Hunter’s North-East Coast sub-region it would not have even a single road link with the rest of that sub-region (effectively the Great Lakes LGA).

There will be not unreasonable fears that the needs of the Tomaree and Tilligerry areas may be neglected by those involved in developing and implementing the plans both for Hunter City and for the Hunter’s North-East Coast sub-region. How does the overall plan intend to ensure that these fears are not realized?

Conclusion

TRRA welcomes the idea of a strategic plan for the Hunter region but is very concerned that the proposal is too general in nature.



The draft does not provide enough detail for local councils on how the implementation will be funded and more importantly on how it will be implemented with true community consultation to ensure the environment both built and natural will be protected against development.

No proof has been provided that population increases will continue or are desirable within areas such as the Tomaree Peninsula.

If the plan is to remain general, TRRA requests that significant procedures and rights of appeal are legislated to ensure a fair outcome.

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