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DRAFT HUNTER REGIONAL PLAN
DRAFT PLAN FOR GROWING HUNTER CITY

Submission to the NSW Government: Planning & Environment

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission on the 'Draft Hunter Regional Plan' and the 'Draft Plan for Growing Hunter City'. Overall, both plans are positive in their direction, building upon the existing strengths of the region and acknowledging future opportunities. The plans give consideration to a range of strategic issues and in various respects, present a significant shift from former documents.

The intent of this submission is to raise awareness of a number of issues for your attention and consideration. Although overlap occurs amongst several issues, they have been discussed separately to ensure their importance is recognised.

1. Progressing the Sustainable Development Goals

Whilst global Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) efforts have rightly focused on continuing and finishing the work of the Millennium Development Goals in developing nations the SDG agenda is explicitly applicable to developed countries. Australia has signalled its commitment to supporting responsible and sustainable social and economic growth in pursuit of the 2015-2030 Sustainable Development agenda as a signatory to these goals. Implicit is the notion that Australia will actively monitor and record such progress. The ways and extent to which local and State government authorities will be expected to report such outcomes are currently unclear; that they will eventuate in some form is inevitable. Metrics against which all Australian development activity can be mapped are currently under development and progress towards the SDGs will be scrutinised as a demonstration of Australian governments' commitment to them. The planning documents under review have the opportunity to demonstrate participatory, accountable, and effective governance to support rapid and equitable urban and regional transformation. Articulation within these Plans of how such outcomes will be facilitated, and consequent progress towards the SDGs mapped will be both valuable and opportune.

2. Government commitment

For successful implementation and outcomes, government commitment and funding is vital. It is important for the Government to adhere to its strategic objectives and fulfil its obligations. Historically the Hunter region has had limited ability to completely achieve its strategic commitments given a perceived dearth of funding and resources or potentially inefficient allocation of resources. It is positive that the Government is committed to the Plan and this must follow through to delivery. Further detail on the supporting function by State Government would reinforce the strategic goals.

3. Governance structure

Within the draft Plan, the governance structure identified includes a range of regulatory agencies: many of which are related to economic, environmental and infrastructure areas. However, in the current form, the proposed structure negates inclusion of community agencies such as NSW Health and NSW Housing. It is important for these agencies to be recognised, for example, given the current affordable housing crisis facing the Hunter and the economic contribution to the region from the construction sector, it is recommended that the structure be amended to include NSW Housing, the Aboriginal Housing Office and Community Housing Providers. All three levels of administration are engaged with the Hunter community to provide an important basic need – shelter – and as a strategic planning document their inclusion is warranted.

4. Government amalgamation

With the proposed merger of multiple local government organisations to be finalised early 2017, there will be significant changes to governing boundaries. The draft Plans must make consideration of these changes to ensure alignment of strategic directions and uniformity across local government regions. To strengthen the relationships between government agencies and collaboration with the community sector, boundary positions should make consideration of those associated with health, housing and comparable State government regulatory authorities.

5. Policy relationships

It is acknowledged that the draft Plans provide the vision, goals and actions for sustainable growth of the Hunter region. Therefore, an important issue for consideration concerns implementation. From a local perspective, it will be the role of the local government sector to make the Plans operational: implementation must give consideration to local level resources and State Government guidance. Currently there is an abundance of regulatory and non-regulatory policy in existence and there must be alignment between these and the proposed new Plans. Given the Actions identified within the draft Plans, there will need to be amendments to various local level policies potentially including Local Environmental Plans. Consideration of an implementation plan or actions that address such activities is vital to ensure successful execution.

6. Economic diversity

Economic diversification is essential to the long term sustainability of the Hunter economy. The draft Plan emphasises the mining sector in this respect and although traditionally a major contributor to the local economy, the prospect of perpetuation has reduced. The declining demand for coal projects and the deteriorating mining workforce mandates a shift towards other sustainable economic growth areas. Agriculture, tourism and local service providers are

expanding growth areas and require significant focus, as does the ongoing sustainability of the manufacturing sector. Similarly, the University of Newcastle and the John Hunter Hospital and their allied services make significant contributions to the regional economy and growth in this area should be encouraged and further emphasised within the draft Plans, particularly given the future impact from the new City campus.

7. Ageing in Place

Australia's population is ageing, primarily due to low fertility rates and increased life expectancy. Given such growth, the availability of appropriate housing has become a prime consideration to ensure we can accommodate the housing needs of the future population. Accordingly, the government has acknowledged the changing culture and has adopted regulatory policies to encourage ageing in place. Although the Plans make consideration of development and also generational differences, there is a need to further focus upon ageing in place within the regional community: to provide more detailed direction to assist local government with implementation activities.

8. Affordable housing

Australia is currently in the midst of an affordable housing crisis. The high cost of residential housing across the Hunter region is significantly impacting upon the community. As many new home buyers are priced out of the market and with a critical shortage in rental properties, affordable housing must be an area within the draft Plans that is further explored and directions detailed: actions specific to the need for additional affordable residential accommodation.

9. Land use planning

Multiple issues are raised in relation to land use planning. First, reflection of the draft Plan goals within local planning policies is essential. The draft Plan needs to be written in a manner that will not only promote or encourage inclusion within the local agenda but will sufficient direction to make implementation achievable by local Councils. This issue aligns with the need for parameters that are discussed further within this submission. Secondly, there needs to be consideration of development activities that limit the use of commercial, industrial and manufacturing lands for residential purposes. These areas are important to the regional economy and therefore, protection of land areas is vital to ensure sustainability within such sectors. Historically there has been a gradual loss of agricultural land to mining operations. The draft Plan must make consideration of land uses in this respect to ensure the future viability of the agricultural sector in terms of long term benefits. Finally, with the need for affordable housing and continual residential development within existing urban areas, there needs to be a focus upon intensification impacts. A range of issues from existing infrastructure status to stormwater run-off require consideration to ensure a liveable community. The concept of increased density to utilise existing transport and infrastructure is inappropriate.

10. Incentives

The draft Plans provide the perfect opportunity to provide incentives to achieve strategic goals. A typical example relates to housing within the region. The crisis with affordable housing, the need for suitable residential facilities given the ageing population and the opening of the new University City campus with a demand for student accommodation, offer an opportunity to work with the development sector to promote housing that meets the needs

of the community. The draft Plans provide capacity for inclusion of incentives conceivably in the form of exemptions for undertaking such essential developments.

11. Regional transport

Transport planning poses many obstacles; yet, a comprehensive and feasible transportation plan for the entire region is warranted and needs to be given priority. Within the City region, the new law precinct and the opening of the University campus alone, will place a higher demand upon public transportation; yet, existing services (since the closure of the heavy rail) remain both inadequate and inefficient. Similarly, with the proposed sale of car parking land along the commercial foreshore and the potential for future development, the commercial precinct faces a significant dilemma given the dearth of transport services available to the area. In addition, many outlying areas considered in the Plan nominated as important locales maintain an extremely limited public transportation service impacting upon community integration.

12. Parameters

Although the plan considers a range of strategic areas, more detail or defined parameters would be beneficial. This is particularly true from an implementation perspective as local government will have direction through the use of established benchmarks that need to be achieved. In turn, this will provide clarity and guidance, avoid subjective interpretation; while, creating uniformity amongst implementing agencies. A standardised set of parameters is required across all areas from economic, environmental (including heritage), health and social community indicators. Again related to implementation, such parameters will guide local government towards achievable outcomes and provide transparency to the community.

13. Monitoring and reporting

In line with parameters is the need for appropriate and regular monitoring and reporting. First, there is a need for better reporting and understanding of natural hazards across the region to direct future development. Currently, policy identifies where development is to occur, yet, there is not necessarily the data to support such decision making resulting in negative environmental and social impacts. Secondly, traditional reporting has been rather undefined; whereby, areas such as construction waste management have been excluded yet contribute to significant environmental impact. It is noted that the draft Plan is to be reviewed every five years; yet, consideration should be made towards monitoring of certain parameters on an annual basis to show initial impact and direction. Responsibilities for monitoring and reporting, in conjunction with parameters need to be outlined for successful outcomes.

The abovementioned issues highlight a number of important areas for your consideration and/or attention. If you have any questions or require any further information, please contact us to discuss.

Kind regards,



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