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Online Submission from company Envisage Consulting (org_comments)

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Feb 5

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To:

Topic: HRP & scenic values

This submission focusses on the issue of scenic values in the Hunter Regional Plan (HRP).

The HRP notably mentions scenic values twice in the very first sentence: "The Hunter region has a rich and diverse natural environment, scenic landscapes, extensive resources, bustling urban environments, international industries and local character-filled communities". The document itself, however, provides limited information about where these scenic landscapes are and what should be the process.

This is concerning when frequently the number one public issue is how a new development will look, and the change to views that will occur. Key concerns such as the loss of scenic landscapes, erosion of regional town settings, views of unattractive infrastructure from our public roads, the escalating controversy over mining all relate directly to what we see and what we value.

What are the key issues?

The HRP does not have the baseline information to effectively inform the protection of scenic values and how such issues should be dealt with in local planning instruments. It is fortunate that often constraints such as native vegetation, heritage items and rural floodplains serve to conserve what we also value from a scenic point of view. For example, the rural floodplain that encircles most of the regional Hunter town of Maitland, and the western edge on Newcastle, has by default created a number of greenbelts that have prevented indefinite urban sprawl between the two towns. To the west of Maitland where there is no such floodplain, urban development is marching on into the Upper Hunter, with the historic characteristic of separate settlements in danger of being absorbed into a contiguous mass. Is this what we want?

Time and again the community rally against the loss of both our natural and cultural landscapes yet trying to put into words the essence of what the public value is problematic without the right information.

Singleton in the Hunter Valley has long been known for its attractive setting, with the town approach from the west via the vegetated McDougalls Hill, a highpoint from where first glimpses of the town can be seen below. At night the glittering town lights previously heralded its proximity and enticed the weary traveller. Now on top of this hill is a large Bunnings and an equally large car dealership complete with an elaborate sales office, with of course no trees that could affect the "exposure". This is a good example of why the HRP needs to provide the strategic direction and oversight to protect our regional town settings.

Out of all the affected Councils, the only one that has existing baseline information on scenic values is Lake Macquarie City Council with their Scenic Management Guidelines. This contrasts strongly with a lack of similar guidance in the nearby Newcastle Council area, where last year the Anzac Memorial Walk was opened as an elevated structure set atop a major coastal headland close to the city. The walkway provides panoramic views over the coast and has become very

popular with locals and visitors, however, there are also those that feel that the visual impact on the natural landscape could have been less. If a similar facility had been proposed in the nearby Lake Macquarie, the Council's Scenic Management Guidelines would have identified the headland as a "significant natural landscape feature" and triggered a requirement for a visual impact assessment. The HRP needs to provide a higher level policy that sets the basic protections for such visually important areas.

How can we do better?

The United Kingdom has a long history of identifying and protecting scenic values through an integrated system that encompasses all levels of planning from country to local. The keystone of the system is what is termed "landscape character assessment" (LCA) which is defined as "the process of identifying and describing variation in the character of the landscape. It seeks to identify and explain the unique combination of elements and features (characteristics) that make landscapes distinctive".

The LCA process is ideally first applied at a country or regional level where broad common areas are mapped and then more detail and mapping is added over time at a local level. Thus the regional planning is conducted by the UK Government and then support is given at a district and local level to undertake more targeted assessment. The benefits of this holistic approach are described: "By setting down a robust, auditable and transparent baseline Landscape Character Assessment it not only helps us to understand our landscapes, it also assists in informing judgements and decisions concerning the management of change."

In simplistic terms the UK has an overall policy that identifies what landscapes are important and this then encourages management and protection of what the community values through each level of the planning system. Its purpose is not to prevent change but instead to ensure that it is accommodated in a way that is compatible, and that what we value most is not lost. Surely this should also be a key purpose of the HRP.

Recommendations

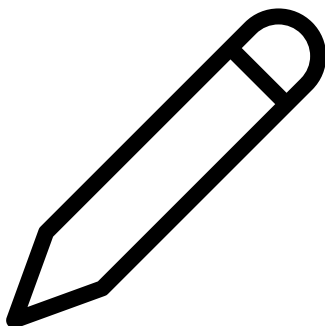
It is not a small ask to expect that we move towards a system similar to the UK, yet this is where we need to aim.

A strong, and relatively simple way to start would be to ensure that the HRP incorporates some basic planning objectives related to scenic values and management. The Lake Macquarie City Council's Scenic Management Guidelines are founded on six key objectives that could be quite easily adapted for this purpose:

- Objective 1 - Protect vegetated ridgelines and upper slopes
- Objective 2 - Retain green breaks between urban areas
- Objective 3 - Protect important natural landscape features
- Objective 4 - Ensure the built environment does not dominate natural landscape qualities in non-urban areas
- Objective 5 - New development to achieve a balance between the character of both the built and natural environment
- Objective 6 - "Protect and enhance attractive views from highly visible viewpoints."

In addition, in the Hunter we need to protect our town settings and approaches. At the very least nominate a boundary around each town and village where any development within that area must be considered with the visual effect on the town paramount.

I urge that the issue of scenic values be far more comprehensively addressed than currently occurs in the draft HRP.



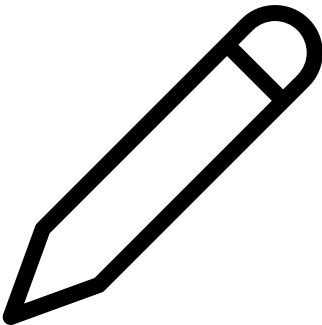
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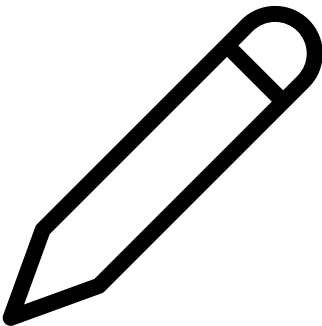
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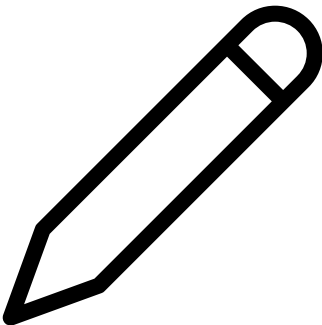
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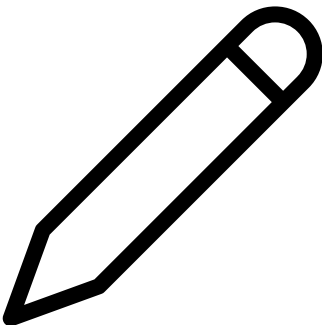
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