

The Draft Riverina-Murray Regional Plan

- Report to NSW Planning and Environment providing feedback and comment by Author Kevin Ian Linton (partner) from 'TopInfo Consulting'.

TopInfo Consulting works in the Business Management area and specialises in 'Information, Troubleshooting and Consultancy'. Kevin has qualifications and 40+ years of experience in the science and engineering fields. For Kevin's qualifications, experience and more information about TopInfo Consulting please view www.topinfo.com.au

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Colour coding:-

Example:-

Recommendation:-

Disadvantage:-



1 Disclaimer

While TopInfo Consulting has taken every care to provide the necessary information to redraft The Riverina-Murray Regional Plan, it can not state it is a complete statement of all the necessary information to do so.

2 Acknowledgement

TopInfo consulting would like to thank the Office of Planning & Infrastructure and its officers Azaria Dobson and Erin Strong for providing information and expertise on the background and intent of the Draft regional plans. In addition thanks are required for allowing additional time to submit this report.

3 Introduction

TopInfo Consulting Partner Kevin Linton was invited to attend a presentation briefing in the nearby township of Deniliquin of NSW Planning & Infrastructures Draft regional plan for the Riverina-Murray area on the sixth June 2016. Kevin attended the meeting and indicated he thought there were some fundamental problems with the Draft plans as they currently existed and undertook to submit comment and suggestions on how this plan could be improved.

This document will deal with the proposed redevelopment in three parts;

- Documentation structural flaws and ways to improve it,
- The differences between Strategic and Statutory Planning, and
- Suggestions for document format.

4 Aim

To provide feedback and comment on the Department of Planning & Infrastructure's Draft Riverina-Murray Regional Plan (Regional Plan). This Regional Plan attempts to set policy priorities for the next twenty years or so.

5 Methods

Record of Events

Drawing on TopInfo Consulting's knowledge and experience in the Strategic and Statutory Planning areas, Mr. Linton has compiled this document after reading the draft Regional Plan; attending the briefing session in Deniliquin; contacting Members of Parliament in NSW and Victoria, their offices and Planning & Environment people in Dubbo.

It is believed that the Regional Plans have been prepared as a secondary measure after legislation failed to pass government scrutiny in parliament a number of years ago. As this document deals with flaws in the Regional Plan, I tender that it should be regarded as a report capable of providing improvement and guidance to said plan when it is redrafted.

6 Strategic Verses Statutory Planning

Flaws in the Regional Plan

Unfortunately, the Regional Plan does not give a statement by the authors of the plan, whom these may be, the intent of the plan and the area covered by said plan. There was no introduction to the concepts of Strategic and Statutory Planning and there certainly was no effort to explain what should or should not be contained in the Regional Plan. I tender these concepts are all missing in the Regional Plans and any redrafting would benefit from their inclusion.

I also tender the Regional Plan would benefit from format changes including closer adherence to scientific report writing and following traditional document formats such as headings and explanations for Tables and Figures, greater use of flow charts and references to all figures (including photographs) in the body of the text.

The Regional Plan seems to be a document written by government officers, about government issues and really has few references to the role of the private sector even though it seems to have almost total reliance upon this sector to achieve the aims of the Regional Plan. The disconnect between the government and private sectors (as demonstrated in this document) is staggering as large glossy photographs herald the role of which sector will drive the Regional Plan, but there is no mention of how this will be achieved and what will happen if economic activity is greater or less than anticipated.

Without clear delineation of these sectors and the different roles they play in the Regional Plan, I really think such a plan is doomed to failure from the start. There almost seems to be ‘an air’ of government possession of all aspects in the Regional Plan and absolutely no mention of how the aims of the plan and any support (I assume there will be some from government) will be provided. Any organisation in the private sector understands that plans need to be costed, timelines provided and at a minimum, estimates scenarios provided in situations where benchmarks are not meet. I am afraid these concepts are all lacking in this plan and it is the poorer for not having them.

Where there is text, it is long and tedious on the justification of why certain ideas have been included in the plan and precious little on other important concepts of timelines, costings, benchmarks and even alternative visions and the reasons for their exclusion.

Good and Bad Aspects of the Regional Plan

As a Regional Plan, much of the information provided is good and well documented. However, there are omissions (as documented above). The strategy has some of the information required but does not include different aspects to ensure complete confidence in the plan. The format to deliver the contained information has a lot to be desired as it is not consistent and predictable enough within and between chapters to make the reader comfortable with the content.

Although the text is good, it is ‘long winded’ and not succinct. I believe the document would benefit from an editorial overview that would tighten the word and paragraph structure and remove unnecessary and obvious information. This would allow the reader to concentrate on the key focus areas of the content.

Graphic maps, photographs and some figures are good, but often they are too large and occupy larges components of digital file content making the document too large to transfer and download easily. I suggest that greater emphasis should be put on use of Flow Charts, dot points and a referencing system involving numbering and colour coding to provide additional information ‘outside’ the body of the text and in appendices. With such documents it is necessary to make use

of all available tools to ensure the reader can follow and understand what the intent of the author is fully. Unfortunately, this has not been achieved in this document and it loses its impact as a result. Of course any information provided in the introductory area will also aid this process.

In addition more use should be made of graphs and tables as these are excellent ways of disseminating information. Any Table or Figure should be accompanied with headings either above or below with a statement of content and each one needs to be mentioned with an explanation in the body of the text.

(e.g. **Table 1.** Transport Alternatives and Their Costs; Table 1. Indicates the costs estimated to be incurred if alternatives are adopted and implemented at years 2025 and 2035).

7 Roles of Strategic and Statutory Planning

The NSW department of Planning and Infrastructure has roles of overseeing both Strategic and Statutory Planning in the community. Unfortunately, this department has forgotten the basic premise of not assuming everybody understands their role in government generally and the community. The roles of these two different aspects of Planning and the function of the department that oversee this planning needs to be explained with a statement or two.

Strategic Planning Role

Strategic Planning by definition should be broad based, but allow hundreds of alternative priorities be narrowed into a dozen or so areas that eventually constitute policy. It is not the aim of Strategic Planning to stifle areas of economic or social development in preference to a selected few priorities on a priority list, but to highlight the areas which should provide the state with community and economic benefit. Often it is a case of optimum benefit, but there also needs to be recognition that government is not always good at ‘picking winners’.

Priorities of Strategic Planning should be the core values of;

1. Environment,
2. Social Values, and
3. Infrastructure.

In each of these areas Strategic Planning needs to encourage;

- Efficient utilisation,
- Protection,
- Maintenance, and
- Improvement of these core values so that human, other species and the physical environment are enhanced into the future for others to enjoy.

Strategic Planning should not only state the obvious, but have an element of aspiration for the future. Such a policy may include different benchmark levels of achievement or timescales;

1. Base level, (1);
2. Average level, (2); and
3. Excellent level, (3).

Of course attainment of such results will be dependent upon;

- Community capacity to change,
- State and world economic situation,
- Technological development, and

- Loss of tangible (population growth rates) and intangible capital (environmental values) employed to the task.

For example, infrastructure; transport:

- Continue to maintain and upgrade road systems around the state, but at a reduced rate. Transfer an increased rate of financial resources into the Newell Highway corridor with emphasis to be placed on dual carriageway roads, a rail system and airport access (1).
- Increased resources to be directed to freight transport by railway from north to south and east to west. We suggest that new rail freight infrastructure to be built within 10 years adjacent to the Newell Highway corridor to link Brisbane with the Port of Melbourne (2).
- With options to incorporate 4-5 new cities along railway route (2) and an extension of passenger services within 20-30 years of project commencement (3).

Strategic advantages include;

1. Relative flat and treeless plains that would allow quick construction and cost benefits of 1 in 20 to 1 in 30 that of attempting to build such infrastructure in hilly and treed areas,
2. Energy provision for inland areas could come from fracking coalbed areas as abundant coal reserves exist in area,
3. Water is available from river systems currently supplying agricultural areas,
4. Area is underutilised and would benefit from such strategic development, and
5. Decentralisation away from coastal fringe with opportunities for additional growth into the future.

Australian Demographic

Strategic Planning policies should reflect future demographics and encourage growth in favourable areas. Economic activity will follow population growth and private sector growth is of prime importance. Where Strategic Planning policies are reliant upon private sector growth due emphasis in planning documents need to be allocated to these private sector aspects.

A sensible approach for the adoption of Strategic Plans in NSW is to have a common format across the state and then when this has been agreed upon as a template to incorporate local aspects into regional documents such as the Draft Riverina-Murray Regional Strategic Plan.

Environmental Capital

There is increasing emphasis on intangible capital and assets in the community that have not been valued correctly and been relatively ignored historically. There is now a growing recognition that health and social wellbeing is highly dependent upon good environmental values in the community. However, environmental values are not yet factored into economic indices and it is becoming increasingly evident that Environmental Capital and the values they represent will continue to decline and be destroyed until they are valued economically in economic indices such as Growth Rate and Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Strategic Planning policy already endeavours to protect and enhance the environment for;

- Future generations to enjoy,
- Improve health and social values, and
- To ensure multifactor economic growth essentially dependent upon the environment can continue without collapse.

TopInfo Consulting believes that Strategic Planning policy should work toward recognition and adoption of International recognised economic indices that incorporate environmental values. This will be a major shift in policy. However, Economists, environmentalists and other sections of the community have been debating and recommending the adoption of such policies of a couple of generations now. This cannot be done unilaterally but needs International support and agreement with a coalition of governments agreeing to such a proposal. However we do suggest that such policies need to be imbedded into Strategic Planning documents to kick-start the process and for this reason we would like this policy to appear in the next Strategic Plans.

Statutory Planning Role

Statutory Planning on the other hand is where rule based codified policies are subjected to development proposals. Such applications are subjected to scrutiny by Local Government Planning Departments and either approved, refused or approved subject to changes. Planning Applications need to be documented, are circulated to Referral Authorities for comment and have time limits for assessment to ensure expediency of the assessment. A characteristic of Statutory Planning is that areas of high strategic interest (e.g. waterways and key features of the environment) have stringent criteria to be met and those of less strategic interest (e.g. farm land) have lesser criteria. The role of Statutory Planning is to ensure Public and community assets are protected or maintained and not degraded (e.g. the environment and historic public buildings).

Statutory Planning and the tools at its disposal (as set out by legislation) have the ability to both encourage prioritised development and in other instances discourage unwanted development.

Regulations associated with such planning need to have;

- Efficient delivery within specific timelines,
- A transparent rule based methodology,
- Clear guidelines so that applicants and planners both understand procedures,
- Penalties for breach of procedures and Planning Permits,
- Enforcement of rules and regulations,
- Appeal mechanism to settle disputes.

It may also be a good idea to indicate what is not covered by Statutory Planning regulations and codified Law.

Strategic and Statutory Planning Failures

The NSW Department of Planning & Infrastructure have stated that the Regional Plan as it exists, incorporates elements of both Strategic and Statutory Planning and for this reason it is confusing to understand and does not ‘do justice’ to either aspect of Planning.

TopInfo Consulting suggests that these components should be separated into separate documents and clearly labelled and prescribed as such. Essentially, a document outlining Strategic Planning needs to be written and adopted prior to any Statutory Planning document and legislation being prepared.

8 Consequences of not Redrafting Regional Plans

If the Department of Planning & Infrastructure choose to adopt the current Regional Plan with only minor changes and not restructure the document, the department ‘run the risk’ of having a disaster on their hands. Without restructuring the document will not have the emphasis nor direction

required of a Strategic Planning document and will probably result in confusion and run the risk of imperilling the policy area for an extended period.

Proposed Method to Deal With Redraft

Assuming the documents across NSW regions will be redrafted TopInfo Consulting suggests the following procedure;

1. Provide three consultants the task of writing a format report with suggested generic policies,
2. Subject these to scrutiny by a designated committee of government after consultants have presented and supported their reasons of various policy inclusions,
3. Ask one consultant to amalgamate the documents so that the best possible strategy document is created. This document will form the basis for all regional strategies across NSW,
4. Write regional plans including Draft Riverina-Murray Regional Strategic Plan,
5. Subject these Regional Plans to local scrutiny by local business and Authorities and redraft into a final versions.

9 Conclusion

I am afraid that if the following the method of setting priorities and format of Regional Strategic plans by a joint committee comprised of government departments without drafting a document by one group or a consultant (no matter how well intentioned) will result in the following scenario;

If a committee is given the task to design a thoroughbred horse, it will probably come up with a design of a...camel!

The reasons for such an analogy include people with specialist skills that all believe their area of expertise to be the most important, a silo mentality and individuals not having the necessary, generalist skills, experience and knowhow to think and act will sufficient integration into the broad communities aspirations and dreams. TopInfo Consulting believes the analogy to be accurate.

10 Summary

The report indicates that the author believes there is essentially a fundamental problem how the draft Riverina-Murray Regional Strategic Plan has been written and that unless rewritten to incorporate separate plans for Statutory Planning and a better format that the intended purpose will not be attained; Good strategic policy and planning.

In addition the author believes the existing document does not include sufficient policy initiatives to satisfy the title of 'Strategic plan' nor does it have benchmarks, timelines and costings to enable some sort of assessment on whether such policies are achievable or not.

Signed on behalf of TopInfo Consulting:

Date:

Signed and Dated: 3/8/2016, K.I.L.

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