

Smart rural planning and how it could alleviate the water crisis

The SEQ Regional Plan contains prescriptive elements that are contributing to the water crisis.

Since 1992 the state government's uncompromising attitude towards the prevention of fragmentation of rural land by subdivision has not resulted in increasing or even maintaining rural production in SEQ.

Turning off the tap on rural subdivision such as the creation of rural homesite and family transfer allotments or masterplanned developments designed to be totally self sustaining with respect to water has led to increased population pressure on areas within designated urban footprints as well as putting unnecessary demands on water resources.

The restriction of subdivision and urban development to within urban footprints has and will increasingly lead to negative impacts on the social and economic fabric of SEQ's rural communities.

Forcing everyone into urban footprints is exacerbating the current water crisis. People seeking to reside in rural living areas have no expectation with respect to connection to reticulated water and accept that they have to be self sufficient. Allowing, and even encouraging, low density subdivision or water efficient master planned developments in rural areas will assist to ease the water crisis.

The proposed Links project in Montville was a good example of a masterplanned development that was designed to be self sustainable with respect to water. The project was extensively evaluated and then approved by the Maroochy Shire Council and subsequently canned by the Premier on the basis of a rushed and flawed report prepared by Parsons Brinckerhoff.

The Links project was refused by the Premier before the water crises became evident. This project needs to be revisited and fine-tuned if necessary. Senior management personnel from Parsons Brinckerhoff have acknowledged shortcomings in their report and have indicated interest in working with the applicants to achieve a world's best practice outcome that could provide a blueprint for residential communities that will not require access to already stretched and inadequate water supply infrastructure.

There needs to be a broader understanding and acceptance of what is an appropriate rural activity in peri-urban areas outside urban footprints. Occupiers of land in such areas that are not in any way participating in primary production or pursuing the sort of rural activity envisaged by the OUM's Rural Futures vision can and do make a considerable contribution to the viability and liveability of rural communities situated outside urban footprints..

It was not so long ago that the majority of planning schemes attempted to segregate commercial activities from residential uses. Now it is accepted practice to encourage mixed use residential and commercial development in village, town or city centres. Encouragement is even extended to residents and business operators to pursue 'green' activities in urban and CBD areas. This can often extend beyond ornamental plantings to actual food producing crops. A similar acceptance of an appropriate balance of mixed use rural, commercial and residential uses outside urban footprints would be in sympathy with this approach.

It has been argued that adoption of an increased density of rural living will lead to a loss of rural landscape amenity. This may not necessarily be the case. For example over the last 30 years on the Blackall Range in both Maroochy Shire and Caloundra City there has been a noticeable increase in reforested areas at the expense of open grasslands. It is questionable whether this has detracted from or enhanced the rural landscape. Measures that can be adopted to preserve the rural landscape include:

- A requirement that houses be set back from roads where land parcels have road frontages.
- Encouraging easement access to rural homesites remote from roads.

- Environmental easements or covenants along road frontages.

Rural planning regulations need to be amended to accommodate those that might desire to become part of a rural community without being forced to live within an urban footprint and who do not want to assume the financial burden of surviving on an income derived by rural production.

Until the adoption of the 1992 State Planning Policy No.1 on the preservation of good quality agricultural land many if not most local authorities in SEQ allowed the creation of rural homesite or family transfer lots. This did not lead to large scale and immediate changes to the rural landscape amenity. To the contrary it allowed rural areas to organically replenish themselves with minimal impact. There was a demand for these blocks of land by people that desired to experience and enjoy the rural lifestyle. It was a desirable alternative to living in suburban housing estates or mixed use commercial and residential areas.

Forcing all new home building into designated urban footprints has and will continue to have an enormous negative impact on land prices and housing affordability. Recent research on land markets across the developed world support this. Until the 1990's it was always a feasible low cost alternative for people to establish homes in rural areas on inexpensive and unserviced rural homesite blocks. This lifestyle choice is now denied to those who most need it.

Regional landscape and rural production do not have to be so closely tied together. An increase in very low density rural living need not detract from the regional landscape, it can enhance it. Also it may not even negatively impact on rural production. The Bureau of Statistics has released figures showing a surprisingly high proportion of agricultural production is generated from peri-urban areas.

The generally over-simplistic and negative approach to development proposals outside urban footprints not only results in hardship to long term residents but fails to take into account that there may be innovative land use solutions that offer environmental and economic benefits above and beyond the limited visions contained in the SEQ Regional Plan.

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17 April 2007