

“In the saddle or the burr underneath” – the role of Regional Organisations of Councils in metropolitan planning.

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ABSTRACT

The governance frameworks of major Australian cities are characterised by a high degree of fragmentation, with responsibilities spread across three levels of government, a range of departments and dozens of local councils.

No one has overall responsibility for managing the city and this is nowhere more apparent than in relation to metropolitan planning and infrastructure provision. Planning the city is both a marginal activity in terms of its status within state governments and at the same time contested between levels of government, usually state and local.

In Sydney, one result has been a series of planning strategies which were started with ambitions that were often not possible to fulfil. These fragmented governance frameworks have also been challenged by the continued expansion of Australia’s major cities in the post-war era. This growth has for the most part been poorly supported by minimal infrastructure provision, imposing enormous social, environmental and economic costs on residents in these areas.

In response to these challenges a number of less formal governance arrangements have been created, which can be characterised as “soft” forms of cooperation, rather than “hard” metropolitan institutions. Some of these new structures have a regional focus, such as the Regional Organisations of Councils or ROCs which first emerged in response to the Whitlam Government’s engagement with urban policy in the 1970s.

This paper draws on both research and the experience of the author’s involvement with WSROC for over 14 years to survey the attempts of these regional organisations and in particular the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils to overcome fragmentation and the urban planning “deficit”¹. The ROCs have both challenged the formal governance institutions and attempted to provide an interface between them with the aim of overcoming the historic patterns of underinvestment in infrastructure and services especially in areas of major population growth.

In light of these experiences this paper examines whether ROCs as “soft” institutions can achieve and maintain a more direct role as representatives of local government in the strategic planning process. It will also discuss whether changes are required to ROCs and other institutions of governance to more successfully manage our cities and deliver better planning outcomes.

¹ As well as any references cited, this paper draws on the author’s own experience with the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils (WSROC) Ltd. Whilst he has represented WSROC in some of the events and policy debates discussed in this paper, the views expressed here are the author’s own and not necessarily those of WSROC.

1. INTRODUCTION

Australia's cities have been described as among the most suburbanised as well as the most fragmented in terms of urban governance in the world (Kübler, 2005)²², so it is not surprising that a range of networking and cooperative structures have been established by local government to deal with these challenges.

These structures have included county councils, waste boards, catchment organisations and regional Organisations of Councils (ROCs). Unlike some of the other networking structures, ROCs are entirely voluntary groupings of councils which are multi-purpose in nature but which usually do not possess any statutory authority. Activities undertaken by ROCs include information exchange, coordination, resource sharing, project management, partnership building and regional advocacy (Marshall et al, 2003; Gibbs et al, 2002).

Fragmentation and suburbanisation also present particular challenges in managing the continued growth of Sydney and Brisbane. In these cities, Regional Organisations of Councils, WSROC in Western Sydney and SEQROC in Brisbane, have both engaged in the metropolitan planning process. However, whilst WSROC has been successful in advocacy on behalf of the region in seeking to overcome the consequences of poor planning, its engagement in the planning process itself has had more mixed results.

The starting point for this paper is an overview of the interaction between fragmentation, suburbanisation and strategic planning in shaping the development of Western Sydney in the post-war era. The role of local government in these processes is examined and in particular the impact of WSROC and its success or otherwise in moving from advocacy to direct engagement in the planning process.

Finally this paper discusses what changes ROCs will have to make if they are to assume and retain a seat in the planning "saddle" instead of continuing their role as the advocacy "burr" underneath; in other words, whether the informal networking nature of ROCs can succeed in representing regional and local government interests in formal urban planning processes.

2. FRAGMENTATION AND SUBURBANISATION IN WESTERN SYDNEY

Many commentators (eg, Gleeson and Randolph, 2002; Randolph, 2003; Kübler, 2005) have described the relentless expansion of Australia's cities since World War 2 and particularly the continued growth and suburbanisation of Western Sydney.

The process of suburbanisation has also contributed to the fragmentation of metropolitan governance structures and in particular those of local government. One measure of fragmentation is the number of councils within each capital city, or its corollary, the average population of each council. In 2001 Sydney had 45 councils with an average population of fewer than 88,000. With the exception of Brisbane, which has the least fragmented governance structure, Australian cities are described as being three to ten times more fragmented than their counterparts in comparable OECD countries (Kübler, 2005).

Although Sydney City Council's original 1842 boundaries were outgrown by the 1900s, attempts to form a "Greater Sydney" were defeated in the early part of the century. A much more modest expansion of the central city occurred along with small-scale amalgamations throughout the County of Cumberland in the 1940s, reducing the number of councils from 70 to 41 (Golder, 2001; Ashton, 2003).

²² The author would like to thank Assoc. Prof Daniel Kübler for permission to quote from a draft of this paper

In Brisbane, however, the amalgamation movement was much more successful. In 1924 twenty council areas were amalgamated to form the current Brisbane City area, which remains by far the largest council by population in Australia. The resulting “clout” of the city council was to have a major impact on local government’s ability to engage in the planning of the wider South East Queensland region, a point that will be returned to later.

In the post-war era, suburban expansion has added to the complexity of governance in Sydney. The western councils of the County of Cumberland were little more than rural villages in the 1940s; today Greater Western Sydney has a population of 1.8 million spread across 14 council areas.

The multiplicity of councils is only one aspect of governance fragmentation. A study undertaken for WSROC in 1996 revealed that there were over 30 frequently overlapping state and federal government strategies, plans and policies relating to Greater Western Sydney, many of which operated in isolation from each other (Albany Consulting Group, 1997). Whilst some of these may have been established even if institutional arrangements were not so fragmented, their multiplicity suggests an institutional vacuum. As early as 1976 Lang had observed this phenomenon:

“The general solution has been to form ad hoc authorities to deal with a particular issue as soon as the problem becomes too difficult for the responsible level of government to cope with, rather than examining methods of reform and updating existing representative government institutions.” (Lang, 1976: 7)

Today Sydney still has 43 councils. Whilst this is not necessarily a problem in itself, this level of fragmentation makes it much more difficult for local government to engage strategically in metropolitan planning. There is also no one body, elected or otherwise, with a specific mandate to manage or plan the city on a metropolitan or even sub-regional basis.

3. METROPOLITAN PLANNING AND WESTERN SYDNEY

It has been claimed that in the absence of metropolitan-wide institutional governance, Australia’s cities have relied on strategic planning to “...steer their development in an area-wide perspective” (Kübler, 2005: 21). It can be argued, however, that in the face of institutional fragmentation “strategic” planning has had at best a mixed record in delivering effective outcomes, especially for outer suburban areas which have experienced a number of major failures in infrastructure and services provision in the wake of the suburban expansion described earlier. In response, councils in regions such as Western Sydney began to develop collective responses to advocate for better resource allocation including, ultimately, the formation of Regional Organisations of Councils (ROCs).

Before discussing the formation and role of ROCs, it is useful to briefly survey Sydney’s metropolitan strategies prior to the current strategy in terms of their impact on Western Sydney.

The County of Cumberland Plan (1951) has been described as a “...classically modernist and interventionist plan, framed by a strong spatial vision” (McGuirk, 2005: 62). It was also significant for the strong role the State Government gave to councils in the process through the establishment of the Cumberland County Council, comprising representation from councils in the metropolitan area.

The Cumberland Plan identified a green belt to limit urban expansion and encourage more compact development as well as to prevent the alienation of agricultural land, which was then most of Western Sydney west of Parramatta (Winston, 1957). The Cumberland Plan was unable to “hold the line”, with the green belt eventually scrapped under the pressure of the post-war population boom, thus opening Western Sydney up for development. Another contributing factor to the demise of the

Cumberland Plan was the lack of cooperation by State Government departments with the County Council because of its local government base (Powell, 2003).

Although local government had lobbied for the County Council model it eventually became disillusioned with its operation and resentful at its centralised control. Planners participating in the County Council in turn became disillusioned with the parochialism of the councils (Lang, 1976). Despite this, the County Council model represented a high water mark of direct local government engagement in Sydney's strategic planning that was never matched in the city's subsequent metropolitan strategies.

The State government dissolved the Cumberland County Council in 1962 and established the NSW State Planning Authority (SPA) in 1963, which prepared the Sydney Region Outline Plan (SROP – 1968). The SPA was a more “traditional” centralist planning body; local government was represented but was in a minority (Lang, 1976).

Unlike the Cumberland Plan, SROP had an explicit agenda of supporting metropolitan expansion into Western Sydney, identifying growth corridors and major release areas including Campbelltown and Mt Druitt. SROP also determined the framework for Western Sydney's expansion for the next 30 years, identifying release areas that were taken up in subsequent strategies, such as the North West Sector.

However, the SPA's “relatively junior status” in the State Government's departmental hierarchy (NSW PEC, 1980) meant it fared little better than its predecessor in ensuring the provision of essential infrastructure, with proposals to lock the planning process into the budgetary cycle dropped from the final plan (Powell, 2003). This entrenched Western Sydney's pattern of continued population growth combined with infrastructure under-provision and heavy dependence on the car to access basic services.

In the 1970s the SPA was restructured as the NSW Planning and Environment Commission (PEC). In 1980 the PEC was abolished and metropolitan-wide planning became a direct responsibility of government with the formation of the Department of Environment and Planning and has remained so ever since.³ As a consequence, local government lost its seat at the strategic planning table.

The strategies from the 1980s onwards were developed in a very different social and economic climate from the 1951 and 1968 plans. The technocratic mode of these earlier plans was increasingly challenged by rising environmental awareness and demands for greater community input (McGuirk, 2005). However, by the early 1980s these concerns were themselves subsumed by the rise of neo-liberalist economics and the associated pressures of globalisation (Wilmoth, 2003), with mixed results for Western Sydney. The region experienced strong economic growth, but there was now a complete “disconnect” of strategic planning from the budget process:

“Growth areas are defined on the fringe with the north-west sector (Rouse Hill) identified for early development although no means of funding infrastructure are identified... As is now apparent there was no metropolitan budget and no means of funding the infrastructure necessary for new urban development or redevelopment... Rouse Hill was starved of funding and meanwhile was becoming a planning catastrophe of considerable magnitude.” (Toon and Falk, 2003:132, in relation to *Sydney into its Third Century*)

³ Later Department of Planning, then Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, then Planning NSW, then Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources and now Department of Planning again.... For the sake of simplicity, references to “the department” should be taken as referring to whatever name is/was current in the period being referred to. Likewise the generic term “planning minister” is used, as the relevant minister's title has also changed several times.

One result was increasing social and economic polarisation along spatial lines within the region (Gleeson and Randolph, 2002). Although the changing nature of metropolitan planning was not solely to blame, its retreat from a strong spatial basis certainly contributed by exacerbating the imbalance in infrastructure investment between eastern and Western Sydney (WSROC, 1994a, 1994b; Searle, 2002).

Although there were some attempts to redress this issue in the strategies of the 1980s and 1990s, such as the identification of equity as a goal in the 1995 strategy, *Cities for the 21st Century* and the release of a document specifically for Western Sydney to complement the 1998 strategy (*Shaping Western Sydney*), these were undermined by the continued inability to fully implement the identified actions. Local government also continued to be given a largely subordinate role.

PlanFirst, the NSW Government's abandoned first attempt to develop a successor to the 1998 strategy, was initiated in 2001. Unlike its predecessors it attempted to create a specifically regional approach to planning, proposing to divide NSW into 16 regions, each with a separate plan. The process of developing these regional plans was to have been overseen by regional forums involving government, council and community representatives.

Sydney would have been divided into three or four regions, including a Western Sydney region, but with little in the way of an overarching metropolitan strategy. Councils, community groups and the development industry strongly criticised elements of PlanFirst, though for widely different reasons. Local government, for example, protested at the fact that council representatives would be a minority on the regional forums (WSROC, 2001, LGSA, 2003); whilst the development industry wanted to restrict the scope of the PlanFirst process (Khan and Piracha, 2003).

The then planning minister established a taskforce to review PlanFirst, which concluded that "... [PlanFirst] was both ambitious and attempted to go beyond what the environmental planning system could and should do in NSW" (DIPNR, 2003: 6). The taskforce recommended scrapping the regional forums and the systematic roll-out of regional strategies, proposing that DIPNR should instead prepare "non-statutory regional strategies" (DIPNR, 2003:17) and develop a new Metropolitan Strategy. Almost all the review's recommendations were adopted by the State Government (DIPNR, 2004a).

During the PlanFirst era, investigations of options for expansion in the north west and south west were commenced (Planning NSW, 2003). These "investigations" quickly concluded that up to 160,000 additional dwellings could be accommodated across both release areas – a proposal with obvious implications for Western Sydney. The rationale for this scale of development was the need to secure land supply for the city's growth until 2030.

The structure plans, which are at the time of writing are on exhibition, differ in several key ways from their predecessors. They are strongly spatial, detailing not only which areas will be required for development and the infrastructure required, but also describing precincts, housing densities, transport facilities and services and the location of shopping centres. They outline how this infrastructure is to be funded, with 75% to come from the development contributions and balance from the NSW government, as well proposing a Growth Centres Commission as the governance infrastructure for the release areas (DIPNR, 2005).

Although smaller in scale and funded by the development itself rather than through consolidated revenue, the structure plans are much more like the traditional "blueprint" plans of the County of Cumberland era than its successors. They have also have had stronger local government involvement than most of the plans since the County of Cumberland. However, given that the 1998 strategy was of limited usefulness in updating dwelling and population targets, there is little in the

way of a strategic context for the development of these plans. Despite better investment in infrastructure, they are also likely to contribute further social and economic polarisation within Western Sydney as the costs of housing in the release area will preclude low-income residents.

4. WSROC'S RESPONSE TO METROPOLITAN PLANNING

WSROC was created in 1973, five years after the release of the *Sydney Region Outline Plan*, largely as a result of the Whitlam Labor government's engagement in urban issues and regional development. The failure to provide infrastructure to support population growth was already evident and WSROC has led the region's response to these issues ever since – a major reason it is one of the few ROCs established in the Whitlam era to survive to the present day (Marshall et al, 2003).

Through the 1980s and 1990s WSROC tried to deal with these challenges in a number of ways, responding at specific failures to deliver urban infrastructure or services. As noted earlier, ROCs do not have any statutory authority and the organisation relied at first on traditional advocacy and submission-writing techniques, utilising whatever opportunities were available to challenge policies and influence the development of metropolitan strategies. In other words, WSROC initially became the “burr under the saddle”, trying to influence strategic planning but not seeking a direct role in its development.

The Western Sydney Vision Statement (1994)

WSROC first proposed getting into the strategic planning “saddle” with its response to the development of the 1995 strategy, *Cities for the 21st Century* (WSROC, 1994a). As part of this WSROC developed a vision statement, *Western Sydney - a Vision for the Next 20 Years* (WSROC, 1994b) which attempted to articulate in a more “user-friendly” way what the region could look like in 2014 as a basis for prioritising government planning and projects.

WSROC also proposed an alternative, region-based model for metropolitan planning. This included a Metropolitan Strategy Taskforce, similar in make-up to some current proposals for a Planning Commission (Spiller, 2004, 2005, Kübler, 2005), with overall responsibility for the metropolitan strategy. This would be replicated at the regional level with Regional Planning Committees, dominated by council and ROC membership but with representatives of government agencies and the community sector. Separate boards would be established for transport and economic development (WSROC, 1994b).

Although none of these proposals was incorporated in the 1995 strategy, WSROC's advocacy had some modest successes in influencing government policy and the organisation also became the first local government group to address the newly-formed Urban Policy Committee of Cabinet. The 1995 strategy also included proposals for such meetings to continue, but its implementation was cut short by the change in government at the 1995 election.

TeamWest (1997-2002)

In 1997 WSROC sought to deal directly with the issue of the region's fragmented governance framework. Responding to the issues identified by Albany Consulting (1997) referred to earlier, WSROC initiated the development of TeamWest, a “virtual organisation” comprising 12 key regional and subregional stakeholders.

The TeamWest process revolved around the preparation of a Regional Agenda, which attempted to “identify common goals and priorities” as a basis for joint advocacy of these to State and Federal Governments (TeamWest, 1997:1). The first agenda was developed from the outcomes of the inaugural TeamWest regional conference held in 1996. The process had some successes; the first

and most enduring of these was the appointment of a Minister for Western Sydney and the establishment of the Office of Western Sydney in 1997 in response to lobbying by TeamWest.

Whilst this gave the region a focal point for advocacy to the State Government, it proved only partially successful in coordinating the government's responses, particularly in relation to strategic planning. As the region's government "partner" in the TeamWest process, the Office of Western Sydney, did not have enough authority to coerce other departments into responding to TeamWest regional agendas, though it was successful in highlighting resourcing issues through its publication of responses to the agendas.

WSROC was also directly consulted in the preparation of *Shaping Western Sydney*, discussed earlier, which incorporated many of the 1997 regional agenda recommendations. This revealed one limitation of the regional agenda process as well as, by implication, the 1998 strategy itself. The regional agendas produced by TeamWest were not intended to be comprehensive strategic planning documents; they were, essentially, a structured list of priorities for the region responding to the consequences of a *lack* of planning and infrastructure investment in the region. They also attempted to target a much wider range of government activity.

Despite its relative sophistication, TeamWest ultimately became a model for regional advocacy, not for seeking engagement in strategic planning. While it was an example of a negotiated partnership which assisted in the management of the region, TeamWest spread itself too broadly. It ultimately failed to produce demonstrable major changes "on the ground" quickly enough and lost momentum. This was not aided by the abolition or dissolution, for unrelated reasons, of four of the 12 TeamWest members. Tensions also emerged between the local government members and the community based ones over the direction of TeamWest, especially the extent to which it should prioritise strategic over community services planning.

FutureWest (2001-2005)

A regional planning framework, initiated, funded and prepared by local government, was first proposed because of the frustration of WSROC and its member councils at the lack of a coherent and relevant metropolitan planning process after the relative "non-event" of the 1998 strategy. This was WSROC's most explicit attempt to take a place in the planning "saddle", moving from advocacy for the region to direct action, though FutureWest was never intended to be a complete strategic plan in its own right.

The Greater Western Sydney Regional Planning and Management Framework (later called FutureWest) was initiated in 2001. The framework's development involved WSROC, all 11 of its member councils and the Macarthur Regional Organisation of Councils (MACROC) and two of its councils. The process commenced with research into the issues affecting the region and local areas and the development of a vision statement setting out the strategic direction for regional spatial planning. A regional strategy was then developed, proposing policy responses for ten strategic directions and a framework developed for regional management and performance assessment.

Apart from being more explicitly aimed at strategic planning, FutureWest differs from TeamWest in several significant ways. First, it involved the commissioning of extensive external research on key policy areas, something that was not possible given the limited resources of the TeamWest process; second, whilst there were opportunities for community input, FutureWest is a much more explicitly local government process; and third, FutureWest has a stronger and more integrated spatial planning basis.

The subsequent commencement of PlanFirst (see earlier discussion) in 2001 changed the focus for FutureWest, increasing its relevance as an advocacy model. Local government had expressed

concerns that councils were going to be very much in the minority on the regional forums developing the PlanFirst regional strategies. WSROC and the councils reaffirmed the view that a regional planning framework developed and led by councils would be the best way of getting local government's concerns incorporated into the PlanFirst process. To quote *FutureWest*:

"The impetus for this project stemmed from the emphasis being placed on regional plans in the restructuring of the NSW environmental planning system and the recognition that a coherent regional framework is an essential element in regional advocacy and coordination. Previous planning has led to a lack of co-ordination, deficits in the provision of infrastructure, suburbanisation of population but not employment and did not adequately value the environmental qualities of the region." (WSROC, 2005: 6)

WSROC successfully negotiated with DIPNR for the Department to jointly fund several of the research projects that underpin *FutureWest*. However, whilst WSROC provided input to the PlanFirst process and like other ROCs assisted in nominating proposed representatives to the Regional Forums, PlanFirst was effectively discontinued before *FutureWest* could have a substantial impact on it.

5. REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND THE METROPOLITAN STRATEGY

After the demise of PlanFirst, the State Government commenced development of the current Metropolitan Strategy. This coincided with the creation of a "mega-department" – the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources – and in parallel to the planning reform process which had also commenced under PlanFirst. These initiatives were part of an ambitious attempt by the State Government to overcome traditional departmental silos, link planning, budgeting and implementation and streamline the approvals process. However, the restructure and associated cost-cutting measures as well as changes in staff complicated and ultimately delayed the Metropolitan Strategy's release.

The strategy was initiated in May 2004 with the first "Sydney Futures Forum", which involved representatives from the State Government, councils, the private sectors and the community, who discussed issues relating to growth management, the environment, employment, transport and infrastructure funding and financing. The Sydney Futures Forum was followed in June 2004 by a local government forum which discussed the role of councils and the spatial impacts of these issues across the Greater Metropolitan Region.

As Kübler notes (2005), there was a major disjuncture between the relative openness of this consultation phase for the current strategy and the closed, more hierarchical "black box" way in which the actual decisions about it have been made within government. A particular aspect of this has been limited ongoing engagement with local government. Whilst local government was collectively consulted at the first local government forum, its later involvement has been more ad hoc and complicated by several factors including the ongoing planning reform process.

Amongst other things the planning reforms give wider powers to the planning minister to "call in" certain developments. A detailed discussion of the reform process is beyond the scope of this paper, but these changes had the effect of antagonising local government, particularly in the absence of a strategic planning framework to justify the minister's decisions. They also reinforce perceptions that local government's powers should only be primarily concerned with implementing a planning process determined by a "higher" sphere of government and with facilitating economic growth at the expense of the environment, local amenity or the concerns of affected residents.

Another factor was DIPNR's initial attempt to identify sub-regions, a tacit concession that some spatial differentiation was required within the metropolitan area. Whilst the concept was laudable

the boundaries proposed bore no relationship to ROC areas or other communities of interest and the purpose of these sub-regions was not defined, leading to their rejection by councils.

In the months following the first local government forum there was little in the way of strategic engagement with local government and virtually none with ROCs. WSROC continued work on *FutureWest* and by early 2004 finished research work and completed a consultation draft. Whilst much of this material was presented to DIPNR and used in the strategy process, DIPNR seemed to resist any notion of adopting any form of partnership with WSROC, seeming to prefer a place-based management approach involving selected councils.

A discussion paper which outlined key directions for the strategy was released in September 2004. Whilst this contained revised sub-regions which were more acceptable to local government, at least in Western Sydney, it still did not define their purpose. The role of councils in the strategy's implementation was still very vague and seemed to perpetuate the marginal role of councils, being described as follows:

“Where local government is best placed to implement aspects of the Strategy it will lead the task” (DIPNR, 2004:22).

At this stage WSROC started discussing with the other ROCs in the metropolitan region ways in which local government might be given a greater role in the planning process. The ROCs and many councils were increasingly concerned that the strategy would be released as a *fait accompli* with councils seen merely as vehicles for implementation.

In November 2004 five of the six Sydney metropolitan ROCs combined to host a forum on the strategy, with the theme of “building a true local-State Government partnership”. The then Planning Minister was invited to speak, along with the former Lord Mayor of Brisbane, who discussed the success of the SEQ2001 planning strategy for southeast Queensland (see later section).

The proposal for a partnership between state and local government based on the SEQ model was supported at the forum. This outcome initially provoked conflict with the minister, but the proposal was endorsed by local government at the department's own forum a few days later. In a symbolic act, the mayors and councillors attending the second forum refused to break up into the groupings proposed by the department for detailed workshops, insisting instead that they be grouped on the basis of “their” boundaries, ie, those of the ROCs.

The process gathered momentum with the support of the President of the Local Government Association (LGA). The Department agreed to a key request of local government – regular meetings between the Director General and senior staff and the Presidents of the metropolitan ROCs and the LGA to discuss development and implementation of the strategy. Whilst there are still differences regarding the purpose and scope of these meetings, the Department appears to have realised both the value of ROCs as an interface with local government and of using a sub-regional approach to deal with Sydney's diversity in implementing the strategy.

Meanwhile, WSROC completed the development of *FutureWest*, which was launched in 2005. The planning framework continues to inform the engagement of WSROC and its member Councils in the planning process, for example forming the basis for successful applications to the Department of Planning to undertake the development of sub-regional strategies in response to Metropolitan Strategy dwelling and employment projections.

The direct intervention in the current Metropolitan Strategy is the most successful example to date of ROC activism in the planning process. WSROC's previous attempts to gain a seat for local government in the planning saddle had been frustrated partly because the organisation had operated

in relative isolation from the other regional organisations and the Local Government Association. The engagement of these organisations and their decision to collectively lead a local government response to the strategy process, which was supported by the majority of metropolitan councils, proved to be decisive in getting traction with the department in arguing for greater local government involvement.

6. LESSONS FROM QUEENSLAND – THE SEQROC EXPERIENCE

Throughout the period since the early 1990s, during which Sydney completed released two strategies, abandoned a third and commenced the development of a fourth, south east Queensland has essentially been operating essentially one regional planning process – the SEQ Regional Framework for Growth Management (RFGM).

The RFGM was initiated at a community conference convened by the newly elected Goss Labor State Government in 1990 to discuss concerns over south east Queensland’s rapid population growth. The RFGM was the first metropolitan plan for the south east Queensland region. Brisbane’s size had made such a broader regional plan unnecessary until the 1980s when population growth spilled out into the surrounding council areas (SEQ 2001, 1998, Gleeson, et al, 2004).⁴

The decision involved the establishment of the South East Queensland Regional Organisation of Councils (SEQROC) to oversee the development of the RFGM. A major driving force behind the RFGM and SEQROC initiatives was the then Lord Mayor of Brisbane, Jim Soorley. Whilst there are 18 councils in southeast Queensland, the metropolitan area is the least fragmented in Australia and Brisbane easily the most dominant “CBD” city (Kübler, 2005). The combination of Soorley’s drive and Brisbane’s status within south east Queensland was instrumental in establishing the planning framework.

Two other factors set the RFGM apart from other metropolitan strategies in Australia, including Sydney’s. The first, an echo of the County of Cumberland plan, is the strong local government underpinning provided through SEQROC, which was the first and so far the only ROC established and structured to support a metropolitan strategy. SEQROC has four subROCs; three represent geographical areas in south east Queensland around Brisbane and Brisbane City Council constitutes the fourth (Bertelsen, 2002). This structure ensures sub-regional issues are considered.

The second is the RFGM’s basis in the strong partnership established between local government and State Government through the Regional Planning Advisory Group which prepared the first framework. This has continued into the Regional Coordination Committee (RCC), which manages and reviews the RFGM. The mayors who chair the four SEQROC sub-ROCs (including the Brisbane Lord Mayor) meet regularly with State Government ministers representing relevant portfolios such as transport, roads, environment, development, families and resources as well as a Commonwealth government representative and one from the non-government sector (Bertelsen, 2002). This gives local government a consistent and unparalleled level of access both to government and the planning process.

The RFGM has been reviewed regularly since its inception, with the current version of the RFGM, the *South East Queensland Regional Plan* being released in June 2005. The RFGM process has been criticised as being relatively weak in that it has been unable to bind government departments in terms of implementation or funding (Gleeson et al, 2004), but it seems to have escaped the fate of the County of Cumberland Plan. Indeed, the 2005 version (OUM, 2005a) seems to go a long way to address these issues and has been reinforced with the release of the *South East Queensland*

⁴ This section is also draws on an interview with Ms Jane Bertelsen, former CEO of SEQROC, conducted in September 2005.

Infrastructure Plan and Program (OUM 2005b) which attempts to align State Government infrastructure priorities and the budget process with the regional plan. In summary, the RFGM remains one of the best examples of how local government can assume and maintain a critical role in strategic planning.

7. CONCLUSION

In recent years Regional Organisations of Councils and in particular WSROC have become increasingly active in planning debates.

Initially the ROCs sought to be the “burr underneath the saddle” – strong advocates for their regions, challenging a wide range of government policies and institutions including planning, but not seeking a direct role. More recently however they have attempted to gain a seat “in the saddle” itself, developing their own regional planning frameworks with member Councils and advocating a sub-regional structure for metropolitan planning which provides a greater spatial dimension to the process and which, at least in the case of WSROC, attempts to address increasing sub-regional inequalities.

These attempts have only ultimately succeeded because this goal came to be shared by the ROCs collectively and because it was widely supported by local government. In doing so Sydney’s councils have been strongly influenced by the only enduring and successful state-local government partnership to date, that which operates at the heart of the South East Queensland strategic planning process.

Can we change the “hard” institutions?

Kübler and Heinelt (2002) make a useful distinction between the “hard” metropolitan institutions and the “soft” forms of metropolitan governance that are now emerging such as Regional Organisations of Councils. In his later paper Kübler (2005) draws on this distinction to discuss options for metropolitan governance in Sydney, suggesting that major changes to the “hard” institutions of metropolitan government are unlikely, at least in the foreseeable future.

The most commonly-advanced proposals for institutional reform are:

- Major amalgamations to dramatically reduce the number of councils in Sydney (eg, Property Council of Australia, 2001, SMH, 2003, Goodsir, 2005). The number of such amalgamated councils proposed varies but is usually in the range of eight to 12. Amalgamations are usually supported on grounds of economic or administrative efficiency or to reduce the number of major centres arbitrarily split by council boundaries and only to a lesser extent on the basis that such councils would be more capable of undertaking strategic planning.

The merits of these arguments have been hotly contested. In any case, the last significant round of amalgamations occurred with the formation of the County of Cumberland in the 1940s. Successive NSW Governments have consistently rejected forced amalgamations especially on this scale. Voluntary amalgamations have been encouraged but when these have occurred they are on a much more piecemeal basis.

- Leaving the present council structure intact but creating a metropolitan-wide level of government with specific powers including strategic planning. A recent example is the Greater London Authority which has a directly-elected Mayor and assembly (Kübler, 2005). A variation on this model would see the establishment of up to 12 such bodies as “regional

councils” for the metropolitan area, each covering three or four existing councils (Barnes, 2002).

Because of the resistance to adding a “fourth tier” of directly-elected government such examples are relatively rare in federal systems, the best known being the Portland Metro Council in Oregon, USA. As Kübler points out, there are additional reasons why this option is unlikely to succeed in NSW, where State Governments act as de facto metropolitan governments:

“In such a context the issue appears as a zero-sum game: the state would lose what the new metropolitan government would gain. The state can therefore be expected to strongly oppose any reform leading to a fully fledged and powerful metropolitan government for Sydney (Kübler, 2005:34)

What are the “soft” alternatives?

If reform of the formal governance institutions is unlikely, what then are the “soft” or “new regionalist” alternatives? Kübler suggests that the major flaw in Sydney’s governance system is the lack of an arena where major stakeholders can interact and negotiate in a structured way and the associated absence of an “honest broker” to guide such interactions along positive lines. He proposes the establishment of a Planning Commission along the lines of the Western Australian model, with representation from all key stakeholder groups and an independent planning expert as chair.

Spiller also advocates a planning commission model, suggesting that such a “separation of powers” from government would lead to better decision-making and a “healthier environment” in which to prepare metropolitan strategies (Spiller, 2004). Ministerial interference and lobbying by business interests would still occur, but they would be more accountable and transparent. Spiller’s model calls for a higher level of local government representative (he suggests, perhaps unrealistically, one representative from each council) but still has a strong component of appointed membership (Spiller, 2005).

Whilst the planning commission model has obvious advantages there are some downsides. The first is that such a model has been tried before, in the form of the NSW Planning and Environment Commission, only to be abandoned under political pressure – and it could be argued that the regional forums proposed in the still-born PlanFirst were also a variation on this model. Given the recent explicit upsurge in intervention in the planning process in support of business investment, the prospect of the State Government handing over powers to such a body (and allowing the sort of scrutiny Spiller proposes) seems as unlikely as agreement to a directly-elected city government.

There are other more fundamental objections. Whilst a planning commission would overcome fragmentation, it is unclear that such a body would recognise and respond to Sydney’s sub-regional diversity or the spatial polarisation described earlier which has particularly affected Western Sydney.

In addition, we have seen how local government’s role within strategic metropolitan planning has become increasingly marginalised. The legitimacy of councils as the “third sphere” of government has been eroded, as has their critical role in metropolitan strategy development. Instead of being regarded as partners in this process they have been relegated to the status of “key stakeholders” to be ranked alongside a range of special interests such as developers and land owners. A planning commission model runs the risk of reinforcing this residual view of local government, which would then merely redirect its criticism of centralised planning from the minister and department to the commission.

One alternative is to put local government firmly in the planning “saddle” alongside the State Government. This could be done by adopting a variation of the South East Queensland model of an explicit partnership between local and State Government as the basis for strategy development and implementation. Such an approach would build on the tentative partnership processes described earlier which involve the LGA and metropolitan ROC Presidents and senior planning department representatives.

To become an effective partnership, all the metropolitan ROCs and the LGA would have to participate and on the State Government side, senior representatives of the key infrastructure, environmental management and other relevant government agencies would also need to be included. Ideally the partnership would operate at a political level, as it does in Queensland, with the metropolitan ROC and LGA Presidents meeting directly and regularly with the relevant ministers. If this is not politically feasible, then the meetings should be at director-general level, with at least an annual meeting involving ministers.

As in Queensland, a representative each of the development and community sectors could also be involved, but the primary partnership should be between local and State Government. The process could also be supported by establishing a separate independent reference panel of major stakeholders, similar in makeup to the planning commission proposals, which could provide a degree of independent input and help the partnership process to maintain transparency. A small independent secretariat could manage the strategy’s development and implementation in conjunction with the Department of Planning and infrastructure agencies. The resulting strategy would also involve both metropolitan and regional components, the latter being developed at a sub-regional level in conjunction with the ROCs.

Local Government and the ROCs – the price of “staying in the saddle”

This model would require a more mature approach by both State and local government. The former would need to be prepared to share the strategic planning “saddle” with councils, rather than forcing them to continue to be the “burr” underneath. It would also require a whole-of-government commitment by other departments as well as planning to the strategy implementation process, especially by Treasury and the infrastructure agencies.

Local government would also have to make significant changes. Councils would have to be prepared to engage in the planning process strategically, working to overcome their remaining parochialism, accepting joint decisions which may sometimes be contrary to their local interests. They would also need to provide more consistent support for their regional organisations which would be their main interface with the planning process.

Assuming a place in the saddle will also have major implications for the ROCs. They will need to make similar hard decisions at the regional level and to re-examine their own structures if they are become increasingly engaged in the planning process whilst ensuring accountability back to their members. Ironically, this could ultimately result in their transformation from “soft” advocacy institutions to more formal structures with defined roles within the machinery of planning, thus potentially losing some of their autonomy. At the same time they may have to seek broader community input at the regional level, extending beyond the constituency of their member councils, if they are to effectively represent the interests of their regions. It would be up to the ROCs and their members to decide if they wished to accept these challenges as the price of staying in the strategic planning saddle.

POSTSCRIPT

Just after this paper was completed and presented to the State of Australian Cities Second National Conference in late 2005, the Sydney Metropolitan Strategy, now titled *City of Cities: A Plan for Sydney's Future*, was released by the NSW Premier and the Planning Minister.

The State Government appears to have accepted the arguments discussed in this paper regarding both the problem of fragmentation and the importance of engaging local government in the metropolitan planning process, as the introduction to the document indicates:

The Metropolitan Strategy covers a geographic area of over 10,000 square kilometres, made up of 43 local government areas including two on the Central Coast. It is too large and complex to resolve all the planning aims and directions down to a detailed local level through one Metropolitan Strategy.

Subregional planning is proposed as an intermediate step in translating the Metropolitan Strategy into strategies for each grouping of local government areas and the many communities of Sydney.

The metropolitan area of Sydney has been arranged into ten subregions that combine local government areas with similar issues and challenges when it comes to planning for growth and managing change. These subregions also relate to particular transport routes, natural features, and patterns of employment and retail activity that are important factors in the way people move around and use their area (Dept of Planning, 2005:18).

The Strategy later elaborates on this:

Involvement in subregional planning will be the primary means of engagement with the formulation and delivery of the Strategy.... Subregional planning represents the major partnership opportunity between State Government and local councils. (Dept of Planning, 2005:278)

In addition the Strategy states that the Minister for Planning will establish a Working Group with local government and other stakeholders to provide advice on the progress of the subregional strategies and any coordination and cross-boundary issues. The subregional groupings will delegate a representative "at Mayoral and General Manager level" to report to the Working Group, which will also include representation from the Local Government and Shires Associations and the "Regional Organisation of Councils", though how the latter will be nominated is not discussed.

An initial assessment of the Strategy would suggest that local government has been successful in obtaining both a subregional planning framework and a strategic role in the planning process. Though little detail has been provided on how some of the proposed structures would operate, initial meetings at the subregional level since the Strategy's release have indicated a strong desire, at least at officer level, to work cooperatively with local government.

There are a range of concerns about the process however, including the tight deadlines proposed for the completion of the subregional strategies and the Department's limited resources for implementation. These are compounded by the Government's tight financial situation, the fact that the State Government's funding commitment will not be confirmed until the release of a separate State Infrastructure Strategy (to be prepared by Treasury) and the potential for the Metropolitan Strategy to become politicised in the run-up to the next state election which is due in March 2007.

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