

Learning from the Past Research Project – Central Coast, NSW

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ABSTRACT

In 2003, the then Sustainable Ecosystems Division of the CSIRO was engaged by the Central Coast Region of NSW to undertake a detailed regional futures analysis based on a dynamic systems approach (Senge, 1992). A key component of such a research approach was the need to better understand and appreciate the historical context of previous regional planning policy initiatives. As a regional planning practitioner of several years experience, I was engaged by the CSIRO to undertake this “learning from the past” investigation.

This paper summaries the value of such a research project by both examining the methodology adopted and findings arising from such an investigation. In short, the paper argues that as a consequence of reflecting on past policy experiences it is possible to better understand and appreciate what policy decisions were previously undertaken, and subsequently improve the opportunities for future policy decision making and implementation.

A total of eighteen individuals were interviewed for the project. The regional participants chosen to be interviewed were a mixture of previous community leaders, politicians or senior professional bureaucrats. To encourage frank discussion and minimise any possibility of conflict of interests, all research participants at the time of interview were no longer in their substantive positions they once held.

The process of identifying key individuals and relying on oral histories is not without methodological deficiencies. Whilst acknowledging these potential weaknesses, the project nevertheless was able to make a valuable contribution to regional planning on the Central Coast by identifying previous experiences and policy relationships as they related to matters of social, economic, environmental and local/ regional governance.

The information arising from this research benefited the larger regional futures analysis in several ways. Firstly, the information was able to provide the necessary context to develop potential future scenarios for the region. In short, understanding ones past helps to understand potential futures. Secondly, the development of any systems models is largely dependent on the ability to critically identify all potential variables that may impact the system under examination. The independent study of past experiences is a valuable approach to identify what those variables may actually be.

Finally, learning from the past provides an opportunity to reinforce the significance of individuals and institutions adopting a systems approach in managing and developing regional futures. By reflecting on policy choices upfront in the early stages of the planning process, one may greatly reduce the need and the costs associated with the “if only we had...” factor. Thinking about the past means reflecting on its good and bad aspects and the opinions, values and perceptions of those involved with past planning decisions. Often it raises issues that many of us would prefer not to be discussed. Whilst the Central Coast project was relatively modest in what it sought to achieve, the value in its approach and findings may have substantially larger benefits for others contemplating future regional planning exercises.

INTRODUCTION

Background

In identifying futures scenarios one needs to be aware of the range of societal drivers that may impact the types of futures in question. The relationship between drivers, the various organisations, the participants involved and the implications of a range of external and internal variables are complex - all play a role in the broader planning and regional development processes.

Integral with such processes, are the need to understand the historical context of *place* and gain some insight into the lessons that may be learnt from understanding past experiences and policy actions.

The aim of the Central Coast *Learning from the Past* research project was to gather information about the perceptions of planning (be regional or local in nature) held by previous decision makers and their reflections on the Central Coast, its community and the larger regional area. An analysis of such reflections differs considerably from simply a review or analysis of written historical accounts or published planning reports and strategies.

The benefit of learning from past experiences is something that appears both obvious and logical. However it would appear that in the Australian context it is rarely practiced or given much credit or value. Public policy making, in urban and regional planning tends to put little emphasis on critically evaluating current, let alone past policy decisions in any real and meaningful manner.

A systems approach by nature, acknowledges the complexity of inter-relationships and importance of time frames and the ability to use a range of potential intervention mechanisms (Senge, 1992). By interviewing and listening to key regional people, it was considered possible to learn valuable lessons about previous experiences with regional change and coping strategies envisaged for the future (Douglas, Roberts, and Thompson, 1998).

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The *learning from the past* component of the Central Coast Regional Future Project (Central Coast Catalyst) sought to assist in identifying and recording the range of

strategies that have and have not worked in the past. More importantly it was designed to provide an opportunity of better understanding and appreciating what actions and policies have been tried in the region and ascertain the longer term value of such interventions.

The investigation was deemed to provide a context by which to guide the overall development of the larger and more ambitious CSIRO regional futures project. In particular, the research endeavours helped to identify the driver of trends and thereby contribute to navigate a pathway that is conscious of the range of potential hazards and opportunities that lie ahead when seeking to formulate future scenarios.

Given the methodological challenges confronting this type of research, together with the standard time and resourcing constraints attached to any research endeavour, the project's intent was rather ambitious. Having said this, it is acknowledged that the value of the findings of the research must not be used at face value and in isolation of adopting other complementary research approaches, including other case studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Central Coast has been the focus of several large investigations since the early 1970s. Today the region continues to be the focus of extensive regional planning investigations culminating in such strategic plans and documents as *Shaping the Central Coast (1999)*, *Draft Shaping the Central Coast Action Plan (2001)*, *Central Coast Moving Forward (2001)*, *The Central Coast Transport Action Plan (2002)* and *The Central Coast Catchment Blueprint(2003)*.

When investigating what historical research had been undertaken that specifically sought to understand past policy actions within the Region, minimal examples were found (Coakes, and Bishop, 2002). There were a number of localised historical accounts of individual places, but few accounts of comprehensive regional matters that transcend individual planning related issues. This dearth of *learning from the past* analysis appeared equally valid for other regions in Australia.

It should be noted that resourcing constraints prevented the opportunity to examine what international research was available.

CONTENT OF THE REPORT

The final published report was structured around five inter-related sections (Fenner, 2004). Section 1 provided the reader with an understanding of why the research was undertaken and its connection to the Central Coast Regional Futures Project. The aim and objectives of the project together with a brief discussion on what regional historical literature on the Central Coast is available was documented within this section of the Report.

Section 2 introduced factual information concerning the study area. The Central Coast region was defined and supporting facts on matters of environmental, social and economic relevance were presented. An abbreviated history of regional planning and development on the Central Coast provided both an introduction and contextual basis for

orientating the perceptions raised by the research participants.

Section 3 examined the methodological challenges surrounding historical investigations. The Research assumptions and the research approach adopted were discussed as were the potential inherent biases of undertaking such a research investigation.

Section 4 dealt with the actual responses received from the interviews conducted. The need to maintain confidentiality, whilst still providing the required insights into how the region had developed over the past thirty years was the key challenge of this section of the report. The research themes revolved around three primary questions:

- identifying how the region had actually changed over time, and the potential reasons why these changes had occurred;
- what strategic planning policies have been successful or not successful and the reasons for such opinions; and
- what key lessons are available for today and tomorrow's decision makers.

The final Section of the report attempted to make sense of the considerable amount of information generated from this research by high-lighting the key messages and evaluating the relevance of the research propositions adopted.

THE CENTRAL COAST REGION

The Place

In the macro sense, there is no shortage of data and information relating to the Central Coast Region. For the record, the Region is defined as the area contained within the political boundaries of Gosford City and Wyong Shire local government areas. That is, an area of 1,845 sq.km, located between the Australia's largest and sixth largest cities of Sydney and Greater Newcastle respectively.

The City of Gosford, covers an area of 1.029 sq.km. stretching east to the Pacific Ocean, south to the Hawkesbury River, west to the Judge Dowling Ranges and to the north to meet the Cessnock and Wyong Shires on the border through Kulnura, Lisarow and Forrester's Beach. The major population centre is the Narara Valley in which the city of Gosford is located. The other main urban areas include the Woy Woy Peninsula, Terrigal, Avoca, Erina, Kariong and Kincumber.

The Shire of Wyong covers an area of 826sq.km. bounded to the south by the City of Gosford. Whilst it also shares a border with Cessnock, its main neighbour is that of Lake Macquarie that borders it to the north. The Pacific Ocean borders the Shire to the east. The major populations area include Wyong, Tuggerah, The Entrance, Long Jetty, Warnervale; Wadalba, Toukley and the smaller outlying areas of Norah Head, Budgewoi, San Remo and the villages on the southern shore of Lake Macquarie.

One cannot describe the region without acknowledging the many natural physical attributes of the Central Coast. The region consists of four main landforms types ranging from hills and an extensive plateau in the west, to the valleys and coastal plains and the lakes and waterways, including the coast. National parks, State Forests, wetlands and

State Recreation Areas are found throughout the region (Fisher, 1997).

The socio-economic statistics of the region is also well documented. The population is exceeds 300,000 and it is projected that the City of Gosford and Shire of Wyong will both contain some 160,000 persons by 2011. NSW State population projections estimate that the region may accommodate 358,000 by 2021 (DUAP, 2003).

REGIONAL PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT HISTORY

The history of settlement and development on the Central Coast has been described by Fisher (1997) as a 5 stage process. Stage 1 to 4 covering the original inhabitation by the indigenous people of the area, the initial European place discoveries of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the timber and boat building era, and the expanding farming and early tourism phases of development in the 20th century.

Whilst acknowledging that all history has a role and place in developing localities, the research was primarily concerned with the significant growth in urbanisation and commuting to Sydney that had occurred since 1945.

From a regional planning perspective, the release of the Sydney Region Outline Plan (SROP) in 1968 confirmed the Central Coast future as a major population centre in its own right. The Plan's purpose was to provide a long term strategic direction for the future growth and development of the greater Sydney region, which for many years had included the Central Coast.

In summary, the SROP proposed that some of Sydney's anticipated population growth would need to be absorbed outside the County of Cumberland (State Planning Authority of NSW Annual Report 1971/72, 12). In principle it was argued that a settlement of over 500,000 people was possible in the Gosford/Wyong sector.

Arising from this strategic framework was the realisation that much more specific and detailed planning investigations would have to be undertaken in the Gosford and Wyong LGAs. Issues that required further research included matters of environmental and visual significance, land development suitability and capability evaluations as well as a raft of rural, recreational, economic, transportation and infrastructure assessments.

During the early 1970s there was additional interest shown by the Commonwealth Government in planning related matters. Issues relating to the identification of Growth Centres and decentralisation were firmly on the political policy agendas of respective Coalition and Labor governments. Whilst the Gosford/Wyong region was not chosen as a Growth Centre, funding for joint planning investigations were nevertheless still undertaken. For instance in 1972/73, a study team undertook a detailed investigation of the Gosford/Wyong area and commissioned the CSIRO to prepare and run a mathematical planning model (Technique for the Optimum Placement of Activities into Zones - TOPAZ) to help select policy choices from six initial possible development strategies.

The six alternative urban strategies were published in late July 1973. Further analysis reduced the population capacity of the region to between 350,000-430,000 people. It was from this phase, that the three potential regional plans contained in the Gosford – Wyong Structure Plan were released for comment in 1975. The three alternatives plans related primarily to different forms of development for the Wyong's new town of Warnervale.

The associated Rural Lands Study was subsequently finalised in 1975. The Study sought to address the growing land subdivision and development pressures impacting the viability of agricultural land, as well as the impacts on water catchments, mineral resources and scenic lands of the region. The broad planning principles together with community representations on the Rural Lands Study resulted in two detailed interim development orders – IDO 100, Gosford and IDO 58, Wyong. The IDOs were legal planning instruments guiding land use and development approvals.

It was in November 1977, that the then Planning Minister adopted the amended version of the radial corridor Structure Plan. This amended Plan provided for the inclusion of a major industrial area of Somersby and some minor changes to the coastal road system in the Gosford Shire (NSW PEC Annual Report 1977-78: 14).

The Planning and Environment Commission (PEC) then established a regional office in Gosford in 1978. In the following year, the Gosford-Wyong Planning and Development Committee was established to assist with the implementation of the Gosford-Wyong Structure Plan. The Committee, with representatives from both Councils, the PEC, range of other State government agencies and the community, sought to co-ordinate and foster the development of suitable areas for commercial, industrial and residential purposes and address the substantial challenges of physical and social infrastructure and transportation.

During the 1980s several planning studies and other investigations were undertaken. This led to approval of a number of Regional Environmental Plans that dealt with protecting extractive resources (SREP 9), agricultural lands (SREP 8) and the expansion of Erina Fair out of town shopping centre (SREP 6). A draft Regional Environmental Plan (REP) for managing future residential greenfield development and coal mining in the northern Wyong Shire was commenced but never gazetted. The latter however contributed to Wyong Council's current approach to identifying and planning for several new development precincts.

Given the continued strong population and development pressures experienced by the Region, it was somewhat of a surprise that the NSW State Government decided in 1988 to close the regional planning office and relocate planning responsibilities for the region between the Sydney head office and the Hunter region office based in Newcastle.

The year 1988 also witnessed the release of a new Sydney wide regional planning strategy. *Sydney into its Third Century*. This regional plan would replace the earlier SROP, but would continue the approach of seeing the Central Coast as a natural population corridor for Sydney's future expansion. It was not until early 1995, that another planning strategy – *Cities for the 21st Century* finally recognized the so-called

greater metropolitan regional area, of which the Central Coast region was one of four inter-related sub-regions.

The acknowledgement of the Central Coast region was the beginning of several policy initiatives designed to reinforce the importance of the region. A Central Coast regional planning strategy was commenced in 1996 and released under the title of *Shaping the Central Coast* (1999). A Regional co-ordinator from the NSW Premier's Department was subsequently appointed, as was a Minister for the Central Coast. A regional based economic strategy – *Central Coast Moving Forward* was released in early 2001.

The State Planning agency at the time – The Department of Urban Affairs and Planning established a specialised planning team under the Living Centres program designed to assist with the implementation of the *Shaping the Central Coast* strategy. The team was eventually expanded to become a fully operational regional office in 2002.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Challenge

The desire to uncover and learn from past planning policy experiences is subject to several methodological challenges. To address these issues it was decided to adopt a triangulation methodology (Moser and Kalton, 1975). Essentially this approach seeks to provide answers to questions based on three separate and overlapping research methods. In this instance, a review of literature on Central Coast policy development, the use of oral histories and the researcher's own specialized knowledge and central Coast regional planning experience. The qualitative nature of such research is not without potential flaws, but adopting such an approach sought to minimise the potential degrees of bias and factual error.

For instance, the main risks associated with undertaking oral histories relate to the complexity of the remembering processes. That is, information obtained is subject to a range of influences including the way the event or issue was understood by the interviewee, the degree of interest or significance of the event, or whether there was a need to remember certain aspects about the event or issue one is actually interested in. In reverse, the interviewer may interpret things differently to what was meant by the interviewee, or inadvertently influence responses received (Moser and Kalton, 1975).

The project time frame was 10 weeks (September – November 2003).

THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions consisted of the following:

- What major private or public policy actions, plans, policies or other events have impacted the central Coast region since the mid 1970s?;
- Why were such actions undertaken? What were they hoping to achieve?
- Given the passing of time, what were the impacts of such actions?;
- What factors influenced the success or otherwise of the policy?; and
- Given the regional challenges outlined in *Shaping the Central Coast* and *Central Coast Moving Forward* and other related strategic directions, what specific

lessons may the past offer the region?

RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

To help guide the research, six so called research propositions were developed. They focus on why some planning actions have had the unintended consequences, and therefore have not achieved their desired input into helping the Central Coast become more ecologically sustainable.

The assumed propositions included:

1. There are regional feedbacks that were not considered in the planning initiative;
2. The required policies are known but cannot be acted on because of a range of political reasons;
3. External forces beyond the control of the region continuously drive the regional change process;
4. The timing of the initiative was incorrect;
5. The resources required for an effective intervention were not available; and
6. An unforeseeable random event changed the effectiveness of the policy.

RESEARCH APPROACH ADOPTED

Participants were chosen for interviewing according to the following criteria:

- They had held relevant senior policy or political positions for extended periods of time but no longer held those positions of influence;
- They had shown an expertise in dealing with an issue of regional significance be it of a social, economic, environmental or governance nature;
- They were considered knowledgeable by the researcher (and the majority of the Central Coast community would likely agree with such assessments) in both current issues facing the Central Coast region and appreciative of many of the policy positions that have been undertaken since the Gosford-Wyong structure planning days of the mid 1970s; and
- They were willing to freely donate their time and expertise for the benefit of the region.

Participants were subsequently chosen to ensure a suitable mix of individuals based on area of expertise, sex and age. For the record, of the 18 participants interviewed, only 4 individuals had never lived in the Region. A majority of those interviewed had resided within the Central Coast for longer than a decade.

Eleven participants had worked at some time in one of two local government authorities. Eight had worked for the State Government. Two individuals had held senior political positions (Mayor and local State Member). Three individuals had held positions with publicly funded and non-government organisations. Four of the participants were women.

The interviews were based on a semi-structured interview schedule, tape recorded and lasted between 30 to 90 minutes in duration. Each participant was interviewed in private and ensured confidentiality.

LEARNING FROM THE PAST

Major Changes

When asked to identify the major changes experienced in the region over the past several decades the predominant view concentrated on the substantial population growth and its flow on impacts on the social, economic and environmental spheres. The consistent strong population growth saw significant growth in traffic volumes and the number of commuters leaving the region daily for work. The land area used for urban development has had negative impacts on the character of the region, as well as the natural environment.

The emergence of stand alone regional shopping centres (Erina and later Tuggerah), whilst limiting escape expenditure, has detrimentally impacted the viability of many of the smaller and historically valued localities throughout the Central Coast.

The provision of infrastructure (soft and hard), although not considered to sufficiently meet the true needs of the region, is substantially better in real and relative terms than they were 20 to 30 years ago. Significant improvements being the sewerage and water supply systems, the electrification of the Great Northern Rail line and the opening of the F3 freeway.

The state of the regional and local road systems and changing attitudes of the resident population however received mixed assessments. The latter for instance, believed that community spirit had deteriorated over time, although recent history would appear the re-emergence of local pride and responsibility. The growth in economic living standards (such as the size of housing, provision of recreational and educational facilities and range of local shopping opportunities) has been at the expense of the longer commuting, longer hours in institutional childcare, and higher levels of personal debt that affected a family's quality of life.

Somewhat surprisingly, few commented on the change in governance of the region were raised by the interviewees. Those that did comment on this issue, agreed that the relationships between the three levels of governments had deteriorated since the mid 1970s and had only fairly recently improved between the two Councils and State Government. The latter being particularly important in ensuring the provision of key infrastructure such as the Central Coast campus of Newcastle University, a network of environmental parks and corridors (Coastal Open Space System) and several strategic planning initiatives, namely the Central Coast Action Plan, Catchment Plans, and the revitalisation of the Gosford CBD.

PERCEIVED REASONS FOR CHANGE OVER TIME

When asked the reasons for the perceived changes experienced by the Central Coast, the responses were numerous and diverse. The growth pressures were seen largely as a direct consequence of the region's physical proximity to Sydney, changing demographics resulting in the need for more households and the Australian cultural tradition of home ownership and love of coastal environments.

Other reasons offered for the Region's expansion included the electrification of the rail system and opening of the upgraded freeway. These infrastructure improvements resulting in improved opportunities for people to travel to and from Sydney.

The broader strategic macro decisions arising from Government policies such as the directions for growth contained in the SROP and the subsequent Gosford-Wyong Structure Plan, Australian immigration policy, capital gains tax exemptions for primary residence ownership were all acknowledged to have influenced the growth of the Region.

The relationship between the levels of government was raised by others as the main reasons behind many of the changes experienced by the Central Coast. It was argued that ad-hoc decision making and political rivalry between various Councillors, Gosford and Wyong Councils, local government and State Governments and Federal and State Governments played a big role in the development of the Region. Key regional projects, such as the Mingara Recreational Centre and the Gosford stadium were only realised when an atmosphere of co-operation was operating.

Many of the respondents described the general attitudes of the broader community impacting on the level of changes experienced by the Region. The attitudes of the 1960s and 1970s were considered to be more pro-development resulting in the establishment of several industrial estates, the action of large businesses and the expansion of newer housing estates. This together with the decision to upgrade the regional water and sewerage system further increased the attractiveness of the area for additional population. Ironically, by providing a greater range of services and facilities, the community's willingness to take responsibility for managing its' future development diminished. An explanation for this change was offered by one of the respondents as simply a product of the huge influx and turnover of people into the Region from places such as Greater Sydney, where the level of services and facilities offered and expected by Government was substantially greater.

The Region's poor public transport system and internal road network was due to several potential explanations. Aside from the physical topography (lake systems and elevated lands), the Region's dispersed settlement and low densities exacerbated such difficulties. The State Government's pro – car position and consistent aversion to funding a public bus service and lack of an integrated ticketing system were additional reasons offered.

The protection and enhancement of the natural environment, at least the scenic/visual aspect of the environment was credited to both the rise in the conservation movement and the dedication of skilled technical professionals and active politicians.

EVALUATION OF PAST POLICY DECISIONS (GOOD, BAD AND INDIFFERENT)

Respondents were asked to provide examples of actual policy decisions and evaluate them accordingly. Many of the comments provided by the respondents fell into a combination of the above. As one individual commented, *most policy decisions have some successes and failures bundled into them.*

Positive

Whilst no attempt to quantify the answers provided, it was clear that the following were considered largely as positive initiatives:

- Coastal Open Space System;
- Reticulated water and sewerage;
- Rehabilitation of wetlands;
- Protection of rural valleys;
- Commitment to catchment management;
- Gosford/Wyong structure plan;
- Accessibility improvements resulting from the electrified rail system and F3 freeway to Sydney;
- Upgrading of key infrastructure (hospitals, schools);
- Establishment of a university campus and rural research station;
- Recreational and sporting facilities at Mingara and Mt Penang;
- Introduction of the State Area assistance scheme and developer contributions;
- Quality regional shopping centres;
- Industrial estates/office parks;
- Decision to relocate Government offices to the Region and creating a Central Coast regional coordination group (RCMG);
- Designating the Central Coast as a region;
- Appointing a Minister for the Central Coast.

Negative or Indifferent

- Erina Fair's impact on the Gosford CBD and other smaller centres;
- Push to cater for green field development rather than retrofitting older suburbs;
- Revitalization programs were overly interested in physical improvements and not business mix, promotion or linkages;
- Emphasis on up front contributions and not factoring into the importance of recurrent funding for the future;
- Lack of on-going evaluation, assessment and research on policy implementation;
- *Blurring of responsibilities (between the levels of Government, NGOs and community bodies);*
- Road based planning and funding program also led to increase noise, health, environmental and social stresses;
- Commitment to developing the Warnervale new town;
- New release planning and its impact on developing the Warnervale airport;
- The Somersby Industrial Estate;
- Missed opportunities to diversify the economy of the region;
- Physical urban design was poor, destroying built opportunities to create a Central Coast identity;
- *Cargo mentality* of economic development policy, rather than building on existing businesses;
- State and local environmental policies were *overly complex, confusing, costly and stifling all types of development – good and bad.*

- Serious Tuggerah Lake system improvements;
- Water management;
- Multiple of strategies that *simply duplicated a mechanism that was already in place*;
- *Most policies are never planned in full...still too many policies and many are just more rhetoric*;
- Weaknesses surrounding many policy funding mechanisms ...*products not outcomes*

FACTORS DRIVING POLICY SUCCESS

In summary, a number of key factors were identified by those interviewed as being central to future policy success.

They included:

- Ensuring that opportunities exist to involve the community in a real and genuine way, and not superficially;
- Ensuring that there is time and opportunity to test the validity of policy assumptions and evaluate their flow-on implications;
- Stressing the importance of fully explaining the intention of policies to the communities;
- Making sure that there are transparent processes which could lead to a more sophisticated community approach to planning;
- Making sure that the politics are right;
- Ensuring that power structures in society are properly managed and respected;
- Engaging political as well as the technical aspects of the issue;
- Having skilled people who can develop policies;
- Ensuring that the processes have tangible outcomes since policy success is about having good processes and delivery outcomes;
- Having people experience the place they are planning for;
- Balancing the need to do something now with the need for a planned implementation phase of policy;
- Realising that decisions made today on the Central Coast will impact on that society for sometime into the future;
- Ensuring that research, data and information are used to support the development of policies and their implementation;
- Questioning the implications of the Central Coast being continuously linked with either the Sydney or Lower Hunter metropolitan areas;
- Noting that many successful policies were based on both Wyong and Gosford joining forces;
- Making sure that policies are supported by financial resources; and
- Realising that most policies need time to work and that an emphasis on quick results might diminish the value of it or its impact.

KEY LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

The opportunity to reflect and evaluate on the past, gives sign posts for those interested in

shaping the future. With this in mind, the interviewees were asked to provide their wisdom on key lessons for the future and these are summarised below:

Structure Planning – there is a need to undertake regional planning and address a range of issues before taking action. The *Gosford – Wyong Structure Plan 1977* was a solid process and provided a valid strategic framework. As such, it is important that this foundation work is kept updated on a regular basis;

Infrastructure – soft and hard infrastructure needs to be provided before the growth occurs. Retrofitting is more expensive and difficult in the long run;

Governance – the community needs to be involved in the decision making processes and advised of the implications of undertaking or not undertaking certain actions. Decisions also need to be made at the right levels, the grass roots being one of those levels;

Consistency – Whilst there always needs to be a degree of robustness in any policy, this needs to be balanced with the value of stability. The recent history of reviewing issues as a matter of course has generated a degree of regional paralysis. Respondents' arguments on the importance of consistency also referred to the retention of key regional staff and senior management;

Sydney to Newcastle Corridor – the Central Coast region and the State and Federal governments, need to continuously ensure that planning for Sydney, the Central Coast and Lower Hunter are undertaken in an integrated manner. Individual actions have wider implications, both spatially and temporally;

Horizontal Integration – one of the biggest weaknesses continues to be the separation of policy responsibilities under specialisations. The silo approach does not provide a view of the whole;

Legislation – there is too much legislation which in many ways makes the entire system complex, slow and counterproductive. Having said this, other argued that strategic planning needs to ultimately have some legal teeth and this need for enforcement should occur at the earliest stage possible;

Regional Offices – reducing the layers of government is important, but if this can't be done then at least ensure that the respective agencies are all physically located somewhere in the Region;

Urban Design – need to increase the quality of design and how places actually work on the Coast;

Regional Development – while the Central Coast has a recently established body to champion regional development (Business Central Coast), respondents claimed it needs to be better resourced (financially and with staff). This includes opportunities to undertake necessary research, study tours with key political decision makers and the like;

Community Development – there is a need to identify and clarify the things that are really important...early intervention, ensuring children get off to a good start, family support, a universal preschool program, schools ready for children rather than children ready for schools;

Environmentalism – the environment is *everybody's business*. Many of the regional stakeholders *need to let go of their prejudices on what it means to be green*. The establishment of the Central Coast Community Environment Network and its charter is the future for sophisticated community groups;

Speed of Growth – in hindsight, the Region would have been better off if it had sought to

slow down growth and diverted resources into local support initiatives. By slowing greenfield growth, *we would get much more retrofit around transport nodes...with a shift of employment (say new building and subdivision) to other areas;*

Housing Affordability – providing more supply is critical in dampening housing prices and rental opportunities;

Water Management – the Central Coast is in a strong position to meet the many water challenges facing the Region. *Most of the key water cycle policy levers are in Council's grasp;*

Sophisticated Communities – you need a strong local community with a good insight into regional challenges of sustainability that also has the capacity to advocate in order to get good outcomes for the community in the long term;

Regional Identity – regional identity is important for building a sense of community and a climate for investment. However, to develop an identity takes considerable time;

Future Foresight – many of the respondents argued or at least inferred that *the lack of a future discourse in society is one of the structural impediments to adaptive change* (Slaughter, 1997, 10). The Central Coast needs to look at ways of examining the future and undertaking scenario investigations. The *Wyong Shire- State of the Wyong Shire Report* being a good example;

Action Research – whilst it was argued that more research needs to be undertaken, some specifically recommended there needs to be more action research. Action research is *about trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement and as a means of increasing knowledge* (Kemmis and McTaggart in McNiff et al 1996);

Decision making – there is a need to try and streamline decision making processes and be more regionally focused. It was equally suggested that it is important to *be respectful of what others have done*. It is this regional lack of respect that is the cause of why so many initiatives seem to be duplicated. *Short term decision making is endemic to planning and it is one of the major difficulties for long term strategic planning*. With respect to decision making and development approvals, local and State governments need to be more transparent and faster. They also need to be bold and reject things upfront rather than letting things *go on forever*;

Implementation – *too much contemplation blunts the urgent response*. Results of many policies, particularly those of a regional, social, environmental and economic nature don't see the light of day for a very long time. It is important to make timely decisions;

Transdisciplinary Approaches – regional planning *needs the right mix of professionals to do the planning*. Following this line of thought, the professional skill base needs to start to cross-fertilise knowledge and understanding. Currently the region *lacks good crossing between contexts...say the bureaucrat, politician and advocate*. *Not many people have had the mixed exposure*;

Mindsets – from experience, *one is profoundly unwise to only rely on one policy lever*. There would be benefits in crossing boundaries and being more open to what can or could occur; and

Value People – linked closely with respect, is the need to value people for the contributions they can make. This attitude may engender an atmosphere of creativity and initiative that helps meet and shape the range of challenges facing the Central Coast in the future.

CONCLUSION

Significance of Findings

Eighteen individuals were invited and agreed to participate in this study of reflections on past planning on the Central Coast. Five core questions were proposed to each interviewee. The questions were:

What major private or public policy actions, plans, policies or other events have impacted the Central Coast region since the mid-1970s?

Why were such actions undertaken? What were they hoping to achieve?

Given the passing of time, what were the impacts of such actions?

What factors influenced the success or otherwise of the policy?

Given the regional challenges outlined in *Shaping the Central Coast, Central Coast Moving Forward* and related strategic directions, what specific lessons may the past offer the region?

The responses to the questions posed were subjective and rely in some instances on individuals remembering experiences that occurred many decades ago. The accuracy of the responses will depend on several factors including:

The reliability of the actual original observations;
The background knowledge of the particular subject in question;
The language used to describe the experiences;
The interviewer's interpretation of what was discussed;
The style of writing and grammar used in documenting the oral history; and
The researcher's own inherent biases in comprehending what and why it was said or written (Douglas, Roberts, Thompson, 1988).

However, the significance of this research is not so much in the precise nature of the information provided. The actual dates and events have not been independently substantiated, although supporting evidence from multiple interviewees lends support to some of the more pointed comments and opinions documented in this report.

The research value value lies in the wealth of assumptions, impacting variables and external factors that all seem to play some role in regional planning and development processes. It is the use that this qualitative information can be put to in future planning exercises that potentially is so valuable.

The findings of the research may assist in developing decision making matrices that will act as a reminder of the range of interacting variables that may impact particular policy choices and vice versa. The ability to identify recognisable and relevant past examples may provide further support and justification for using such decision making tools.

In a more generic way, this project and its findings also allows the range of existing

decision makers to better appreciate where the Region has come from and some of the potential reasons to explain why things are the way they are.

If we can learn to navigate around the ‘holes’ the region has previously been in, (or at least know what one will likely need to do to get out of such situations), and what peaks are worth climbing, more of the Region’s limited resources can be directed to doing those things that will actually deliver a more ‘Sustainable Central Coast’.

RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

In light of the information obtained through the feedback by those interviewed, it is then possible to re-examine the initial research propositions identified in section 3.3

1. There are regional level feedbacks that were not considered in the planning initiatives: True. This proposition appears to be valid certainly in the light of the comments made by past decision makers and material discussed in this report. The historic development patterns of the Region, the division of responsibilities, the regional divide between Gosford and Wyong, the dominance of Sydney head office policy making all appeared to be factors that had contributed to compartmentalised or segmented and relatively linear decision making processes.
2. The required policies are known but cannot be acted on because of a range of political reasons: - True. The political nature of planning and democratic societies ensures that politics, that is power structures and decisions to allocate limited resources, has and will always play major roles in the areas of strategic planning and sustainable regional development. The solutions for many of the regional challenges of employment, housing, transport, community development, environmental protection and governance are both diverse and contradictory. However, it would be equally wrong to argue that many of the policy solutions to meet the Central Coast’s present and future challenges are known, and that all the regional problems are attributable to political circumstances.
3. External forces beyond the control of the region continuously drive the regional change process: True. One of the most consistent themes or messages from the interviewees was the influence of outside forces on the Central Coast. These outside forces including the population and housing push emanating from Sydney, the development of a F3 freeway, the numerous Sydney long term strategic planning strategies, and decisions to support or not support various initiatives rely entirely on a final approval outside of the region.

With the appointment of a senior NSW Cabinet Minister for the Central Coast, some of the power balance has shifted towards the Central Coast and away from Sydney. How the Region proposes to take full advantage of this shift remains unanswered.

4. The timing of the initiative was incorrect: True. The timing of policy decisions has major impacts on the quality of outcomes achieved. The many examples provided in the report pointed to initiatives happening too slowly to have made real and lasting impacts.
5. The resources required for an effective intervention were not available: True. The

respondents often talked about the lack of resources (dollars or professional staff). The population growth and the demands placed on the Region by this growth were not, they claimed, supported by the equivalent increase in resources. The issue of regional boundary allocations, the need for the Councils to undertake research to support their resourcing claims are two pieces of evidence to support this claim. Having said this, respondents indicated that the trade-offs within and outside the Central Coast may have contributed to this state. It was argued by some that the Region should have been allowed greater control over the allocation of resources to where the Region thought was most appropriate and beneficial areas.

6. An unforeseeable random event changed the effectiveness of policies. True. In the Central Coast circumstances, there were both natural and political events that had major for on implications. Numerous examples are provided in the comments of the respondents. The flooding events of the mid 1970s prompted Wyong Council and to some extent, Gosford to re-examine where development was allowed to proceed and re-assess the importance of wetlands generally. The State Government's decision to allow the development of Erina Fair impacted on the Gosford CBD and all of the other shopping facilities in the region. Road traffic and subsequent residential growth was also impacted by this one decision. More recently, the drought and 2002 State bushfires has raised the level of discussions concerning population growth and residential development on the periphery of urban districts.

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