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The Committee Manager  
Standing Committee on Public Works  
Parliament House  
Macquarie Street  
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Sir or Madam,

**RE: INQUIRY INTO INFRASTRUCTURE PROVISION IN COASTAL  
GROWTH AREAS**

This submission draws on baseline research conducted by the Planning Research Centre at the University of Sydney, on the implications of coastal growth in Australia.

Our research focussed specifically on population growth associated with what is often popularly described as the “sea change” phenomenon. “Sea change” describes a metaphorical change of life, rather than a literal move to the sea. However, to date in Australia much of the migration away from larger metropolitan and inland centres has focussed on the coast.

The attached report prepared for the National Sea Change Taskforce; *Meeting the Sea Change Challenge: Sea Change Communities in Coastal Australia*, draws together existing data on population trends in non metropolitan coastal Australia, highlights the environmental, social, and economic implications for the different types of coastal communities affected by sea change, and examines existing coastal policy and planning responses.

In this written submission we focus on some of the key findings highlighted in the report in relation to the terms of reference for the Inquiry, particularly key coastal population growth trends in NSW. We refer the Committee to our full report for further discussion of these issues.

## Population growth trends

- 1) There has been rapid growth in many non metropolitan coastal areas of NSW over the past two decades, but this growth has fluctuated over time. Generally, rates of population growth at the local government area level slowed between 1991-2001 although in most cases remain significantly higher than the State average<sup>1</sup>. There is likely to be a new wave of coastal migration as the “baby boomers” retire.

Rates of growth calculated at the local government area level may understate the extent to which growth is concentrated within a narrow coastal strip.

In comparison to national trends documented in our report, some of the fastest growing areas in NSW (eg. Hastings, Coffs Harbour, Greater Taree) are located more than three hours drive from a capital city. This level of distance from a major centre means that access to health, educational, and transportation services is particularly critical for such communities.

## Socio/economic trends in high growth coastal areas

- 2) Non metropolitan coastal areas of NSW are significantly older and aging at a much more rapid rate than the State overall. Median ages in coastal communities tend to be between 3 and 9 years greater than the NSW median age of 35 (in 2001).

However, national research by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)<sup>2</sup> has found that on average, newcomers to coastal areas tend to be younger than existing residents and Australians overall. Thus there is a distinct cohort of younger people of working age and families with children moving to coastal communities. This is not likely to change the overall age profile of coastal areas, as new residents only represent a small proportion of the total population. Further, as baby-boomers retire later this decade there is likely to be a new influx of retirees to the coast (and to some inland areas offering high amenity).

The important point to note is that high growth coastal areas need to cater to the specific needs of an ageing population, while ensuring services and opportunities for younger singles and families. This is a critical issue as many coastal communities also experience a loss of younger people (particularly in the 15-24 year age cohorts) who seek education or employment opportunities in the city.

- 3) Coastal communities in NSW are characterised by higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage than the State overall. Consistent with the national trends documented in our report, population growth is not yet delivering significant socio-economic benefits for coastal communities. Coastal NSW has some of the lowest median incomes of the State (all of the communities in our sample had median household incomes below the State median of \$800-899 in 2001). Incomes have also been

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<sup>1</sup> All references in this submission are drawn from the attached report: Gurran, N, Blakely, E, Squires, C 2005, *Meeting the Sea Change Challenge: Sea Change Communities in Coastal Australia*, Planning Research Centre, University of Sydney.

<sup>2</sup> ABS 2004, “Sea Change – New Coastal Residents”, in *Australian Social Trends*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

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growing at a slower rate (by \$100 per week between 1996-2001, compared to the NSW rate of \$200 per week).

Lower median incomes in coastal areas are not fully explained by an older population: unemployment rates in coastal NSW are amongst the highest in the States and also tend to be higher than other coastal areas of Australia. High unemployment reflects long term economic trends in regional Australia – particularly associated with restructure and change in agricultural and other resource based sectors.

Local economic growth in coastal communities is occurring in consumption based retail, tourism and construction related industries, as well as health / community services. The new industries tend to be characterised by lower wages, and part time and seasonal employment patterns.

As a consequence of reduced employment and educational opportunities, levels of relative socio-economic disadvantage are also higher than other areas of NSW and Australia overall (based on the ABS combined index which measures income, educational attainment, unemployment, and skilled occupations).

- 4) These trends are leading to socio-economic polarisation in many coastal communities affected by rapid population growth. Population and tourism growth contributes to coastal gentrification, higher housing costs and seasonal shortages in rental accommodation. Sources of lower cost housing – such as caravan parks – are under increasing pressure for redevelopment. Anecdotally, divisions between wealthy “sea changers” and visitors, poorer newcomers and existing residents are becoming apparent. Socio-spatial polarisation is emerging, as poorer residents of coastal communities are forced into smaller hinterland communities (characterised by even fewer services, employment, and educational opportunities) in search of affordable housing.

### **Urban consolidation**

- 5) Urban consolidation of coastal communities is a priority. However, consolidation needs to occur in a way that is consistent with the unique character of these areas. The demographic information summarised above shows that coastal communities will continue to grow, but their housing needs are likely to be different to the traditional form of detached single dwelling on a large block that has characterised Australian towns and suburbs to date. Further, preventing the spread of coastal settlements is essential to protect important coastal environments and rural landscapes.

The NSW Coastal Policy (1997) strongly discourages ribbon development of urban areas along the coastal strip. Consistent with the coastal policies of the other Australian States, there is an emphasis on containing existing settlements and maintaining a distinct separation between them through urban consolidation and limited new release strategies. The NSW Coastal Policy is supported by the Coastal Design Guidelines for NSW, which promote a hierarchy of coastal settlements and establish design guidance for each settlement type.

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We strongly support the content of the NSW Coastal Policy and the Design Guidelines. However, in our view, neither document is being fully implemented. Instead, we are witnessing a form of urban consolidation – multi and high rise apartments; large suburban houses on very small lots, lifted straight from metropolitan renewal and release areas. In metropolitan locations where such developments are situated in close proximity to transport and services, and are consistent with the urban character of major cities, this form of consolidation is appropriate.

However, in small and medium sized coastal towns, these types of development fundamentally alter the character of the area. The implementation of the NSW Design Guidelines needs to be supported by funding for local councils to achieve greater housing variety and contain urban settlements through appropriate design controls for their areas. Such work has already commenced in other States such as Victoria, where a *Coastal Towns Design Framework* is being developed for 16 coastal settlements in eastern Victoria. The Urban Design Frameworks will provide guidance for the future development of urban areas and will involve the preparation of realistic design concepts and planning provisions based on community consultation, research and analysis.

### **Infrastructure needs**

- 6) Most high growth coastal areas participating in the National Sea Change Taskforce report both basic and human services infrastructure shortfalls but actual needs vary greatly between different communities. It is clear that current opportunities for local governments to fund infrastructure in coastal areas (existing grants, developer contributions, and rates) are insufficient to service the needs of rapidly growing populations and seasonal influxes of visitors. The tendency toward incremental development and low density, linear patterns of settlement, make it difficult to achieve efficient approaches to infrastructure and service delivery in coastal areas.

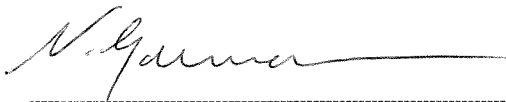
Infrastructure needs must be considered in relation to the regional context; desired settlement trends; environmental capacity; and the ability for the local council to meet ongoing maintenance and service costs. While this Inquiry will yield important information about the extent of infrastructure need in coastal communities, detailed regional settlement planning must precede (and be supported by) Commonwealth, State, and local investment decisions for major coastal infrastructure.

The recently completed South East Queensland Regional Plan provides the leading example of this approach. The planning process was led by State government, but with the very strong involvement of local government. The plan itself establishes a clear spatial strategy for future growth, and is supported by a long term funded infrastructure investment program.

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We would strongly support a comparable regional planning exercise for coastal areas of NSW, led by the NSW Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources, but with the close involvement of local governments. We understand that preparatory work in this area has begun and regard this as a positive initiative. We reiterate, however, that regional settlement planning must come before significant infrastructure decisions. Given the urgency of infrastructure and planning needs along the NSW coast, priority must be given to resourcing and expediting this planning process.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Nicole Gurran



Professor Ed Blakely