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The Committee Manager
Standing Committee on Public Works
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**INQUIRY INTO INFRASTRUCTURE PROVISION IN COASTAL GROWTH
AREAS**

The Coastwatchers Association has acted as environmental “watchdog” in the Eurobodalla Shire for over 20 years. In that time we have seen enormous changes to this very beautiful and very sensitive area of the NSW south coast.

POPULATION GROWTH AND URBAN CONSOLIDATION TRENDS

The Eurobodalla Shire remains a major holiday destination and retirement area especially for Canberra and Wollongong residents. The area has been successfully promoted as the Nature Coast and tourism underpins a large section of the local economy. The peak holiday seasons in summer and Easter see more than a trebling of the normal population and place great strain on existing infrastructure.

In the last few years there has been an enormous surge in development as the major cities become too expensive and younger families too are being forced to more affordable areas. A very unfortunate side effect of high housing costs in the cities has been the subsequent rise in housing costs in the Shire so that now many local people are unable to afford a home and rental properties are very scarce and too expensive.

Another bad trend in recent years has been the enormous increase in the size of houses although the families living in them are usually much smaller than in the past. Huge homes together with smaller lot sizes has meant that villages are losing their natural settings and most native wildlife is completely displaced from urban areas. There is no room for trees.

Judging by community input to discussions on a settlement strategy for the shire, people are supportive of urban consolidation and want to stop the sprawl of urban areas into forested and rural lands. However, they also want to preserve the ambience of the settlements where they live. A proliferation of units in Batemans Bay has met little opposition, (when they meet DCP requirements) but proposals to cram 2 large dwellings onto one lot in a village are usually opposed. Dual occupancies involving smaller dwellings attract little opposition.

Urban consolidation needs to leave adequate wildlife and vegetation corridors intact or establish them if they are missing; to encourage smaller dwellings; to preserve trees in urban areas and to maintain the character of each town and village.

SHORT AND LONG TERM NEEDS OF COASTAL COMMUNITIES FOR BASIC INFRASTRUCTURE

Rapid growth of the permanent and holiday populations together with the distances between urban and semi rural settlements in the Shire, has meant that ratepayers have been unable to fund the necessary upgrades to infrastructure and meanwhile maintain existing infrastructure.

Water and Sewerage

There have been regular sewage spills during the past holiday seasons due to overload of the system and failure of pumps. Council has a licence to pollute at its sewage outfalls and the outfall at Batemans Bay has generated complaints from swimmers on nearby beaches. If Council meets licence requirements then these must be too lax to protect water quality.

The drought has highlighted the need to conserve water and upgrade storage facilities but there has so far been little reuse of sewage effluent.

Our Association would like to see full treatment of sewage effluent so that Councils no longer have licences to pollute, ocean outfalls can be phased out and the water reused.

There are still some villages/hamlets along the coast that do not have town water or reticulated sewerage. South Durras is an example in our Shire. The people want to remain self reliant. They know the value of water and conserve it. Their tank water supplies were better quality and more reliable during the drought than the town supply elsewhere. The on-site sewage treatment systems are working and are inspected by council.

South Durras residents do not want town water or sewerage, partly because it will allow increased density in the village and destroy the character of the place. The only problems arise in the holiday seasons when caravan parks and Murramarang Resort are fully occupied. **One caravan park has already installed a package treatment plant (as have others in the Shoalhaven area). This is a more sensible option than changing the character of the whole village.**

Roads

Roads are the only means of transport within the Shire and to Canberra and adjoining Shires. Batemans Bay becomes gridlocked during holiday periods, especially when the Clyde River bridge is opened. The campaigns to upgrade the Princes Highway; duplicate and stop the opening of the present Clyde bridge; and provide bypasses around Moruya and Narooma are all widely supported in the community. These will need Commonwealth and State funding. However, the lack of plans for these projects has meant that land that may be needed is being proposed for other developments (duplication of the bridge at Batemans Bay will need land proposed for apartments) and the structure plans for the towns are unable to be satisfactorily completed (the Narooma Structure Plan, the first of three for the shire, needs to know the route of the future bypass).

Hospitals

Our region desperately needs a major hospital, currently serious cases are transferred to Canberra. Coastwatchers strongly believes that such a facility should go in one of the main

towns where it can easily complement one of the existing hospitals and be near other medical facilities such as radiologists and general practitioners.

Aged care facilities and schools

Aged care facilities will continue to be a growing need in the area. Like schools, it seems sensible to locate these in towns and larger villages around the shire. They should not be isolated in rural areas.

Having local aged care facilities and schools encourages local voluntary support and reduces travel.

If public schools were properly funded there would be much less need to bus children to other schools.

Sporting facilities

Regional sporting facilities should also go in the major towns preferably where existing facilities can be expanded. At the local level, private schools receiving public funding should have to make their sporting facilities available for public use at weekends and after school hours.

Public transport

The towns are the hubs of our currently inadequate public transport services (private bus services). By locating regional facilities in these towns (hospital, sporting facilities, etc) it may encourage more frequent services.

Community transport services will also require continuing and growing funding and volunteer support. In our shire these mini-buses provide an affordable means for aged and disabled people to get to doctors and other essential services.

CO-ORDINATION OF COMMONWEALTH, STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES TO DELIVER SUSTAINABLE COASTAL GROWTH AND SUPPORTING INFRASTRUCTURE

There is certainly an urgent need for effective co-ordination of strategies and for more lateral thinking.

Taxation

Taxation could play a major role in limiting the size of homes and their consequent over-use of resources, energy and water. The new State tax on investment properties was welcomed by our Association because it slowed the excessive construction of apartments – apartments that were mostly poorly designed for older people and so were often used as holiday rental properties and remained empty for most of the year.

Carrying capacity

Strategies should be based on the environmental carrying capacity of each region of the coast. Many of the necessary studies have been done or are underway. These have to be the basis of planning and the plans must be implemented. Unfortunately, in the past planning efforts have been undermined by concessions to developers and unsuitable rezonings.

Limit development to the infrastructure available

Development should also be limited to the existing capacity of infrastructure such as roads, hospitals, schools, water supplies and sewerage systems. It has always been the other way

around in the past. With decades when the community and the environment had to suffer while infrastructure tries to catch up.

In coastal tourist centres the peak population should be the determining factor. It is not good enough if infrastructure can only cope with off-season loads.

Information co-ordination

The various government agencies must already have a wealth of information pointing out the needs of the various regions. How many of these studies remain on the shelf? Perhaps a Commonwealth-State intergovernmental panel could draw the information together and prioritise the needs in the framework of the new coastal capacity studies and settlement strategies.

Reducing fossil fuel use

An integral part of sustainable coastal growth is reducing the use of fossil fuels. This needs action at the Commonwealth level to encourage generation and use of renewable energy. For example, there are hundreds of homes with roofs where solar panels could be installed and connected to the grid – all that is needed are the right incentives.

In rural and semi-rural areas self contained renewable energy systems not only reduce greenhouse emissions they reduce the need for clearing of valuable native vegetation for powerlines. In any case all future power line connections should go underground.

Requiring passive solar design for homes, as well as insulation and other energy saving features, will reduce the need to upgrade high voltage transmission lines. The clearings for these are so wide that they effectively destroy connections between wildlife habitats. There is also considerable concern that in closely settled areas they expose people to unsafe levels of electro-magnetic radiation.

Many farmers in our shire are suffering due to dairy deregulation. They could be helped to grow crops for ethanol or biodiesel production.

Encouraging more use of buses by improving their frequencies and routes would also reduce fossil fuel use. Perhaps part of the fuel levies could be used to subsidise buses. With modern technology it should be possible to run mini-buses more like taxis with pick up and drop off at the door or at least close by. Fewer cars would substantially reduce the costs of roads, parking areas, road trauma, pollution control and the like.

Coastwatchers supports the construction of shared pedestrian cycleways. However, the routes should be planned to facilitate maximum use by residents. For example, circuitous scenic routes are not appropriate when the need is to get children to schools and residents to local shops.

No privatisation

Privatisation has been suggested as a means of upgrading water, sewerage and hospital infrastructure. Our Association opposes privatisation. When it occurs the community and the environment suffer as the profit motive takes priority over everything else. It also becomes much harder for the public to examine the operations of private companies and there is much less accountability.

MANAGEMENT OF SOCIAL, ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH INFRASTRUCTURE PROVISION IN COASTAL GROWTH AREAS

Many of Coastwatchers ideas on this topic have been touched on in previous sections.

Infrastructure provision must preserve the character of the coastal regions. If the coast continues to be converted into suburbia then programs have failed.

When infrastructure projects are being planned the environment should be given top priority. For example, if the Princes Hwy is widened through forest then where ever possible the lanes should be separated by bush so that clearings are still narrow enough for aboreal mammals and small birds to cross, and underpasses are provided for other animals.

There also needs to be more careful planning of high speed roads. If they intersect future growth areas and will have multiple entrances and exits then they cannot safely remain high speed roads.

Water and sewerage schemes should give top priority to preserving environmental flows in rivers and to water quality.

Most importantly development should not be allowed to exceed the carrying capacity of the coast's natural ecosystems or the ability of existing infrastructure to cope with the peak loads.

Better co-ordination of governments at all levels will help achieve a sustainable future for the coast and our Association welcomes this inquiry and looks forward to some positive outcomes.

Jenny Edwards
Secretary,
The Coastwatchers Assoc Inc