

Central Coast - NSW

– a Regional Growth Area

Proposal to establish a 'regional growth area', including governance and planning structures, for the Central Coast - covering Gosford City and Wyong Shire

Presented to: Hon Barry O'Farrell, Premier of NSW

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Report Recommendations:

A. Growth Areas

We recommend that the State government designate the whole of the Central Coast (Gosford / Wyong) as a Regional Growth Area

We make three suggestions (containing options) about growth areas for the State government to consider:

1. State government extending the area of responsibility of the CC Regional Development Corporation (CCRDC) to the Warnervale / Wadalba growth centre;
2. State government designating Wyong Shire as a 'Local Government Growth Area';
3. State government designating the whole of the Central Coast (Gosford / Wyong) as a Regional Growth Area (preferred option).

B. Planning

We recommend that five plans complement the Central Coast Regional Strategy:

1. CC Infrastructure Plan – with commitments to delivering needed infrastructure to meet population growth
2. CC Sustainable Transport Plan – follow-up actions under the CC Regional Transport Plan (2010) linking the existing major population centres and integrating public transport (rail/buses), roads, cycleways and walkways
3. CC Conservation Plan – the yet to be completed plan to conserve the local environment and address degradation from past development (especially the lakes and valleys)
4. CC Water Management Plan – linking the three above to this plan under the newly formed CC Water Corporation
5. CC Affordable Housing Plan – to ensure many local people on lower incomes can afford to live on the Central Coast

Executive Summary

Sustainable Communities Research (SCR) has recently been working on aspects of the growth centre of Warnervale / Wadalba as well as greenfield and renewal growth areas in Wyong Shire and Gosford City. The paper addresses key issues and major questions of strategic planning and infrastructure financing of these areas. Of priority importance for the Central Coast are water planning, population management and infrastructure provisions.

From this work SCR makes three recommendations for consideration, including: extending the area of responsibility of the CCRDC to the Warnervale / Wadalba growth centre; designating Wyong Shire as a Local Government Growth Area; and, designating the whole of the Central Coast as a Regional Growth Area. The report also suggests five Central Coast plans need to complement the Central Coast Regional Strategy (CCRS) (2008). These plans as noted above are: infrastructure; sustainable transport; conservation; water management; and affordable housing.

Introduction

Many residents of the NSW Central Coast consider that their lifestyle is adversely impacted by a lack of adequate planning and a lack of timely provision of infrastructure to meet current and future community needs. Planning is local and lacks co-ordination; infrastructure and services have not kept pace with population increases. The local economy provides insufficient jobs; many families are experiencing social stress resulting from excessive travel time and cost. Finally, almost all indicators show degradation of the local environment of the Central Coast.

Current governance arrangements are clearly not effective – evidenced by delays, frequent disagreement and blame shifting between Federal, State and local government. Projects funded by the Federal government are delayed by State/local priorities and approvalsⁱ. The State government has failed to release the draft Regional Strategy, yet requires that Wyong Shire Council planning demonstrate compatibility with unknown requirements. The previous NSW government ‘called in’ three (3) major local projects in Wyong Shire because of complexities faced by local government and related state significant factors. Water supply became a crisis, as a result of many years of delayed decisions as well as the drought. The two local councils still do not agree over possible solutions including desalination and recycling of water. Despite clear indications that the environment is being adversely affected by current development, Gosford City Council in 2006 disbanded its Environment Department Unit and Wyong Shire Council voted not to put its draft Conservation Strategy on public exhibition in 2004 (remains in draft).

Sustainable Communities Research believes that planning needs to recognise the Central Coast as a region of sensitive natural areas; geographically, it is separated from Sydney by national parks and the Hawkesbury River and from Newcastle by national parks and Lake Macquarie. With a rapidly expanding population, the local community deserves commitments by all levels of governance to planning and infrastructure expenditure – at least equivalent to other developing areas in NSW such as Western Sydney, Illawarra and Newcastle. Only with such commitments can Central Coast residents continue to enjoy a relaxed lifestyle, with a vibrant local economy, liveable social communities and a sustainable environment. Finally, a growth centre governance structure would operate cooperatively with existing Federal, State and local governments, avoiding party-political bickering which hinders current arrangements. The growth centre organisation would work within the framework of the NSW State Plan. It would need to plan using sustainability principles and deliver infrastructure across social, economic and environmental issues.

The paper spells out the major issues facing the Central Coast; planning that will be required to tackle these issues; and a new governance organisation to meet growth and renewal requirements.

1. Issues

Regrettably, the Central Coast, receives **scant recognition as a region** despite its population of some 325,000 people (bigger than Canberra). For many ‘administrative’ purposes the Central Coast is seen as an addendum or adjunct to either Northern Sydney or the Hunterⁱⁱ – areas which have quite different demographic and planning needs. Whilst much planning effort has gone into city areasⁱⁱⁱ and regional areas such as the Hunter and Illawarra have regional plans, Central Coast councils and residents still await implementation of most aspects of the Central Coast Regional Strategy...

A further problem is caused by **ineffectual relationships between various governance bodies** – State government and its various departments and agencies, local councils and various local authorities. Too often these critical relationships are confrontational and combative – often over relatively trivial, localised issues and egos - rather than and collaborative and mutually supportive

in seeking the best outcomes on broader and important issues^{iv}. Representation of regional issues by local parliamentary representatives has failed to achieve recognition, appropriate planning or timely or adequate funding / delivery of services demanded by the large increases in population mandated by the NSW government.

Numerous community consultations over at least the last 20 years^v have delivered no coordinated approach for funding of infrastructure.

Most keenly felt at the present time is the continued need for better water planning. Water restrictions have been in place for many years and have resulted in substantial savings in domestic usage. Despite this, residents receive daily exhortations to 'save our water' – an expensive PR exercise, masking inadequate planning and delayed decision-making over many years. Local government officials / water authority personnel scurry headlong into undertaking a range of temporary / permanent – and usually expensive - 'fixes'^{vi} and Vales Point Power Station continues to use thousands of megalitres of potable water for industrial cooling.

Also keenly debated is the related issue of **increasing population**. For many years, the Central Coast was the fastest growing area in NSW. Within this growth new housing has been either medium density / high-rise redevelopment of existing centres (Gosford town centre, Terrigal, The Entrance) or single / two storey residences on increasingly smaller allotments in new areas (especially Kariong, Kincumber in Gosford City and Warnervale / Wadalba at the northern end of Wyong Shire). The issue of population management and sustainable growth was debated in Wyong Council (9/8/06), with a resolution to call for submissions and hold a Population, Infrastructure and Services Summit (5/10/06). Sustainable Communities Research addressed Council and presented a paper^{vii} before the debate.

Rapid increases in population have not been matched by increases in **local employment**. Whilst retailing employment has significantly increased in recent years^{viii}, manufacturing has substantially declined and construction is cyclical. For career employees, local salaries are generally acknowledged as being 15-20% lower than would be obtained by people doing similar work in Sydney. For many, travel to / from work is a severe time / cost burden, adversely impacting on their family life, recreation, general health / fitness and community engagement.

For the something like 30,000^{ix} people who travel daily to work in Sydney / Newcastle, **transport** is a critical issue. Anecdotal evidence suggests local bus services do not adequately meet commuter needs, in spite of major improvements over the last two years (i.e. State provision of new buses and integrating routes). Whilst capacity does not appear to be an issue, travel times between residential areas and major railway stations are excessive^x. Peak hour trains are typically overcrowded, with many commuters standing for up to an hour – trains frequently run late, especially in the afternoons. Whilst there have been substantial improvements to the freeway over recent years, local roads are well below desirable capacity or standards, resulting in many traffic jams and slow progress – whether to a local job in the main centres or beginning a journey to Sydney / Newcastle. Many older residential areas have no footpaths or kerb and guttering, making pedestrian access difficult and / or dangerous – especially for the elderly or mothers with young children. Cycleways do not exist in many areas – even where topography is flat and ideal for such activity^{xi}.

Both **family and social life** are adversely impacted by the relative lack of local employment opportunities, lower incomes and relatively long travel times and high home-work travel costs. There is clear evidence that family services are not coping – there are insufficient childcare places and family counselling/support services are stretched to the limit. High levels of domestic violence/child abuse are experienced in many families; at the community level there are increasing reports of gangs, violence and vandalism of community facilities.

With some 21% of the local population aged under 14 years^{xii}, **education** services are crucial to economic prosperity and gainful employment. These services include preschool, primary, high

school and post-school ongoing education through TAFE / VET, University and Community Colleges. There are clearly some shortfalls, especially for new schools in some areas where there have been rapid increases in population and adequate maintenance of some older facilities. The community generally however rates education as one area where the government public school sector, together with the private schools, is reasonably satisfactory.

Health services are also in heavy demand, given the proportion of the population regarded as children / youth and a higher than NSW average of the population are aged over 65 years^{xiii}. Over the last 10 years, the NSW government has spent heavily on health services, upgrading Gosford Hospital and substantially increasing the facilities available at Wyong Hospital. Apart from some staffing issues, the community would likely rate hospital services are generally good to excellent. Access to GP and ancillary health services, including dental, still causes concern for many older people as does the issue of affordability/bulk billing (acknowledged generally as Federal government issues).

A vibrant local economy requires reliable **energy / electricity**. Blackouts still occur – indicating that the electricity grid is barely coping. The announcement of a gas turbine power station at Munmorah may alleviate the generation problem; but an adequate distribution grid is essential. Responsible corporate citizenship requires that we reduce demand / discretionary usage wherever possible (by requiring better design / BASIX etc) and that we look to reduce our almost total reliance on coal as our prime energy source. Given current water shortages and the cost impositions on the community of additional pipelines, groundwater extraction and (temporary) desalination plants, using hundreds of megalitres of potable drinking water daily for industrial cooling in power stations is utterly irresponsible. The NSW government should immediately install available technology to use recycled sewage for this purpose.

Regional business is also heavily dependent on fast, reasonably priced **telecommunications** services – fixed telephone, mobile, data and internet services. Whilst there are some delays in service connections and repairs to fixed line services, mobile services have generally improved with installation of more base stations. Internet services vary from reasonable, but relatively slow (broadband) access near exchanges to many areas where access via pair gain technology and dial-up is woefully inadequate. Such inefficiencies are a significant impediment to the economic goals of employment/productivity in a regional area where many would be happy to work part-time/from home offices if they had adequate facilities. Inadequate communication links also hinders community participation by those who spend long hours travelling to / from work.

A casual **lifestyle** and a relatively unspoiled natural environment are high among the reasons many people choose to live on the Central Coast. There is clear evidence of family stress on the Central Coast – support agencies are overwhelmed, counselling services stretched and the area has among the highest number of AVOs in NSW. Critical factors are average lower incomes, stress caused by travel times to / from Sydney and locally, cost of travel, reduced relation time.

The **environment** attracts many to the Central Coast; many who visit the area are captivated by its charms and choose to live here. Despite some recent medium – high density developments, the area remains relatively uncrowded and has a sense of space. The area has unspoiled beaches, waterways and lakes together with hinterland valleys and forests. Air quality is good, as there is little heavy industry. Climate is moderate and ideal for a range of recreational outdoors activities, sporting, dining and cultural.

Local councils are required to present State of the Environment reports within their Annual Strategic Plans; regrettably, almost every indicator in the Wyong Shire SoE Report has been down since reporting started about 10 years ago^{xiv}. Developing a conservation strategy for Wyong illustrates the stalemate that can develop in governance within a growth area. The *draft Wyong Shire Conservation Strategy* outlined the importance of balancing conservation and development. Council resolved not to place the draft strategy on public exhibition, not to apply the draft strategy to private lands and to review how the strategy would be applied to public lands. No

further report has been received by Council, but it is understood a further report on the application of the strategy to public lands is being worked on.

Financing a growth region has been the foremost shortcoming of planning the Central Coast since the Gosford Wyong Structure Plan (1975 NSW Planning and Environment Commission), the last strategy adopted for the Central Coast. Wyong Council has struggled for years with **inadequate State and Federal funding** in all sectors of its financing works / services in coping with growth – environment, social, infrastructure, transport (roads and community transport), community safety, etc. The structure of local governments in financing growth needs an overhaul. Ratepayers are increasingly burdened by heavy infrastructure commitments (about 50% of the \$200m+ budget), leaving less funding available for maintenance / improvements in older, more settled areas. Additionally, the NSW government takes \$7.4m in the Wyong Shire Council (06/07) budget by way of tax or levy

In general Councils do a commendable job in producing strategic financial documents under the annual Management Plan requirement. Sustainable Communities Research has completed four (4) submissions for the Community Environment Network (CEN) (Central Coast) in addressing the Wyong Shire Council Management Plan (2002/03 to 2006/07). The emphasis of each submission was on developing a new approach to local government fiscal policies based on ESD principles. Sadly, the whole process of financing a growth local government area like Wyong is under woefully inadequate governance (noted above). Recent initiatives by Council to address these matters are commendable.

The Wyong Council has struggled with **inadequate State and Federal funding** in all sectors of its financing works / services in coping with growth – environment, social, infrastructure, transport (roads and community transport), community safety, etc. The structure of local governments in financing growth needs an overhaul. A disproportionate share of rates is spent subsidising new development. An examination of the roads, guttering, parks, street lighting, youth facilities at night, bus services, affordable housing, unsettled families, etc (covered earlier) suggests a new funding approach is needed by State/Commonwealth. The method of local government completing Strategic Plans needs close monitoring. The Wyong Shire Strategic Plan (2011/15) s generally does not dovetail (as prescribed under the Local Government Act) into other plans, at State (i.e. NSW State of the Environment Report) and Federal levels. The establishment of the Federal level Regional Development Australia Central Coast (RDACC) could address this question. The exhibition of the Wyong Shire Strategic Plan is too late for effective public engagement to have submissions adequately addressed and possibly influence the final Plan's budget.

2. Planning

Planning on the Central Coast presents some unique challenges – partially due to geographic factors (mountains, Broadwater and 3 major lakes), but also due to the scattered nature of population centres, many of which have been in existence for many years, some of which are more recent. Recent urban planning in Sydney embodies the principle of regional hubs; similar principles could be applied to the Central Coast. With approximately 10-12 scattered larger residential areas^{xv}, it is critical that a network of roads / transport corridors provides access / links between where people live and where they work / shop / obtain essential services. **Regional access corridors** are even more critical in that both the freeway and rail service corridor lie almost along the western boundary or the major population centres; people wishing to travel to / from this area must access these from decentralised population centres. Conflict between local regional and off-the-Coast destination traffic is a frequent source of major congestion.

The NSW government has recognised the **need for co-ordinating planning and development on a regional basis** under the Greater Metropolitan Region (GMR). Significant funds have been invested in developing holistic planning in Sydney and some in some regional areas. The Metro Strategy^{xvi} provides for the release of land for some 220,000 dwellings over the next 25-30 years with some 30-40% of new housing in new release areas and 60-70% in existing areas. Sustainable Communities Research completed a submission for the CEN putting a case for a Greater Metropolitan Region Strategy Based on ESD Urban Planning Principles (23/11/04) (submission available). We subscribe to the general aims of the Metropolitan Strategy, including:

“Growth is planned to occur in a sustainable way with new infrastructure planned, funded and linked to the properly sequenced release of land. Innovative planning will provide:

- better public transport – linking bus and rail
- right mix of houses, jobs, open and recreational space and green spaces
- major town centres with a full range of shops, recreational facilities and services along with smaller village centres and neighbourhood shops
- jobs available locally and within the region, reducing the demand for transport services ... and cutting travel time
- streets and suburbs planned so that residents can walk to the shops for their daily needs
- a wide range of housing choices, including ‘traditional’ houses, smaller, lower maintenance homes, and units and terraces
- Conservation land ... to protect the region’s biodiversity and provide clean air ^{xvii} “

The previous government established the Growth Centres Commission www.gcc.nsw.gov.au

“The Growth Centres will eventually provide around 181,000 dwellings and \$7.5 billion in infrastructure for about half a million new residents. The Commission is responsible for working with infrastructure agencies, industry, local councils, landowners and the community to make the plans for the Growth Centres a reality.”

The Growth Centres Commission’s functions are:

- *preparing plans for the funding and development of regional infrastructure;*
- *controlling precinct planning for each precinct (or part of a precinct) within the North West and South West Growth Centres;*
- *recommending new precincts for staged land release to the Minister for Planning;*
- *administration – including collection, holding and management – of the new Special Infrastructure Contributions to pay for regional infrastructure;*
- *implementing regional infrastructure in consultation with State agencies to support new development; and*
- *negotiating with government, landowners and developers to ensure development is facilitated in a sustainable and timely way.*

Working with councils and landowners

The Growth Centres Commission has established two local government coordination committees, one for the North West and one for the South West. The committees include elected representatives and senior staff of local councils in the Growth Centres.

The Commission will consult with councils and landowners in developing the plans for each precinct in the Growth Centres. Councils will identify what types of local infrastructure is required in the precincts, such as parks, community facilities, drainage and local roads.

This will result in new zonings and controls for the precincts. Over time these controls will be incorporated into local plans when councils prepare their new comprehensive Local Environmental Plans. The Growth Centres Commission will work with councils to achieve this.”^{xviii}

3. New Governance for the Central Coast

It has been demonstrated earlier that current governance arrangements are not delivering appropriate planning or adequate services. Governments at all levels are becoming increasingly aware of a general resentment of ‘spin’ and a requirement that governments at all levels deliver infrastructure and services to meet the needs of the community.

At consultations regarding the ‘NSW State Plan – A New Direction for NSW’, the previous government received feedback from local residents expressing strong dissatisfaction with inadequate planning, lack of infrastructure, transport and basic services such as water.

Sustainable Communities Research (SCR) has completed work recently on aspects of the growth centre of Warnervale / Wadalba and Wyong Shire local government growth area.

We submit three suggestions we would like the government to consider:

- 1 State government extending the area of responsibility of the CCRDC to the Warnervale / Wadalba growth centre
- 2 State government designating Wyong Shire as a ‘Local Government Growth Area’
- 3 State government designating the whole of the Central Coast (Gosford / Wyong) as a Regional Growth Area

Arguments could be advanced for each of these proposals; however, our preferred option would be the latter - designating the whole of the Central Coast (Gosford / Wyong) as a Regional Growth Area. The Central Coast is a discrete region (as accepted in 2010 by the Bureau of Census) defined by national parks / Hawkesbury River in the south, mountains to the west and national parks and lakes to the north. The region’s population shares similar lifestyle and both Gosford City and Wyong Council share many services – especially water. It makes sense for the NSW government to plan health, hospitals, emergency services and schools on a regional rather than a LGA basis.

Planning / infrastructure challenges for Gosford City include: increased population – mainly as infill development; consolidation near existing centres/along transport corridors; linking existing residential areas to main town centres/village centres; adequate public transport, including linking bus to rail services and employment centres

Planning / infrastructure challenges for Wyong Shire include: increased population, mainly in new areas to the north (especially Warnervale / Wadalba) but also infill development/ consolidation in areas like Long Jetty/The Entrance, Wyong and possibly Toukley; adequate transport services, most of the residential areas are not along the rail corridor; employment; and, conservation, especially the 3 major lakes which are at the heart of the area.

Common planning / infrastructure challenges for both areas include: local economy as there is insufficient local employment; over 30,000 locals travel daily to / from work in Sydney causing local morning/evening traffic congestion; unmet need for more and more trains and social disruption; largest employers are retail and construction (spasmodic); more needs to be done by

the State to stimulate and assist local small business; social challenges there is a wide income divide on the Central Coast with relatively well-off retirees contrasting with limited income young families and pensioners; there is increasing evidence of social breakdown shown in divorce, single parents, AVOs, gang violence and nuisance vandalism statistics; conservation, including SoE for both councils indicate continuing deterioration across all areas

We believe that a governance structure, including the CCRDC, would:

- give recognition to the Central Coast as a significant region in its own right
- assist overcome the current dysfunctional and ineffectual relationships that currently exist between local, State and Federal governments
- bring fresh thinking and additional resources to bear on a developing regional 'problem'
- act as a catalyst to a new co-operative effort between governments at all levels to integrate the planning, funding and delivery of appropriate infrastructure to meet local needs
- allow effective regional planning of population and essential services / infrastructure such as water, transport, energy
- more adequately provide for maintenance of the casual lifestyle and amenity which is so attractive to local residents
- maintain and enhance the natural environment – lakes, beaches, waterways, valleys, mountains etc
- ensure appropriate balance between consumption / use and preservation of natural resources for future generations

Undoubtedly some will resist what may be perceived as a 'takeover' of local government; they should be reminded that reliance on local planning and funding resources is clearly not working; local residents are voicing their dissatisfaction in increasing numbers.

The previous NSW government responded to the need for regional planning and infrastructure delivery in Sydney (Metro Strategy, Growth Centres Commission); it also initiated regional planning in the Illawarra and Hunter regions.

Sustainable Communities Research believes that the governance structures developed for other areas may provide a useful model for a growth strategy for the Central Coast – a sustainable growth region.

Other Reports noted as available through Sustainable Communities Research.

A. *Population Management and Sustainable Communities – Case Study Wyong Shire* (2006). Sustainable Communities Research/Rauscher R (2006)

B. *Wyong Shire draft Conservation Strategy Paper Extracts*. Sustainable Communities Research/Rauscher R (2004).

C. *Submission on the NSW Government's Metropolitan Strategy 2004*. Sustainable Communities Research/Rauscher R (2004).

D. *Submission to Minister for Transport on Sustainable Transport and ESD Based Urban Planning on the Central Coast*. Sustainable Communities Research/ CCCEN/ Rauscher (2004).

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- ⁱ Examples include dredging of Tumbi Creek and recent announcement of AusLink funding to upgrade The Ridgeway and Brush Road – clearly not major / link roads.
- ⁱⁱ For example, employment data supplied to the Area Consultative Committee was mixed data including two areas – North Sydney / Central Coast – with quite differing patterns of unemployment; Central Coast Area Health was merged with North Sydney; the Catchment Management Authority is Hunter / Central Rivers; our University is Central Coast Campus of Newcastle University
- ⁱⁱⁱ Metro Strategy covering South West (Liverpool / Campbelltown) and North West (Baulkham Hills) growth centres; Growth Centres Commission
- ^{iv} Examples include previous State government takeover of Gosford Council planning powers in respect of the Spurbest development, Dept of Planning insistence that Wyong strategic planning proposals comply with the then non-existent Regional Strategy Plan, calling in of the Wyong WEZ and Warnervale Town Centre proposals, past joint Gosford Wyong Joint Water Authority disagreements, approvals etc, Tumbi Creek dredging fiasco
- ^v Community consultations commenced as far back as Central Coast Structure Plan 1975, Shaping the Central Coast early 2000s, and Central Coast Action Plan 2003.
- ^{vi} substitute alternatives include use of recycled water in road-making / construction and irrigation of parks / gardens / some large-scale developments (Magenta Shores), use of bore water for irrigation of playing fields, proposals for permanent / temporary desalination plants and subsidy schemes (generally not wide take-up) for tank installation, water saving measures, front-loading washing machines etc
- ^{vii} Population Management and Sustainable Communities – case Study Wyong Shire (extract or full paper available)
- ^{viii} Initially with establishment of Erina Fair and Westfield, more recently with expansion in these large centres together with Fountain Plaza Lake Haven and also rebuilding of Peninsula Plaza, Market Town
- ^{ix} Wyong Shire Management Plan 2006/07
- ^x Peninsula to Woy Woy; The Entrance – Gosford approx 1 hr, similar to Tuggerah, Wyong
- ^{xi} Recent main roads have generally been widened to include cycleways
- ^{xii} ABS
- ^{xiii} ABS 17.7% for Gosford / Wyong
- ^{xiv} In 1998, Wyong Shire Council reported that the Shire's environment was declining in all areas except waste management. Every State of the Environment Report since then has indicated similar trends so our move towards sustainability is proving very difficult to achieve despite concerted efforts on many fronts. Wyong Shire SoE Report 2004-2005
- ^{xv} Peninsula, West Gosford-Kariong, Gosford, Wyoming-Narara, Erina-Terrigal, Avoca-beaches, The Entrance-Long Jetty, Berkeley Vale-Chittaway, Tuggerah-Mardi-Wyong, Toukley, Gorokan-Wadalba-Warnervale, Blue Haven-Budgewoi
- ^{xvi} NSW Government's Metropolitan Strategy – 'Managing Sydney's Growth Centres' and 'Preliminary Infrastructure Report'
- ^{xvii} Extracts from Metro Strategy *ibid* p3
- ^{xviii} Growth Centres Commission, Information Leaflet No 1