Whatever happened to our social infrastructure?

(Oops, that wasn’t what we meant?)

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I wanted to initially highlight a headline from the Gold Coast Bulletin in August of Careflight’s plight resulting from the carbon tax, to highlight that the not-for-profit sector seldom figures in the consideration and delivery of government policy.

By way of further example, when Allconnex was created in July of 2010, pre-existing rebates with Gold Coast Water that previously had applied for members of the not-for-profit sector were summarily dropped, as Allconnex was set up with a pure business model by State Government that had no room to include provision for those rebates. Grummitt Planning subsequently headed up a strong push from the Gold Coast branch of UDIA to have those rebates reinstated and this finally happened in April of this year.
The Sector.

One could say, so what? What’s the big deal whether they get discounts or rebates or not?

It is little known that, according to the National Roundtable of Non-profit Organisations, in 2006/07, the not-for-profit sector provided paid employment for 890,000 people or 8.6% of Australians and contributed $34 billion or 3.4% to our GDP. That reflects only those in paid employment and the voluntary elements, involving a further 4.6 million people, added a further $13b to those economic figures. According to the Productivity Commission’s Report into the Not-for-profit sector in 2009, the economic value to our nation was similar in impact to the wholesale trade sector, the transport and storage sector and the government administration and defence sector and was 1.5 times the size of the agricultural sector. It was also growing at twice the rate of the national economy.

By way of global comparison, the not-for-profit sector in Australia is similar in size to that of the US and the UK and larger than that of Canada and most European nations, with the exception of Netherlands and Ireland.

Many of these larger economic sectors in Australia have peak body lobby groups to ensure that their interests are protected when major government policies are introduced. As my introduction showed, by contrast, the not-for-profit, or charitable sector (which is the term I prefer to use), are largely smaller, uncoordinated, well-meaning community members who do not have any collective voice, outside perhaps of ACOSS, which only covers some elements in this sector. Consequently implications on the sector are rarely considered by Government when policy launches are made.

It is my strong conviction that this occurs to at least the same degree with Local Government which is the area providing the primary operating space for all of these organizations – the land use regulatory environment.

As government devolves more services to the not-for-profit sector (a clear example of which is welfare housing) and retreats from its own previous commitments in social areas, the size and engagement of the charitable sector in the provision of the social fabric of our society has increased. For example in some small rural communities a significant charitable sector agency may be the largest employer in the town, as is the case in St George with Churches of Christ Care.
Our Credentials

Grummitt Planning has operated on the Gold Coast for more than 16 years and in Ipswich for more than a year. An important part of our consulting practice involves the charitable sector, including places of worship, developments for service and community clubs, affordable housing projects, charitable corporate facilities etc.

The majority of examples that I will use are from our own clients. I have also consulted with local governments in our core areas of Gold Coast and Ipswich and with major government and private providers of master planned communities to ascertain the current state of play, some examples that have worked well and some of the challenges faced by both the charitable sector and our regulators.

The result, I believe, provides a significant challenge to our local authority planners and to the town planning profession in general.
Why Bother?

I should initially set a framework for who I am including in this sector.

There are many definitions for the not-for-profit sector, the third sector or charitable sector as it is variously described. As in my outline of the significant economic value provided by the sector to our nation, I will turn to the Productivity Commission’s Research report into the Contribution of the Not-for-profit Sector, published in January floods in Queensland, that one other key element of the charitable sector is its ability to mobilise volunteers and resources to respond to emergency situations in ways that government is never capable of. Those floods also demonstrated the enormous social credibility that the sector had, with the massive donations specifically directed to the sector rather than the government’s appeal. Our communities and corporate citizens obviously have a high level of trust in many of those organisations.

Is there a need for something to be done?

As mentioned above, in 2006/07, the charitable sector was worth $34b to the national economy, with an estimated additional $13b worth of voluntary time provide outside of the paid sector. According to the ABS, of that $34b, 39% was funded by the sale or gifting of goods and services, 34% by government grants and contracts and 14% by private donors and membership fees.

It is my strong view that both government and private donors would rather that their contributed dollars were spent on delivering the service to the needy sector of community for which it is designated, than for fees to consultants (like us) and local government along the way, and that the time involved in approval processes was truncated so that the service was delivered more quickly to the point of need. Few projects are funded prior to a need being identified and, most often, is only provided when the need is at such a level that a public cry for action has already been made.

It is interesting to note from the Productivity Commission’s report that major reforms are underway with Federal and State governments (and to a much lesser extent with community services directorates within Councils) on service compacts, reporting and capacity building but nothing was identified in the town planning arena of local government. Yet this is a sector that potentially affects everything that the charitable sector does as their activities almost exclusively involve land use.

The three areas of problem outlined above are capable of addressal and our society, I believe, supports such action. In its submission to the Productivity Commission, ACOSS said ‘the community values the contribution of the sector and expects State, Territory and Commonwealth governments to help non profits to flourish through appropriate regulation and concessional treatment.’ Whilst they did not make reference to Local Government, the general principle is obviously relevant.
What is being done?

Where a system results in frustrations or anger, there are always creative people who seek and find alternative solutions to avoid the problems encountered. Frequently there are many who are ignorant of town planning processes, so that approval processes are frequently ignored or handled with a nod and a wink so that compliance issues with charitable institutions are not unknown and most town planning consultancies have had to deal with those.

As schools are generally not covered by planning scheme limitations, many community groups undertake their activities in schools, which does have the community benefit of better utilisation of school facilities outside of school hours, but carries an added burden on the charitable organisation in not having their own space and having to bump in and bump out each time they use it, even if they are designed with such multi-use in mind. Community usage of schools is not universal with State government leaving the decision on whether school facilities are to be used by community groups with the local principal.

We understand that State Government is planning to trial a number of integrated service hubs around the state to facilitate the provision of broader social infrastructure, including early childhood services in 3 schools in the State and health services in some health locations. These services are intended to involve both government and non-government charitable organisations.

There is an interesting example in Gold Coast City, where Council was granted a tract of State land at Arundel a number of years ago at a fixed rental, with the express proviso that it be provided for community sector groups. These groups are granted a sub-lease under Council’s primary lease from State Government. This land has been used to provide separate parcels of land for a very wide range of community groups who are required to pay for a share of the roads and other infrastructure and then lease the land for $500 pa. This special arrangement has enabled a wide range of community services to be established ranging from the Ostomy Association, Vietnam Veterans Association, Gold Coast Mosque, Gold Coast appear that the ACOSS’ comments about the value of the charitable sector are not acknowledged. It would be appropriate for ULDA to more deliberately facilitate such land uses in their development areas.

The large and much awarded Springfield development also does not make any special provision or favourable assessment for the charitable sector, notwithstanding the accelerated approval process in place for other land uses. Their philosophy is to aggregate community service providers in a limited number of central locations, e.g. the education precinct provides for 4 different churches to meet in the same auditorium space on a Sunday, but no provision facilitated anywhere else in the community for any additional activities or services, including those that they would normally provide through the week. They are certainly supportive of the larger religious denominations which provide more integrated and wide-ranging community services, e.g. education, health or child care services as part of their religious presence, but no provision for the smaller more localised group.
What is still to be done?

1. Land use issues.

Whilst the uniform land use definitions are a significant step, it is still up to each Council to establish the level of assessment for the different elements of social infrastructure, so each can make the assessment process as easy or as difficult as they choose. The standard definitions include definitions for club, community care centre, community residence, community use, place of worship and residential care facility.

It is important therefore that realistic assessment of the impacts of charitable uses in the relevant zones needs to be considered including consideration of differing assessment levels for different scales of facility. These considerations should not just consider the negative amenity impacts but also the positive community impacts. An acknowledgement of the value of social infrastructure provided by charitable groups should be addressed and appropriate assessment levels nominated. Impact assessment should only be contemplated when large facilities are proposed which will have significant impacts by way of traffic, noise etc, e.g. large places of worship of a regional or city-wide scale in close proximity to residential areas. Housing related uses should be assessed at the lowest level possible.

This has not occurred within the draft Toowoomba scheme where community uses within residential or other areas are limited to provisions that are of a nominal scale and provision for broader sector community uses has not been facilitated. There are some locational guidelines, i.e. on major roads, but scale limitations are significant and likely to be a major restriction in their provision. The Code provided for the Community and Recreation Uses do not do much more than give guidelines for Child care centres, thus making other uses readily non-compliant with the code, thus raising any self-assessable land use to code assessable. Incorporation of code provisions such as those used by Gold Coast City Council in their community precinct would make appropriate community uses more likely to be compliant and thus facilitate their provision as self-assessable development.

As the experience of Gold Coast City Council’s community precinct has demonstrated, there is great value in such precincts and Councils do have opportunity to explore the utilisation of public land in the approval process and contemplate using it more widely than just for open space and parkland. The examples of the past when these areas were used for community halls or for the local Scout and Guide groups is worthy of revisitation for wider usage by community providers, as currently being developed by Gold Coast City.

2. Pricing mechanisms

The provision of discounts and rebates is a long-established mechanism that most local authorities have used to encourage and facilitate the provision of community infrastructure by this sector. The establishment of statutory authorities in this area has resulted in the potential loss of these acknowledgements and discounts or rebates. Pressure needs to continue to be exercised within Councils, but particularly on State regulatory authorities, to see discounts or rebates provided in recognition of the contribution that charitable organisations make to community well-being.
Conclusion.

It is not realistic to nominate singular solutions but I hope that what has been outlined above has created an awareness of the particular requirements of the charitable sector and the need to contemplate them in our master planning and plan making processes. It is obvious that community groups need space to meet and provide services and there also has to be recognition of specific requirements of certain groups which are not capable of joint use, such as a mosque or Buddhist temple.

As outlined above, the value of the sector to our communities, both in jobs and the cost-effectiveness of services delivered, behoves approval authorities to acknowledge and facilitate that social investment by providing discounts or rebates for those organizations as the result is a greater extent of service delivered to the community as the beneficiary.

Clearly the community’s needs create an imperative on both the assessment authorities and service providers to keep application and compliance processes and costs to a reasonable minimum.

As Ashley van de Velde of RACQ Careflight observed, the impact of the carbon tax (read PIP charge, application fee, additional consultant costs etc) can only result in a reduction in services that the community is expecting to be provided or an additional need for fund raising by the sector operatives.

I urge you therefore to go back to your Councils and organisations and enquire of your own local charitable groups just how your organisations can better facilitate the provision of their services.

Our communities will thank you.

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