One size does not fit all (or how a planner can break your heart) - experiences of the South West Regional Plan

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Abstract

In fast growing areas eg. SEQ, regional plans assist councils in dealing with urban development, people and industry concentrations, competition for water, power, transport etc. Does that growth model have any relevance for us where the population is static or declining? Alas, one size does not fit all.

The idea of ‘place’, a significant concept with indigenous people, is the real asset of the sparsely populated south west.

‘Place’ should conjure up regional aspirations as opposed to density issues for planners.

Background – Queensland’s regional plans

Queensland’s first regional plans were focused on coastal regions experiencing high growth rates. Since the mid-90s they have evolved from non-statutory Regional Growth Management Frameworks, with a focus on co-operative regional responses to growth pressures, to the current generation of statutory regional plans spawned by the South East Queensland Regional Plan. These statutory regional plans have a primary focus on regulating land use and directing council planning schemes.

When the Integrated Planning Act 1997 (IPA) was amended in 2004 to give the South East Queensland Region Plan 2005-2026 the status of a statutory instrument a dual regional planning system for Queensland was created. Different provisions applied over the remainder of the State. This dual model of regional land use planning led to inconsistencies in addressing state wide planning issues and raised questions about the role of regional plans and their capacity to influence the Queensland planning system.

In 2006, the government extended the statutory regional planning program to the Far North Queensland region. It also announced that three new non-statutory regional plans would be developed for western Queensland. This program was later extended to include a regional plan for Maranoa and District, as well as the previously-announced South West, Central West and North West regional plans.

As part of the reform process for planning in Queensland a single statutory regional planning system was instituted in 2007. This meant the new plans for western Queensland regions were some of the first statutory regional plans to be developed outside South East Queensland.

But how did this new statutory planning model apply to the western plans?

This is the continuing story of the South West Regional Plan, an update of early-stage impressions delivered at the 2008 PIA conference in Longreach.

South West Regional Plan – “the good, the bad and the ugly”, and the future...

Development and history - prior to the western regional plan initiative the four “corner shires”—Bulloo, Murweh, Paroo and Quilpie—collaborated through the shared interests and activities of the South West Regional Economic Development organisation. On a broader scale, the four shires were also members of the South West Queensland Local Government Association.
The Size, Shape and Sustainability initiative, a Queensland-wide review of local government boundaries to identify amalgamation opportunities (later to morph into the Local Government Reform program of forced amalgamations) set the backdrop for formation of South West Queensland’s first Regional Planning Advisory Committee (RPAC). There was SOME reluctance on the part of regional constituents. Communities in western Queensland were still smarting from the impact of a tightened Queensland Government regulatory regime for vegetation clearing and extraction of water from streams and the Great Artesian Basin. Other “great unknowns” were looming—Wild Rivers and new stock route management arrangements! And that drought refused to break…

At the first and subsequent meetings of the South West RPAC the “wounded westerners” were adamant that their support for the regional planning process was completely contingent on local ownership, including the formulation and writing of the plan. Further, the Committee was determined that land use regulation beyond council planning schemes was NOT to be a feature of the regional plan, especially after planning legislation changes in late 2007 dictated that all new regional plans would be “statutory”. Urban footprints continue to be seen as having little relevance in regions where councils receive only very low numbers of small-scale development applications each year and populations are either static or declining.

The 2007 and early 2008 meetings and workshops of the planning committee delivered the plan’s drafting instructions culminating in a consultation draft of the South West Regional Plan, released in August 2008 by Deputy Premier and Minister for Infrastructure and Planning at the time—the Honourable Paul Lucas. After an extended consultation period and a State election the final plan was released, largely unchanged, a year later.

Along with some apparently obligatory motherhood policies, force-fed into the plan by remote George Street bureaucrats, the plan very clearly articulates on page 5 the region’s priorities—health, education, transport and sustainable natural resource management.

The good – two years after release of the final South West Regional Plan there is still considerable enthusiasm for the activities of the regional planning committee and its implementation of the plan. Meetings are held three or four times a year, even though some scheduled meetings have been impacted by weather-induced assess and travel problems. Attendance levels are consistently high, in a region with very few stakeholders and large distances separating them. The committee’s meetings coincide with meetings of the South West Regional Economic Development organisation and the South West Queensland Local Government Association. This is both convenient and strategic; it reduces the total travel burden on participants who would otherwise be travelling long distances to attend two or more of the meetings and it coordinates the committee’s activities with those of the other two groups.

There is a sense of real progress in the four priority areas and committee meetings provide a regular forum to raise new issues such as concern over groundwater impacts arising from coal seam gas extraction in eastern sections of the Great Artesian Basin.

The committee enjoys open communication with Queensland Health, the key co-ordinator of health service delivery to the region. At a time when the Federal Government’s Health Reform program is being rolled out the committee uses its influence to make recommendations about district health boards and service delivery. Committee recommendations about Queensland Health’s regional newsletter, the Pulse, have improved its effectiveness as a tool for informing the community of available health services and initiatives.

A regional transport and freight strategy for South West Queensland has been funded and completed. The strategy will provide an invaluable platform from which actions to address the region’s transport needs and frustrations can be launched.

Some progress has been made in the development of a dialogue with the Department of Education and Training. The committee has supported Bulloo Shire in its development of an effective partnership with the Department to deliver an innovative secondary school option for
Thargomindah. This delivery model potentially has application in other small, remote centres where whole families sometimes leave the region to pursue secondary schooling opportunities for their children. The committee has effectively raised specific secondary school concerns that were addressed by the Department and is currently deeply interested in maintaining effective education services delivery in remote areas as the relevant delivery program transitions from the Priority Country Area Program to the Rural and Remote Education Assistance Program.

The committee continues to consider advice about natural resource management issues and determine its most appropriate role in the natural resources arena, an arena characterised by a multitude of players and interests. Ongoing concern about the impacts of vegetation management restrictions on wild fire hazard, the sustainability of the Great Artesian Basin and management of surface waters in the region persists. Committee meetings provide a forum for members to receive expert advice from scientists and policy makers, as well as providing advice directly to the responsible agencies.

The Department of Local Government and Planning provides a secretariat to the committee and has initiated a runsheet to keep an ongoing record of implementing activities, against each of the plan’s policies and strategies. All stakeholders participate in providing this information that in turn delivers a clear snapshot of what has been done across each topic area of the plan and highlights those areas in need of further attention.

Most importantly, the regional planning committee appreciates that the regional plan is a Queensland Government-endorsed blueprint for South West Queensland. As such it has great value as a leveraging tool in negotiations between south west stakeholders and the Queensland Government.

**The Bad** – delay seems to be the one common ingredient in initiatives of government, at all levels. A full year elapsed from release of the draft South West Regional Plan until its finalisation in 2009. The regional plan is a policy document, with some pointers to how these policies might be implemented. A Queensland Government-endorsed plan WITH some initial actions specified would have provided for a more rapid and smoother transition from plan writing to plan implementation.

The regional planning committee has no discretionary funding to implement the plan. Implementation activities are funded from core or operating budgets of local government and State government departments. There is no infrastructure plan associated with the final regional plan and the July 2011-released draft Queensland Infrastructure Plan provides very little comfort for western inhabitants of that plan’s identified Darling Downs South West region.

**The Ugly** – interference by non-involved parties has been the ongoing challenge for South West Regional Plan “believers”. Protracted argument at the start of the process was essential to convince regional stakeholders to get involved in the planning process. Regional ownership was the key to the plan “getting off the ground”. As Queensland government officers and elected representatives cycle through their individual career paths “corporate memory” about the plan, its stakeholders and focus on matters other than land use is at constant threat.

A cursory read of the plan readily reveals policy inserts quite at odds with the priorities and issues canvassed in regional discussions. Presumably these were force-fed into the plan to ensure a smooth path through Cabinet approval processes.

To a non-government observer it seems that the conduct of meetings, setting of meeting dates and flow and review of meeting minutes is increasingly scrutinised by the Brisbane-based hierarchy of the secretariat—the Department of Local Government and Planning. A draft annual report to inform the responsible Minister of the committee’s 2010 activities was endorsed in March this year. An assurance was given that the report would be published on the department’s web site after internal approval. At the time of writing, September 2011, the report is still not published.
The Queensland Government has recently released as part of its Queensland Regionalisation Strategy the Queensland Infrastructure Plan. It pays scant regard to the existing regional plan and has a clear focus on population growth and the infrastructure to support such growth. Our dilemma persists, our population wavers between “static” and “declining” and we continue to struggle to be heard above the clamour of concerns raised from the rapidly-growing regions.

In short, South West stakeholders engaged in the regional planning process on the condition that they had significant “ownership” of the plan and its implementation. Two years on from release it seems that our ownership is being wrested away, with no clear indication of continued support from George Street.

The Future – since 2007 there have been significant changes in the priorities of the Queensland Government, elections loom large for both local and State Government and the resources sector in Queensland has flourished. The summer of natural disasters has re-set agendas and dominated budget considerations for the immediate future.

There is no certainty about the priorities of the Queensland Government that will be in place post-elections and changes in local government leadership, with significant potential for flow-on impacts on the regional planning committee and its implementation of the regional plan, are anticipated.

Behind this “wave of change” currently, or about to, sweep Queensland some constants will remain—the population in Queensland’s south west corner will remain relatively stable, delivery of health and education services will still be a priority for local residents, the grazing and farming sector will persist with its ageing and diminishing workforce and struggle to maintain young workers. In this world, the South West Regional Plan will still be relevant; if it’s allowed to survive!

Conclusions – “what should we remember from this exercise and make use of in the future...”

In Queensland, western populations are a minority group with a majority Queensland land holding. The remote, sparsely-populated parts of the state play a major role in terms of economic prosperity and natural resource management.

Past experience has made western constituents wary of new State Government initiatives. Planning fatigue is VERY REAL, especially in communities where action is much more highly valued than rhetoric. More consultation is not a priority agenda item for bush constituents.

Successful regional planning is planning in its purest form—envisaging the future, establishing how best to achieve that vision and most importantly, acting to get there.

In the South West it’s about trying to maintain the good things that contribute to the South West sense of place and improve the not-so-good things. In order to achieve that, transplanted planning models from high-growth regions have little relevance. Alas, one size does NOT fit all.