Planning for Growth in Small Regional Towns

Stephen Smith MPIA
Deicke Richards
58 Baxter Street
Fortitude Valley Q 4006
PI 3852 8700
MI 0458 458 825
El stephen@deickerichards.com.au

Non Refereed paper

Topic Description: Mackay is a booming resource area. This economic growth has impacts on smaller towns and settlements in the regions, which invariably have little or no planning controls. The Enquiry by Design process delivers fast, cost effective tangible results for the planning of these towns and settlements.
Mackay is at the centre of a strong regional economy dominated by a number of nearby mining operations, chiefly coal. In fact, around one third of Australia’s coal exports leaves the Australian shore via Hay Point south of the city of Mackay.

On any one day you can count 60-70 bulk cargo ships lying at anchor off Hay Point waiting for their turn to fill up and go.

This regional industry drives an expanding population creating pressure for growth for residential development across the Mackay Region. The Mackay Region is projected to have a population of 200,000 by 2031.

The region of Mackay is a diverse place comprising small coastal communities separated by well vegetated coastal headlands which provides striking relief to the smaller beach communities in between.

From the coastal beach’s, flat alluvial plains stretch along the Pioneer Valley to the Great Dividing Range behind. These plains are dominated by fields of sugar cane, punctuated here and there by houses and outbuildings shrouded behind a screen of palm and mango trees. A very picturesque landscape. Small discreet rural towns and communities are scattered across the plains. The City of Mackay is the dominant settlement of the region.

Mackay Regional Council, which was formed from the amalgamation of Mackay City, Sarina Shire, and Marian Shire Council’s, now administers this diverse region. As with a number of regional areas where amalgamation has occurred, planning officers must now stitch together the various and differing planning devices and controls for the entire region. For some of the smaller rural towns, information on basic items such as flooding and drainage are non-existing, incomplete or badly out of date. Planning controls are generally, equally basic or indeed inadequate in light of unexpected growth.

Such is the case in Mackay where some of the smaller hinterland communities are now experiencing pressure for growth with little in the way of planning controls.

Two hinterland towns in particular Marian and Mirani west of Mackay are now experiencing this pressure for growth.
**Mirani**

The Mirani township was the major centre and civic hub of the previous Mirani Shire. Containing a range of community and other services, the town serves a broad catchment that includes much of the hinterland area further west along the Pioneer Valley.

The town has been built on a bend of the Pioneer River and is connected by both road and rail to the City of Mackay some 40 kilometers east of the town. An elegant orthogonal grid underlies the town structure with the rail line running along the main street providing opportunities for large park areas which divide the northern and southern halves of the main street. These park areas contain large mature mango trees which, in conjunction with the street layout and rail line, provide a strong sense of identity to this township.

The grided structure also provides for high levels of connectivity both vehicular and pedestrian.

Marian

The Marian Sugar Mill operated by Mackay Sugar Ltd is the starting point for the settlement of Marian. Larger than its neighbour Mirani to the west, Marian is a Mill Town. The Marian Mill located on the western edge of the town, has been identified as being strategically important in the long term future of the sugar industry in the Pioneer Valley.

The Mill literally sits astride the main traffic route (Anzac Avenue) through the settlement. As well as being located on the major east west route through the Valley, the town is also traversed by a major north south route which links the Bruce Highway with the Peak Downs Highway allowing traffic, especially heavy vehicles associated with the mining activity, to bypass Mackay.
Historically, the town has grown around the Mill with the Mill establishing a residential area adjoining, to provide housing for workers. The Mill has divested itself of most of these properties now, though some of these houses still remain next to the mill. These houses provide some sense of history and continuity for the township.

Pressure is now being exerted to expand the town to provide land for residential development. This development capitalises on the towns relative proximity to Mackay and the amenity the locality offers.

Enquiry by Design

Given the extent of pressure being experienced and the number of existing and proposed development applications in both towns, Council approached Deicke Richards to undertake an Enquiry by Design (EbD) workshop to consider the future of both towns.

An enquiry by Design event is an intense, interactive, collaborative, creative process, involving a broad number of stakeholders, including Council, State Government, the community, land owners, designers, engineers and a range of other specialists. A wide range of issues, interests and influences are considered and hopefully reconciled to generate an agreed position regarding a development proposal.

Specific design outcomes are created within a short time frame through a highly structured process to ensure outcomes are grounded in reality.

Working in groups, usually with an appointed design leader each group will have a specific brief or design to pursue. It is an iterative process where the design process sharpens the definition of the problem which informs the next wave of designs and outcomes. The process works from the broad strategic scale drilling down to focus then on individual sites, opportunities and interventions.
Usually conducted over multiple days the process goes from examining constraints to developing solutions to issues such as movement, built form, land use and open space.

EbD’s are normally conducted close to or within the site to allow participants to check and recheck site conditions and constraints.

Because of the collaborative nature of the process there is a greater sense of ownership of the outcomes and a much greater consensus between participants. As a result outcomes tend to be more robust, transparent and enduring.

**Marian and Mirani EBD**

The purpose of the enquiry by design workshop for Marian and Mirani was to investigate a range of design and planning options that provide alternative ways to accommodate the growth that both townships are currently experiencing. The workshop examined a number of themes and options for each township as well as considering the regional perspective of how the townships relate to each other and the broader Mackay urban framework.

The enquiry by design workshop brought together Councillors, Council staff, and representatives of a selected group of State Agencies in a collaborative environment to exchange ideas and to establish principles and guidelines for development. Deicke Richards acted in the capacity of both facilitator and design leader for the 2 day event.

The workshop led participants through a structured design process looking from the regional perspective (the big picture) to looking at the individual towns and looking at key development sites and interventions.

**The Process**

The process led key stakeholders through the context and constraints of each place to gather an appreciation of the issues and opportunities each place provided before structure planning options, at a range of scales, were developed.
An agenda was agreed before the workshop which set out the running of the workshop and was structured as follows:

Day 1

- Welcome and goals of the EbD
- Background Briefings on a range of topics (planning, environment, infrastructure etc)
- Design Session 1 Issues & Themes Analysis - Overall site response to issues and background information. Strategic planning framework and urban footprint definition.

Day 2

- Design Session 2 Structure Plan Options - Considering the existing constraints and opportunities within the current planning frameworks to develop a master plan approach for each township movement, land use, open space
- Design Session 3 Defining the Place - Review of density and form appropriate to the settlement, main streets, frontages, typologies, built form and character

The process is designed to elicit a range of response plans from broader strategic and structure plans to more detailed master plans and layout plans for specific sites, in very compressed time frames.

**Background Briefings**

Background briefings are provided to the workshop participants on a range of topics relevant to the study area. Briefings are no longer than 8-10 minutes and provide very targeted advice on relevant issues that are pertinent to the resolution of an outcome on the site.

Briefings are provided by a range of stakeholders and may range through topics such as:

- Environment, vegetation, flora and fauna
- Flooding and drainage
- Impacts on and from local industries (in this case Mackay Sugar)
- Roads and Transport
- Planning

These constraints, where they can be physically identified, are mapped on base plans to be used later in the design process.

These briefing sessions also allow closer questioning and scrutiny of the issues to allow a balance to be struck between competing and/or conflicting issues.

**Strategic Framework**

The first step of the process produces quick response plans regarding the overall structure of a place. This stage is about setting the strategic framework and understanding the place as a whole, its connections, its elements and its setting. This stage looks at opportunities that are derived from an analysis of the place and getting a ‘feel’ for it. The following plans were all produced at the workshop.

For Marian and Mirani these response plans were as follows:
The above plans for Marian explore a number of connections and concepts such as establishing an urban footprint, the creation of a new centre, new vehicle connections, consolidating medium density and mix use around a local centre. It also looks at defining an ‘edge’ for the town and identifies where if anywhere there could or should be opportunities for growth and how that growth integrates with the existing town.
In this situation existing industry to the west, the river to the north and low lying areas to the south help to define the town footprint. To the east development is constrained by GQAL and perhaps more importantly its ability to integrate and connect with the existing town fabric. Preventing development from pushing further east consolidates the town around a new core creating the potential for a more compact walkable town. The areas around the centre defined above provided sufficient land for new development for at least 20 years given current take up rates.

Mirani Strategic Framework

As with the plan for Marian, the Mirani plan looks at similar themes and notions of connections, centre location and consolidation of uses around the centre. In this case the river provides a strong edge to the west while GQAL helps define a footprint north and south of the existing centre. Again, development is constrained to the east and south to provide a more compact and walkable centre. Opportunities for redevelopment of key sites to provide a broader mix of housing were identified.

Structure Plans & Master Plans

From the strategic plans further structure plans and plans of layout (Master Plans and layout plans for key sites) were developed. These Plans such as the one below, explored a number of elements such as:

- Land use arrangements and associations
- Settlement footprint
- Opportunities for growth
- Interface with rural properties
- Connection to the Pioneer River
- Movement networks including vehicle and pedestrian connections
- Preliminary built form and building arrangements on site
- Car parking arrangements
- Park and open space locations
- Centre locations
- Infill opportunities

The plan for Marian below sets out the fundamental relationships of the town and its surrounds and achieves a compact urban form that capitalises on the existing services and facilities that are located within the town.
With the principles established in the strategic vision for the place, the design team was able to drill down into solutions for specific sites and situations. This includes considering land use and built form relationships as well as detailed connections for both pedestrians and vehicles.

The plan below for Marian provides a detailed land use and built form solution to the creation of a new centre within the town, and how that centre integrates with surrounding areas. Pedestrian and vehicle connections are defined especially in relation to a proposed road realignment which (north/south) will alleviate heavy vehicle movement east/west through the town.

Marian Plan of Development

Marian is receiving the overwhelming majority of pressure for development given its proximity to the City of Mackay. A new centre will cater for this new growth creating an opportunity for a new mixed use centre to provide a focal point for the community as well as providing new retail, commercial and community uses. Residential expansion to the south of the new centre allows opportunities for a mix of dwelling types to be located within walking distance of the new centre. On the above plans the darker pink denotes low-medium density development while the light pink represents low density residential uses.

For Mirani, the workshop produced a similarly detailed planning outcomes as shown below. The workshop explored opportunities for the town to reconnect with the river. Residential development opens out to and overlooks the river and delivers new open space opportunities along the riparian zone adjoining the river where previously the town had little physical connection with it. Transitions to adjoining agricultural uses are provided for as well as further opportunities for development of tourist facilities in the main street.
Mirani Plan of Development

Opportunities for infill development for a more diverse dwelling types were explored at the workshop. The plans produced in the workshop quickly revealed that a number of infill opportunities as shown below using the existing lot sizes and structure, can be achieved which could help consolidate development around the centre.

Mirani Housing Infill

As evident, the level of detail achieved in the workshop allows for Local Area Planning to be rigorous and cadastrally based rather than just a simple strategic view. Land use controls, movement networks and density outcomes are all set out on the above plans which make translation of these items into a statutory documents much more streamlined.
Outcomes Reporting

The background information and outcomes (visions and plans demonstrating land use, built form, access, urban structure and urban footprint showing the extent and form of the settlement) were collated into summary documents immediately following the workshop. These documents have formed the basis for consultation with the local community. In effect they became a de facto draft Local Area Plan that does not necessarily represent the ‘Council view’, but does portray an outcome they assisted in preparing. The document is a complete volume providing all available background information from state and local government agencies as well as from other relevant stakeholders – in this case Mackay Sugar.

The public can then see all information and outcomes and provide comment before Council commits to a final Local area Plan. Documents for Marian and Mirani are available to download from Council’s website as are other recent projects such as Sarina.

Advantages

For Councils, there are a number of advantages that include savings in both time and cost. These and other advantages are discussed below.

Enquiry by Design workshops by their nature are a fast paced process which enable a design team to respond quickly to sites and issues. This was the case in Marian where a number of Development Applications have already been lodged and Council has significant time pressures to resolve a position.

The EbD delivered a comprehensive plan and strategy for the town and dealt with specific sites as part of that broader strategy. The process was able to resolve Council’s preferred approach to the outstanding DA’s and in some instances radically changed the nature of the development proposal intended by the applicant. Indeed Council released the workshop plans to some applicants (as Information Requests) as Council’s preferred position for some locations prior to the Workshop Outcomes Report being released for consultation. In some cases this change in Council position has lead to significant improvement in value to the applicants who have been very willing to comply with the new direction.

Perhaps one of the greatest advantages of the process is its ability to build consensus around outcomes. By working with a broad range of stakeholders around the same table who have a good understanding of the issues, the design process is able to build group consensus over outcomes. All aspects from the point of view of each stakeholder can be discussed and outcomes explored and drawn. It gives all participants the opportunity to understand the broad range of positions held by participants as they relate to development sites and issues. The process allows these various viewpoints to be considered and balanced to arrive at an agreed outcome.

The EbD process by developing solutions in conjunction with stakeholders tends to create a better understanding of issues and the reasoning behind the outcomes and therefore greater ownership of outcomes. As participants have a greater understanding of the outcomes they become advocates for the solutions proposed and indeed are better able to explain outcomes to their own groups they represent.

The EbD process allows the design team to look broadly at the town as a whole and its wider associations within the region before drilling down on to specific sites and issues. In this regard, the process was both strategic and very much site based. This is important in understanding the nature of the place from a strategic perspective for developing local area plans. This allows a framework to be developed consistent with the requirements of the Sustainable Planning Act and its requirements for strategic planning. This is important given the requirements for strategic planning under the QPP.
Once the strategic picture is understood especially from the point of view of town size (urban footprint), it is relatively straightforward to development open space and movement networks as well as land use mix and centre locations based on an understanding of the place and its constraints and its connections and through the application of good planning principles.

The EbD process provides a very quick and effective (both time and cost) response to local planning issues allowing for the compression of Local Area Plans time frames. These processes tend to be costly and time consuming with extensive usually one sided consultation with communities and stakeholders. Plans tend to be developed in isolation from stakeholders who then are the last to see and more importantly understand the balance of issues and outcomes in their production. The EbD process offers practical and implementable results that are commensurate with the expectations of SPA and can be delivered in much shorter time frames. Local communities are engaged and local issues highlighted and addressed. It is a simple and powerful design process that produces results.

Stephen Smith
DEICKE RICHARDS