Grapes, apples and planning in Stanthorpe: The inaugural national Rural and Regional Planning Conference

Josh Leddy MPIA, 2016 Conference Convener

On 26-28 October, over 160 delegates joined us for PIA’s inaugural Rural and Regional Planning Conference in Stanthorpe; located on the granite belt of Queensland. The two days involved intensive discussion, an emphasis on information exchange, collaboration and presentations by leaders in their fields. At least a third of those attending were from outside Queensland and all mainland states and territories were represented.

The conference was held at the Queensland College of Wine Tourism, where delegates enjoyed a smorgasbord of the tastes and flavours of the Southern Downs. It was a great success, as people came together to share a real sense of camaraderie, share common issues and appreciate the opportunity to explore and exchange ideas and approaches suited to rural and regional Australia. Many rated it the best conference they’d been to!

On Wednesday, study tours included both a bicycle and bus option. The bicycle tour included a 25km bike ride and was co-led by our conference Master of Ceremonies Greg Vann and illustrious ‘Southern Downite’ Cecil Barnard; who both wore the yellow leader’s jersey on the tour which took in local landmarks, some big granite boulders, and a final sprint to a winery or two. Planners on this tour experienced the natural beauty, landscape and eco-tourism opportunities on ‘the Downs’.

The bus tour was led by Clancy Sloan PIA from Southern Downs Regional Council (SDRC) and involved discussion on the planning issues and responses surrounding local land uses such as tourism, wine-making, agriculture and other ‘foodie’ industries. The tour started at Sutton’s Farm juice factory, cidery and distillery, followed by a visit to one of the region’s largest apple packing sheds, and was rounded out with a wine tasting masterclass at Summit Estate Wines. The planners on this tour enjoyed a first-hand look at the importance of agri-tourism and unique planning issues on the Southern Downs.

SDRC (our host local government) led a main street heritage tour on Thursday morning. Special thanks to Annette Doherty, Ken Harris and team for their informative walking tour.

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There were many impressive presentations over the two days. A flavour of both keynote and key-message presentations included those from:

- Costa Georgiadis, host of Gardening Australia, who gave a brilliant and inspirational address. He likened planners to caper bushes, whose deep roots, he said, are comparable to the roots a planner has in their community which ensure that planning outcomes are resilient to political and social changes. Costa saw planners in rural and regional areas as not only ‘tough mongrels’ but also ‘vascular surgeons’.

That is, we are standing tall and steadfast in the face of a challenge; and are facilitative in clearing unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles with the intention of allowing essential lifeblood to keep pumping through the town. Costa also reflected on the positive contribution of planning to the communities he has worked in, however he believes that we need to celebrate the outcomes more often, and focus less on the process.

- Jennifer Howard, Assistant Minister for Local Government, spoke to the wide program of regional planning initiatives being undertaken by the Queensland Government.

- Greg Chemello, General Manager for Economic Development Queensland, presented on the ‘Advancing our cities and regions strategy’ and strategies on regional liveability precincts and sustainable energy projects.
• Professor Jim Cavaye from the University of Southern Queensland – Institute for Resilient Regions, presented a wide ranging take on the challenges facing our regions, as well as the opportunities they uniquely present.
• Brittany Lauga, MP for Keppel, chaired a Q&A-inspired panel discussion which included notable practitioners and academics from the planning industry. This included insights from a politician’s perspective, and involved discussion on the role a planner may play in their communities.
• Ian Sinclair and George Milford both talked ‘Food over Food’ at a special Friday morning breakfast session, this included discussing planning, food security and promoting agri- and eco-tourism and artisan farming opportunities.
• Stuart Moseley, Deputy Director General of the Queensland Department of Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning – DILGP, presented on regional futures, including the benefits of planning at a regional level, and how this can be approached to address planning issues such as conflicts between town development/growth and regionally important agricultural industries.
• Kirsty Kelly, PIA CEO, presented on the role and importance of rural and regional areas in strategies looking forward to an Australia with a population of 50 million people.

The conference was also fortunate to receive over 65 high quality abstracts, and 28 were selected to present at concurrent sessions. Some that attracted a lot of interest included Sue Calvin from Taree (NSW) about the effectiveness of tactical urbanism in the main street of a regional town; and Thomas ‘Sherlock’ Gardiner (Rockhampton), a young planner who outlined the lessons learnt and how to ‘wrangle the rural/ regional planning bull by the horns’. In addition, Stephen Smith (DILGP) presented a masterclass on the Murweh (Charleville) South-west Planning Scheme project, which involved a collaborative partnership between the state government, local government and community to help this smaller local government area plan for their communities by using a streamlined plan-making process.

Thanks to the team of five who presented informative snapshots on agricultural land management, and the intensive poultry and pork industries – Stephen Potts (DAF), Mark Baker-Jones and Nell van Weerdenburg (both Dibbs Barker), David Ireland (PSA) and Janine Price (Australian Pork Limited). The diversity of presentations was as impressive as the high quality of delivery by all.

The focused rural and regional theme produced a great sharing of planning knowledge from across Australia. One of the key benefits of holding a conference in a rural and regional area is the ability to experience the town as a local would. The main conference dinner was hosted at the Granite Belt Brewery, and involved sampling the local craft beer. The wrap up social function was held at a local historic pub, where Costa joined us for the evening talking about tales from the road and his experiences in working directly with the community on contributing to a town’s identity.

Rural and Regional Planning Charter

During the planning and preparation of the conference, the organising committee recognised the need for an outcome of the conference. This was the inception point for the Rural and Regional Planning Charter. The charter attempts to establish a strategy for a planning agenda for a more liveable and prosperous future for rural and regional communities and planning in Australia. The charter received positive support and comment, and will be distributed to all attendees for further consideration. Trevor Budge, from City of Greater Bendigo, also led a very productive group discussion on Friday afternoon.

At the last call on Friday, there was a strong vote to conduct a second rural and regional planning conference within 12 months ... so watch this space in a rural and regional community near you!

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