For more than four decades, Melbourne’s planned outward expansion has been guided by the growth corridor model. However, there are two significant departures from the growth corridor model: Melton and Sunbury. Both were declared satellite cities in 1974 by the Town and Country Planning Board (TCPB) as part of a long-term plan to accelerate their development, and these towns have experienced significant expansion and change since the mid-1970s. Sunbury, and particularly Melton, are now approaching the lower end of the substantial population targets outlined in the satellite city plan. Changes to the UGB contained in the Delivering Melbourne’s Newest Sustainable Communities plan in 2010 marked a change in the strategic planning direction for Melton, as well as a formal end to the satellite city plan. The previous green wedge between Melton and Caroline Springs is now zoned as a continuous growth corridor, although it has yet to form a continuous urban area. Therefore, now is an opportune time to investigate the successes, failures and lessons of this satellite city plan, a vision four decades in the making.

The satellite city plan was the catalyst for my thesis which explored key elements of the vision and outcomes of that plan for Melton and Sunbury, using Melton as the case study. Key extracts of the findings of the research relating to employment self-containment, population growth and the implications of the green wedge on travel behaviour are summarised, due to being conceptually integral to the satellite city.

**The Satellite City vision**

Various proposals for the accelerated development of Melton and Sunbury were floated by the TCPB and Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) from as early as 1967. In 1974, the TCPB released the Melton and Sunbury Investigation Areas report which contained the overarching satellite city plan for Melton and Sunbury. This plan contained a comprehensive program of accelerated development, envisioning a population in each town of 75,000 residents by the time Melbourne reached 4 million people, with provision made for each town to support a workforce commuting movements can be broken down into:

- **3,033 workers commute to Melton for employment**
- **13,224 workers commute to employment outside the township**
- **4,456 residents live and work within Melton**
- **13,224 workers commute to employment outside of the immediate township**
- **3,033 workers commute to Melton for employment**

Employment self-containment was a key objective of the satellite city plan, as well as a contemporary planning objective. As the satellite city concept evolved throughout the 20th Century, there was an increasing awareness of the need for a greater economy of scale to facilitate meaningful levels of self-containment. The plan for Melton and Sunbury contained a target of 50% employment self-containment. My research set out to understand how much employment self-containment exists in Melton and Sunbury, as well as how it compares to the 1975 vision.

**Population growth**

In the early 1970s both Melton and Sunbury were experiencing rapid population growth, with Melton home to nearly 10,000 residents. Present-day Sunbury has an Estimated Resident Population of 36,769 in 2016(id). Melton has an Estimated Resident Population of 60,606 as of June 2016 and an annual growth rate of 5%, resulting in an additional 2,500 residents a year (id 2016). This makes Melton currently Victoria’s 4th largest town after Bendigo. However, Melton’s metropolitan designation means that the town’s population is counted as part of Melbourne’s Capital City Statistical Division by the ABS. The Melton Township Strategy Plan prepared in 2007 by the then Shire of Melton envisioned an ultimate population of 150,000 residents, and was conceptually very similar to its predecessor.

**Employment self-containment**

In 1976, an estimated total of 18.8% of Melton’s workforce were working locally (Melton Sunbury Interim Co-ordinating Committee 1976). Both Melton and Sunbury have retail, commercial and industrial employment centres. Based on 2011 census data, there were a total of 7,489 jobs in Melton, principally located in the town centre, shopping centre and industrial precincts. In Sunbury, there is a total of 6,368 jobs, partially reflecting Sunbury’s smaller population. For perspective, this translates into a jobs to residents ratio of 0.164:1 in Melton and 0.19:1 for Sunbury, based on 2011 census data.

However, local jobs do not necessarily translate into local employment. On average, approximately 60% of local jobs are occupied by residents, while the other 40% are occupied by people who live outside the area. This is a similar rate to that observed across Melbourne. In real terms, Melton’s workforce commuting movements can be broken down into:

- **4,456 residents live and work within Melton**
- **13,224 workers commute to employment outside of the immediate township**
- **3,033 workers commute to Melton for employment**

Overall, Melton’s rate of employment self-containment was 21.5% based on the 2011 census data. The level of
employment self-containment has increased modestly since the inception of the satellite city plan. However, it falls well short of the 50% target in the satellite city plan due to several factors. These include changes in the Australian economy since the 1970s, and a lack of a critical population mass.

A critique of the top three destinations for the City of Melton’s workforce provides perspective on where they work and commuting movements:

• 19% City of Melton
• 15% City of Melbourne
• 13.5% City of Brimbank

Notably, the top three employment destinations combined make up less than half (47.5%) of all employment destinations. The rest of the workforce commute to a diverse range of locations across greater Melbourne and regional Victoria. This highlights the fact that the working population is highly mobile. Extrapolating these findings would suggest that the oft-cited view that outer-urban residents are principally commuting into the CBD for employment is an oversimplification of more complicated commuting behaviour.

Conclusions

Rather than develop as a peri-urban township, the decision to bring Melton and Sunbury inside the metropolitan boundary has had a range of positive and negative implications for these townships. A significant contributor to self-containment is having a critical mass of population which Melton and Sunbury are yet to achieve. Despite the significant population growth in Melton and Sunbury, neither town have yet achieved the population targets contained in the plan. Reviewing the satellite city plan also highlights the difficulties in projecting over a timeframe of decades, where social, economic and technological changes over that period can influence the vision in various ways.

A more general lesson to emerge from the research would suggest that the timing of when a population milestone is reached does not constitute a particularly important measure of success. High level strategic plans are often preoccupied by the functioning of an urban area at the ultimate population contained in the plan, but less-so on the functioning of that area in the decades between the inception of the plan and the ultimate population envisioned.

Anthony Alexander in his 2009 critique of British New Towns noted; “Given the decades long time-scale for a town to be designed and built, occupied and grow, and, eventually undergo incremental change as parts are replaced, the original creators are seldom around to see whether their designs remain valid over the long term. Success or failure cannot be anchored in a single point in time. The success of places can rise and fall, perhaps many times over.” Melton and Sunbury’s story of development and change is a continuing one.

Karl Sass is a Strategic Planner, and this research was conducted as part of an RMIT honours thesis. He can be contacted KarlSass@ballarat.vic.gov.au or karl.sass05@gmail.com

References

• Alexander, A 2009, Britain’s New Towns: Garden Cities to Sustainable Communities, Routledge, 2009
• Id., 2016, City of Melton Community Profile: Melton Township Estimated Resident Population, ABS
• Id., 2016, Hume city Council Community Profile: Sunbury Estimated Resident Population, ABS
• Shire of Melton, 2007, Melton Township Strategy Plan.