

Upper Hunter Region Strategic Regional Land Use Policy Forum – Local Government Muswellbrook – 21 July 2011

Attendees: Cessnock City Council, Dungog Council, Muswellbrook Council, Singleton Council, Upper Hunter Shire Council, Department of Planning & Infrastructure, DPC Hunter, Natural Resources Policy Branch, Industry NSW, Office of Environment & Heritage, Local Government Association

Summary of key issues raised by stakeholders relating to the development of the Strategic Regional Land Use Plans.

The Department of Planning & Infrastructure recognises these comments as the views of members at the forum. These comments will be taken into consideration in the development of the Strategic Regional Land Use Plans.

Key themes included:

Natural Resources and Rural Landscapes

- Need to consider emerging coal seam gas exploration and gold prospecting.
- Value of Upper Hunter wine industry. Vineyard lands are being bought up, with vines being removed. Vineyards are becoming isolated, less cellar door sales, impacts on tourism, loss of local employment. Need to consider more than just the physical land characteristics (i.e. vineyards and thoroughbred industry).
- Will the Strategy consider expansion opportunities for land uses other than coal (agriculture, vineyards, thoroughbred, urban development), and the impacts that coal will have on the expansion of these other uses. Muswellbrook has data and projections on future thoroughbred/vineyard development.
- Noted that there are a number of very large mines, and consideration could be given to intensifying existing mines as opposed to expanding the mining footprint. Putty Valley also faces similar issues.
- Upper Hunter Shire faces coal seam gas issues. Need to recognise the importance of horse breeding and map horse areas, not just agricultural land quality/river flats.
- Dungog interested in opportunities for wind farming. Council has limited mapping of agricultural land values.

Regional and Local Infrastructure

- Muswellbrook has done significant work on funding options, including s. 94 and the Infrastructure Fund. Local roads are an issue, particularly where individual mines do not trigger upgrade thresholds, but cumulatively the mines do. Should consider state infrastructure levies.
- Rail noise attenuation and the impacts of the power industry need to be considered in terms of infrastructure needs/impacts.
- Concern that if approach relies on just strengthening VPA arrangements, this is difficult for individual councils to negotiate and will not address regional issues.
- Scone rail crossing and also the other rail corridor coming into Muswellbrook.
- Access to doctors and how to attract more doctors to the area/region. Mining growth also causes staffing issues (i.e. nurses leaving to work at the mines), and the ability to attract replacement staff.
- Singleton has highway and traffic congestion, which is impacting on business development and is looking at bypass options, and wants the RTA involved in the strategy.

- Muswellbrook has issues with water and sewer, and upfront costs for expanding facilities. Mines also buying up offset lands, impacting on infrastructure (e.g. limiting future expansion).
- Over dimension vehicles are also an issue (there should be an established route), and applications often understate traffic generation details.
- Mechanism for identifying population growth is required (e.g. itinerant population and intensification of home occupation makes it difficult to calculate).
- Cessnock noted an impact of heavy vehicles on local roads surrounding the vineyards.
- Dungog raised several issues: delays in the timber bridge replacement program, poor road condition between Dungog and Singleton.
- Dungog provides water resources for much of the populated areas in the Hunter and contains significant environmental resources and offset areas should be considered.
- Singleton raised road closures throughout the region where mines are allowed to close major roads including New England Hwy and Denman Road for over 20mins to undertake blasting.
- Issue of rat running on roads not designed for high volume and/or heavy vehicles.
- DP & I suggested that funding should be considered as follows: For benefit – royalties; To mitigate impact – infrastructure contributions such as VPAs, s. 94 etc.

Economic Development

- Not just protecting current industries, but growing industries.
- Upper Hunter Diversification Strategy and preserving skill sets in other industries (i.e. loss of stock agents in Singleton). Larger agricultural properties are being bought up, and using different sales channels. Impacts on local areas
- Labour supply must equal demand and mines should train a minimum number of apprentices and offer incentives
- Importance of planning after mining has ceased with consideration to post-mining land and its useability
- Dungog has an oversupply of organic material in the region, which could be used for rehabilitation that could be staged which would assist employment and make use of the organic material, possibly using empty trains on their return to the mines.
- Mines buying land on the alluvial flats but not including the water licence. The land should be linked with the water licence.
- Water management. 60 per cent of Glenbawn dam supply is owned by mining companies. They are buying from the market but the water is not being used for agriculture. Deregulation of water didn't suit the Upper Hunter. Impacts also from power stations.
- Dungog has impacts on roads and on the LGA making the region harder to access. Until this is addressed the area won't reach its financial potential.

Housing and Settlement

- Muswellbrook is surrounded by mines with a shortage of affordable housing and rental market availability. Recognise need for MAC villages, but unsure where to locate.
- Around Broke, coal seam gas exploration licences have led to falling property prices and inability to sell. Impacts on future amenity of the area.
- Housing supply has a long lead time, and there is a need for short-term housing (i.e. construction phase) as well. Housing types and quality are also an issue, and those currently in demand (dual occupancy, multi unit housing) may not be sustainable into the future.

- Conversion of houses into boarding house type accommodation is also an issue. Motel accommodation is also very tight, particularly during the week. Mines are tying up some unit stocks, with 2-3 year leases, and the shortage of motel accommodation also impacts on tourism opportunities. The community sector finds it very difficult to compete in the housing market.
- Need to reassess the definition of 'traveller' in the Standard Instrument LEP, particularly for overnight travellers.
- Issues with MAC camps.
- One of the impacts of the tight housing market is accommodation is hard to find, leading to people looking further afield (i.e. Maitland), which gives rise to more traffic and congestion on the roads.

Community Health and Amenity

- Health is a state issue, and the state needs to deal with health impacts. Singleton has a zero tolerance health approach – there should be no health impacts.
- The community is worried about the PM 2.5 particles, for which there is no standard, and there are very strong community views about this. There is medical evidence that PM 2.5 should be considered.
- Land acquisition is an issue and concern about where the displaced community would move.
- Noise impacts are a concern (NSW Industrial Noise policy assumes background noise of 30dB(A)) rather than the actual rural background noise which is significantly lower. This means noise impacts are far greater. (Note: dB(A) is used to measure A-weighted sound pressure levels)
- Road/traffic dust is a major issue. Noted that on-line monitoring results were showing lesser impact than the community had been expecting. Need to better explain the data/results and more/better communication to debunk some of the negative media.
- There is a wider increase in shift work in the region, and this is impacting on communities.
- Need to consider infrastructure needs (transport/NBN) in terms of attracting/retaining staff.
- Need a better methodology for assessing mine activity and impacts on infrastructure.

Natural Environment

- Should look at opportunities for funding to embellish environmental corridors, and treat conservation at a strategic level.
- Lack of high-quality conservation land left. Some land available in valleys but is under exploration leases. Concern that Anvil Hill identified as important woodland, but went to Court and protection unsuccessful as not all of the land was zoned environmental protection.
- Need to be clear about offsets, and map EECs and vegetation communities. Dungog identified that they were promised high-detail vegetation mapping.
- Need to consider triple bottom line.