Local Government Precinct Committees and
Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) Based Urban Planning

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Abstract

This paper outlines the author's research to date on incorporating ecologically sustainable development (ESD) based urban planning within the aims of Local Government Precinct Committees. The paper explores the history of Precinct Committees, particularly the role of place management as a foundation for precinct committees. The structure and operation of Precinct Committees within the Greater Metropolitan Region (GMR) of Sydney/Central Coast/Lower Hunter/Illawarra in the State of New South Wales (NSW) is examined. Planning tools such as NSW New Planning System and Agenda 21 (UN 1993) are examined for their relevance to ESD based planning at the precinct level. The Lakes Precinct (Wyong Shire) is taken as a case study of a precinct in an urbanising area within a growth centre region (Central Coast).

Introduction

Local Government Authorities (LGAs) and State governments are faced with prospects of adopting governance procedures to incorporate Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) within their urban planning. There is thus an opportunity for community precinct committees (PCs) to play a role in this ESD challenge.

This paper looks at PCs within the Greater Metropolitan Region of Sydney/Central Coast/Lower Hunter/Illawarra. Wyong Shire is chosen as a case study area because of its population growth and Wyong Council's trialling PCs from 1995 onwards. The paper examines:

- Theory of Place Management
- Precinct Committees and ESD Based Urban Planning
- Lakes Precinct Committee Case Study

Theory of Place Management

PCs have developed from a discipline of place management. Place management is a community development process that places reliance on the community to solve local problems and promote healthy communities. A number of New South Wales (NSW) LGAs and the State government have applied place management to resolve social, economic and environmental questions. Place management as a community development and planning tool has been gaining in application over the last twenty years in Australia and overseas. David Crofts stresses the importance of understanding the operational parameters of place management (Crofts 1998)[1]. Finally, the publication *Unequal in Life,* (Jesuits 1999)[2] highlights the need for increased place management programs. The report highlighted the needs for place management in disadvantaged parts of Australian inner and outer city areas.

There are a range of place management applications across the Greater Metropolitan Region and Regional NSW. The major categories of place management and examples in practice can be

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[1] "Place management incorporates the principles of sustainable communities as globally defined under United Nations Agenda 21. Place management aims to encompass the input of all groups and works within an integrated planning framework under charters and memorandums of understanding. Finally, place management can be defined as a holistic outlook, outcome directed and dependent on local ownership." (Crofts 1998)

[2] The Jesuits argue that the resources required to meet disparities between localities have been inadequate to date and that place management is an important tool for addressing these needs. The study highlighted social need by postcode districts in Victoria and NSW. Many inner city areas of Sydney and Newcastle registered as high need areas under the Study.

summarised under the headings: Community Renewal; Community Intervention; New Release Area Community Development Programs; Main Street and Town Centre Renewal; Public Housing Estate Renewal; and, LGA Strategic Plans. Each of these is now examined in more detail.

The NSW Community Renewal program has been operating in a number of LGAs under the Premiers Department since 1995. The State government launched a 3 year ($7m. budget) community renewal program in Redfern/Waterloo in 2002 (called the Redfern/Waterloo Partnership) (RWP). The RWP program (continues in 2006) provides programs in social welfare and community development. The physical planning program of RWP was transferred to and expanded under the Redfern/Waterloo Authority in 2004. The Authority program includes: master planning of areas such as Redfern CBD; the redevelopment of the Redfern Aboriginal Housing Corporation's land in Eveleigh/Caroline Streets; and, strategic planning of Redfern/Eveleigh/Darlington (RED).

Besides the RWP program, the State had earlier proposed in 1999 a community renewal program in selected Newcastle and Lake Macquarie City disadvantaged areas. The program as applied in the Hunter is called *Hunter Community Renewal Scheme* (Premiers Department 1999). The scheme utilises place management within suburban areas with high public housing content such as Windale and Booragul. On initiating this program the State government stated the program would be extended to Newcastle City inner city areas of Islington, Tighes Hill, Wickham, Carrington and Hamilton South. Some of the challenges of these latter areas stem from: inner city area high transient population; land use redevelopment to higher densities forcing relocation of residents; and, relocation of employment out of the inner city.

In addition to community renewal, LGAs and the State government have initiated a number of community intervention programs. An early example of community intervention was the City of Sydney City's[3] of Kings Cross program. In this instance a place manager was employed to address strategic issues facing Kings Cross. The place management programs included a 'whole of agency' delivery of services and coordination/consultation on community issues. Outcomes of that program were the creation of a safety coordination program, reclaiming of unsafe streets and expansion of the harm minimisation drug prevention program.

The third avenue of place management is new release area community development programs. Many Sydney outer suburbs contain greenfield new release areas within growth LGAs such as: Penrith, Liverpool, Baulkham Hills, Blacktown, Wyong, Lake Macquarie and Newcastle and Wollongong. Many of these release areas have experienced high social, economic and infrastructure needs. The Jesuit study, cited earlier, illustrates the urban disparities that exist in many of these Greater Metropolitan Region centres. In some instances new release area place management programs have been instigated in addressing these needs.

In contrast to release area place management programs there are main street and town centre renewal programs. These programs include: main street revival; town centre strategies; and, area improvement programs. The NSW government's Main Street Program (Department of State and Regional Development) (DSRD) assists downtown businesses to improve services, strengthen local economies, and improve community spirit and locality image. Some of the Main Street programs utilising place management techniques within the Central Coast/Newcastle area include: Wyong, Gosford, Toukley, Ettalong, Woy Woy, Wallsend, Hamilton, New Lambton and Mayfield, Newcastle West, Newcastle East and Newcastle Darby St. Finally, advancing Main Street and town centre programs requires the adoption of planning strategies. Examples of these include: the *Wyong Town Centre Strategy* (Wyong 2000)[4], *Woy Woy Vision Plan* (WWVP 2002)[5], and, *Gosford City Downtown Strategy* (GCC 2005). Finally, the State initiated the Area Improvement Program[6] in 1998 to assist CBDs and town centres to plan strategically.

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[3] Before 8th May 2003 the area was under the City of South Sydney (amalgamated on that date into the City of Sydney).
[4] The Strategy contains approaches for upgrading Wyong Town. The Wyong/Tuggerah Chamber of Commerce submitted to Wyong Council the Chamber's Wyong District Strategic Plan (WCC 1996) and Wyong/Tuggerah District Strategic Plan Update (WCC 2000).
[5] The plan is a blueprint for future strategic development of the Woy Woy CBD and Woy Woy Peninsula in general.
[6] An example of an area improvement program is the Strathfield/Burwood/Ashfield redevelopment program where three LGAs are developing improvement programs.

In addition to the above programs, the State government has also established place management programs within public housing estates in the GMR and Regional NSW. One of these programs at Claymore in the Campbelltown District has been running for several years (1998-present). The program has established community gardens, improved social services and expanded recreation opportunities. Recent programs from 2003 have embraced whole scale renewal such as in several South West Sydney suburbs and regional centres such as Dubbo. The relocation of residents and the building of new housing areas have created challenges for the State.

In all of the above place management examples it has been imperative that local councils formulate the basis of programs through strategic plans. One strategic planning model is contained in the *Parramatta City Outcomes Program (PCC 2000)*. That program is detailed in the *Parramatta Regional Environment Plan* (PREP) (PCC 2000), a blue print for place management to 2021. This plan contains action plans in partnership between the City and the State (i.e. projects nominated to receive State/Commonwealth funding). The Parramatta City's goal is "Parramatta will be a vibrant, cosmopolitan and sustainable city" (PCC 2000). The council states that its place management approach will seek to build communities and community capital, including through citizen based participatory planning and design." (Parramatta CC 2000). Finally, key statements of Parramatta Council reflecting place management within the Council's strategic planning include: neighbourhood place management[7]; urban sprawl[8]; community capital[9]; outcomes group[10]; and accountability[11].

Precinct Committees and ESD Based Urban Planning

It was apparent in the NSW State elections in March 2003 that environmental and urban development issues dominated the debate. Given lessons learned from the 1990s and early 2000s one of the challenges now facing LGAs and the State government is how to further engage residents in applying ESD based urban planning. To start with, the State government has embarked on reforming its planning approach through the creation of new planning and environmental legislation and establishing Basix (water/energy/climate impact reduction programs). Many LGAs in NSW have responded through establishing ESD based urban planning procedures. A sample of several LGA's recent experiences in this area is detailed below.

Port Stephens Council (PSC) adopted the PC system in the early '90s after lengthy community consultation. There are over a dozen PCs and all come under the document 'Precinct Committees – A General Guide' (PSC 1990)[12]. The council also established a Sustainable Planning Department in the late 1990s to expand the application of ESD based urban planning. Contrasting with Penrith, from the 1980's Liverpool Council serviced up to 19 PCs through a Precinct System Manager. In 1997 the PC system evolved into a Neighbourhood Forum System[13]. In early 1998 Fairfield City Council (FCC) decided to review its overall strategies and soon afterwards "introduced an innovative place

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[7] "Neighbourhood Place Management shall seek to engender community spirit and create communities that have safe and equal access to health, affordable housing, employment opportunities, artistic and cultural expression, recreation, leisure and other services." (PCC 2004).

[8] "We want to push back the spread of placeless sprawl, environmental deterioration and the erosion of society's built heritage as one interrelated community-building challenge." (Ref. *Parramatta City Council Application for Special Variation to General Income)* (PCC, 2000).

[9] "Our place management approach will seek to build communities and community capital, including through citizen based participatory planning and design." (PCC 2000)

[10] "The Outcomes Group is to ensure Council's activities focus on and deliver the council's strategic outcomes." (PCC 2000).

[11] "Parramatta's place managers will be accountable to assessing the needs of places or systems and ensuring that long term solutions are found for problems that arise." (PCC 2000).

[12] "Council is certain that this open system of democracy will provide a means of drawing both residents and Council together. It allows people to feel they have a more direct influence within their Council. The objective is to enable every resident access to input into the decision making process." (PSC 1990)

[13] The Council concluded "it was difficult to effectively resource and support the PCs" (*Neighbourhood Services Manager*, LCC 21/5/01). There are currently four Neighbourhood Forums in place at Liverpool under the 'Neighbourhood System'. The Forums get administrative support from Neighbourhood Managers responsible for districts.

management model that recognises the unique character of place and systems within the City" (*Role of Local Government in Places Report* (FCC '98)[14]. The model was supported by a new organisational structure.

After the 1980 LG elections North Sydney Council (NSC) adopted a series of policies including a formal public involvement program known as the Precincts System. This eventually made the Council "possibly the most advanced model of open government that exists in Australia" (Mayoral Minute No.133, 2/10/87). A report on Council's precinct system is contained in *Public Participation and Direct Democracy in North Sydney Municipality* (NSC 1990)[15].

There are two additional councils that embraced PCs in the 1980s. Waverly Council commenced the Precincts system in 1988. A Community Precincts Liaison Officer and Administrative Staff serviced the PCs. Council noted in 1992 that the council was committed to resident participation in decision making (SMH 3/1992 advert for PCs Liaison Officer). Gosford Council also initiated a precinct system commencing in the 1980s, including the provision of a Community Liaison Officer. Council retracted its PCs program in the mid-1990s. A reflection, however, on the importance of PCs is contained in Council's strategic plan program, which commenced in the year 2000. This program was designed to encourage formal citizen input into the planning system (ref. *Gosford Strategic Plan 2001-2006*, GCC 2002). Another Gosford Council planning tool as introduced in 2001 is called Character Plans and involves Council looking more closely at communities' physical structures and environmental surrounds. These character plans illustrate to residents the natural assets that their localities possess and how these assets can be preserved or measured against development options.

With an understanding of PCs and other community participation programs many councils and the Sate government are now investigating the means of incorporating ESD based local area planning. A number of community associations and local chambers of commerce working with local councils have put together local area strategic plans. At the State level, the Draft Plan First (Planning NSW 2002) was a State initiative that was proposed to provide the means under Part 3 of the NSW EPA Act to improve coordinated planning at State, regional and LGA levels. The Plan First program was to give LGAs greater incentive to adopt ESD based local area plans. Taking up this challenge, Lake Macquarie City Council adopted several local plans under its LEP 2003 and *Lake Macquarie City 2020 Strategy Plan* (LMCC 2003). Finally, the State in 2003 reviewed a number of planning policies, including Plan First which was never fully implemented. By 2005 the State issued guidelines requiring all councils to produce new LGA wide LEPs over a 3-5 year period.

Lakes Precinct Committee Case Study

Wyong Shire, 100 km north of Sydney, is within the growth areas of the Central Coast. The shire population increased from 35,000 in 1978 to 143, 393 in June 2005 (ABS). There is a diverse

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[14] Council created a new 'City Outcomes Department' containing place management staff with priority setting and service specification responsibility. The 1998 Report emphasised that place management can be designated in geographic terms, system terms or in relation to shared issues or opportunities. In FCC a range of place management programs is being used as outlined in the FCC '99 Report as follows: main street program at Cabramatta and Fairfield Downtowns have clear geographic boundaries, targeted issues and budgets; and, Cabramatta place management is a joint project between Council and Premiers Dept. FCC area is divided into five places along the lines of suburbs or common issues. 'Places' include a new release area, an industrial estate and an open space system. The Place Manager provides a single point of contact within Council for opportunities or issues about the place. The final FCC place management policy is the creation of the positions of Suburb Support Officers (SSOs). Each staff member within the City Outcomes Dept. has adopted a suburb. The staff member visits 'his/her suburb' and collects information about its appearance in strategic planning terms and nominates works believed important. SSOs work closely with the place manager accountable for that area. The 1998 Report concluded that constant reflection on the results of place management allows Council to fine tune the models and adjust the systems. These are designed to focus on outcomes, results, and accountability.

[15] Council received the Local Government Bluet Award the next year based among other things on the creation of the Precinct System. By 1977 various Aldermen saw the precinct system in competition with their own roles and objected to the way some Precincts demanded more than an advisory role. This led to the disbanding of the PCs. After a survey of public meetings however in 1980 Council reinstated the precinct system with a network of 25 PCs. Council employed two staff, a Precincts Coordination and an Admin Assistant to resource the precinct system.

collection of land uses ranging from the rural Wyong Valleys to the tourist dominated Entrance Peninsula. There are over 30 suburbs and over 100 localities within those localities in Wyong Shire. The character of these localities varies significantly in physical and social profiles. Over half the localities in Wyong Shire did not exist 25 years ago, reflecting the rapid growth. Issues of community health, land use planning, job creation and conservation within localities are of increasing concern to residents, Wyong Council and State authorities. Council's concern culminated calling a Population, Infrastructure and Services Summit (held October 2006).

The subject of PCs in Wyong started in 1990 when a North Sydney PC representative addressed the Wyong community on the history of the precinct system in North Sydney. Nine Wyong Shire local civic group delegates addressed Council about the value of PCs in late May 1991, including: San Remo, Wyong, Warnervale, Dooralong, Budgewoi, Mannering Park, Lake Munmorah, Norah head and Bateau Bay (Wyong Advocate 6/6/91). It was this presentation to Council that led to further discussions and eventually to the adoption of the precinct system by Council.

Over the next 4 years various considerations for a precinct system were discussed before Wyong Council. Finally, in 1995 that Council resolved to establish a precinct system. The present PCs include: Lakes, Ourimbah, Wattanobbi/Warnervale, The Entrance, Lake Munmorah/Chain Valley Bay, Bateau Bay/Killarney Vale, Wallarah North, and Gwandalan/Summerland Point. The Lakes PC over its 11 year history has been trying to embrace ESD based urban planning principles based on Agenda 21.
The Lakes PC has been involved in making submissions under ESD principles on a number of development and local government management plans. We now examine a sample of these plans, including: Cadonia Road, Tuggerawong aged retirement units; Kooindah, Wyong, tourist resort/residential complex; residential high rise, Mardi; Pollack Av., SEPP 5; and, Wyong Council Management Plans.

The Cadonia Rd., Tuggerawong, aged retirement units involved a development proposal for an aged retirement unit complex. The proposed site appeared to be flood liable and part of a primary drainage system. The applicant for the project responded to the refusal by Council by appealing to the NSW Land and Environment Court. The Lakes PC appeared in Court after having made a substantial submission based on ESD principles and supporting the Council refusal. The appeal was lost and Council's actions upheld.

A second example of Lakes PC actions involved the Kooindah Tourist Resort proposal, a major tourist complex and residential development (200+ homes) on a sensitive site in proximity to wetlands, flood plains and the Wyong River. The Lakes PC was involved in public information meetings and conducted research on key ESD environment issues (i.e. acid sulphate soils and drainage). Many of the Lakes PC recommendations within a submission to Council were eventually incorporated within Council's conditions of approval.

A proposal for residential high rise (9 and 11 stories) rezoning at Mardi (part of the Tuggerah District Centre) required the Lakes PC to comment (given regional significance). The PC conducted site meetings and applied ESD criteria to the proposal. The PC then submitted a report on the development proposal stating the density of development was counter to ESD principles (i.e. scale, visual, bulk, social, landscape, ridgeline, etc.). Council, by late 2006, was still considering the proposed re- zoning.

Developers had the ability in the 1990s and early 2000s to create aged unit complexes on parcels of land not suitable for that purpose using the State Environmental Planning Policy 5. The policy in its implementation raised substantial questions about ESD principles being overridden. The Lakes PC studied one such SEPP proposal to rezone a site in Pollock Av, Wyong under SEPP 5. In applying ESD principles the precinct committee was able to illustrate any rezoning for aged care at that location was inappropriate. The proposal was not approved and by 2004 the State scrapped SEPP 5, in favour of a more comprehensive Seniors Living Policy.

Finally, the Lakes PC attends each annual public briefing on the Wyong Shire Management Plan and prepares a submission based on ESD practices. While to date the Wyong Council Management Plans contain few references to ESD principles, there have been increasing references to ESD within each Management Plan. Lakes PC, however, continues to submit to Council ways of adopting wider ESD based urban planning approaches in its Management Plan decision process.

Conclusions

Some conclusions that can be reached from the above research. Firstly, Councils need to understand the theory of   place management, precinct committees and ESD based urban planning as tools for better planning. Secondly, the role of PCs in ESD based urban planning needs to be understood by Councils and the State government. Thirdly, PCs need to be adequately resourced to understand the implications of ESD based urban planning. Finally, place management programs and PCs in particular can play major parts in the community participation process under LG and the State.

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