

Understanding and Managing Coastal Economic Development

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Coastal economic development is (as Pat Mullins observed some time ago) something of an economic paradox. It has a great appetite for land development (in a narrow strip close by the water) and has delivered large amounts of new housing, sudden gains in population in small communities, and (recently) very rapid price increases in land and houses. Closer study of locations with these outcomes shows they have low incomes, high levels of welfare dependence, small shares of commercial investment and high unemployment rates. This paradox emerges from a misunderstanding that housing and population growth constitutes development, a misunderstanding that fails to recognise the difference between the forces that shape the distribution of population and housing and those that shape the distribution of jobs. That difference is sharpened by the special circumstances surrounding the creation of jobs in the many forms of the tourism industry and is honed by geography, as coastal development is much stronger in regions closer to metropolitan areas.

The paradox can be understood when it is understood that the price escalation in land and housing values and the rapid rates of residential construction in many coastal locations was caused by a surge in demand for a limited resource. That surge was not felt in commercial investment other than in some population-related services, and then only in a few places. It is also important to understand the scale and depth of coastal development can be easily exaggerated. That is confirmed by an ABS analysis of the largest and fastest growing areas in Australia (ABS 2001) which includes very few coastal municipalities. That data is consistent with very recent estimates of residential population. A list of local government areas with the fastest rates of population growth (not simply percentage change in population but actually annual average rates of growth) shows 6 outer suburban areas and 2 inner city areas in the top ten. Even in absolute growth the outer suburban areas are very prominent although the City of Brisbane and the Gold Coast are ranked one and two on this list (ABS 2004).

The paradox can be rationalised by careful attention to the way that economic processes work within coastal areas. Though subject to the normal working of market forces this paper suggests coastal development is re-fashioned by some special circumstances. After establishing those circumstances it explores the implications for the administrative and managerial resources of coastal municipalities at a time when the

understanding of the management task and the expectations of different outcomes has become stronger, not only among locals but also among a broader community that uses coastal locations seasonally. The paper explores these interrelated dimensions in general terms to create scope for some more detailed follow-up case study work.

1. Some Details of Coastal Economic Development

That coastal development has some special features is perhaps best illustrated by the circumstances of the economy of the Gold Coast, Australia's most prominent coastal regional community. While acknowledging some of the economic gains that have been made by the area, the recent Economic Development strategy (GCCC 2002) has shown that income levels are below the national average, unemployment rates are higher than the national average and the employment structure is narrow and specialised and requires substantial imports of products and services, the latter confirmed by West (2004). If these outcomes occur in the midst of the nation's premier tourism destination it is perhaps no surprise that Stimson, Baum and O'Connor (2003:144) found the places in rural Australia with the lowest ratio of household tax income to welfare payments were Nambucca, Kempsey, Harvey Bay, Greater Taree, Eurobodalla and Byron. That was consistent with these same coastal communities presence among the highest levels of unemployment in the country (Salt 2001:101).

The weak link between coastal population and housing growth and broader economic development (reflected in the investment in commercial and business facilities) can be seen in the small (7%) coastal share of all new investment in commercial buildings in the decade between 1989 and 1998 compared to its 18 percent share of national population (and even more remarkably to the 8 percent share that went into the much maligned and problem ridden "bush") (O'Connor (2001:51). Those general observations have been supported by work on the Sunshine Coast by Taylor and Birrell (2003) which found it to be less well off on a number of indicators than a so-called "battler area" of outer suburban Melbourne. Those perspectives are at odds with the idea that coastal communities are in some way self-generating and creative of their own

fortunes, exploiting a new and ill-defined “lifestyle” resource, and they suggest that the current process has little chance of providing self sustaining economic development in coastal communities.

2. Understanding Economic Development on the Coast

Much of the effort directed at understanding coastal development relies upon “lifestyle” as an explanation of change. The difficulty with developing a serious interpretation of this idea is that “lifestyle” is imprecise. For some individuals, lifestyle is best expressed in the crowded cores of cosmopolitan cities, a judgement backed by the high price paid for real estate in those locations; for others the unique rurality of a place like Tuscany or Provence, or their equivalents in many countries, are the quintessential lifestyle locations, and again real estate prices support the values expressed. For families, favoured lifestyle locations can be new outer suburban estates. Given that diversity, it is likely that the lifestyle of the coast will be relevant to just a small slice of the population, an observation consistent with the relatively limited effect coastal development has had upon national settlement patterns.

The physical attractions associated with a coastal lifestyle attraction has to be tempered by limited economic opportunity and poor economic performance. Yet unemployment in coastal regions is sometimes assumed to reflect lifestyle. However in an analysis of this issue Mullins (1991: 336) found that “interstate transferees on unemployment benefits who moved to the Gold Coast or Sunshine Coast during the 1980s barely comprised 1% of the total unemployed in each of these cities”. Hence the unemployment of these locations primarily reflects the problems of their economic sectors.

Lifestyle attractions might be a relevant factor in residential re-location and house purchase decisions but it is probably less relevant to the business and commercial development associated with coastal change. Yet the latter is the real issue here, as its weak response limits the economic opportunities in a typical coastal region. There are some cases where coastal lifestyle opportunities do attract individuals in national and global market businesses (usually in services) but their numbers (and effect upon employment) are small. Hence lifestyle is not a useful concept to understand coastal

economic development and as shown in some of the reasons for moves shown by Burnley and Murphy (2004), it is necessary to look beyond lifestyle to some of the economic considerations in coastal change.

There have been a number of efforts made to understand the growth of coastal or tourist locations. A start was made by Butler (1980); his work was extended and developed to include spatial and local structural elements by Smith (1990). Both approaches have a common theme that coastal locations expand rapidly and then peak; Butler uses a backward sloping S-curve to present his ideas. The peaking and eventual downturn was associated with carrying capacity and competition from other locations in Butler's thinking; Smith's work notes the problem of local scale congestion and the need to expand inland can act as a constraint. At a more general level Mullins (1991) explored the character of what he labelled tourism urbanisation. He showed the latter was a special form of urbanization due to its consumption pressure, its socially selective character and spatially distinctive ribbon-style small settlements and small nodes. These distinctive features, along with the possible natural tendency for coastal communities to peak and decline as Butler indicated, strengthens the need to think differently about these places, and not produce simplistic notions about development just based on population, house construction or price trends.

A different perspective can be developed by seeing the coast as a particular form of a regional economy, one where demand and supply interact in a special way. An old perspective on regional development is useful to refine and enhance this perspective. This involves ideas on the process of urban and regional growth originally developed by Thompson (1968). Drawing on urban history, as well as some simple ideas about the economic base of a community, he suggested that cities and regions move through the following development stages.

1. Export Specialisation
2. Export Complex
3. Economic Maturation
4. Regional Metropolis
5. Technical and Professional Virtuosity

The dependence upon an export demand starts the process, in the coast and in most other urban contexts. The coast's exports are usually to state and national consumers, although international demand can be important, and are reflected in the consumption that Mullins (1991) has shown drives coastal urbanisation.

Moving to the stage of export complex involves production "broadening and deepening to involve other sectors and to develop and enhance the connectivity between the different sectors". Expressed in modern jargon this stage involves the development of "industrial districts" and "clusters" of interrelated firms, a set of ideas developed from work on post-fordist manufacturing, but increasingly seen as relevant to service sector location and development (Scott 2001). For a coastal region this could involve the addition of entertainment facilities to the original tourist accommodation. It could also mean some links between sectors like agriculture and food production in the surrounding region.

The stage of economic maturation occurs when the city or region can replace imports with its own products and services as its local market is large enough to support local suppliers. The focus here is generally on the emergence of major service sector suppliers. Early steps in this stage on the coast are seen in the appearance of larger and better quality retail facilities which reduces the need for consumers to travel to another town for these services. Eventually that effect might be felt across a wide range of professional services and may even spread to manufactured goods. Moving beyond that stage the coastal city might begin to act as a regional metropolis, supplying an expanding catchment as its service base draws consumers in from a surrounding region.

This change could lead to "technical –professional virtuosity", where a skill base in some services or in parts of manufacturing that lifts the city from its local and regional network into a broader global area. That outcome can be seen in the global leadership certain cities provide in selected sectors like London and New York in finance, Paris and Milan in fashion, Silicon Valley in IT and so on. That thinking has influenced the approach to economic development espoused in the Gold Coast City Economic Development Strategy (Gold Coast City Council 2003) where the established expertise in construction and environmental management has been seen as an area of skill that could be exported.

Although the Thompson structure draws on some old ideas, and can be dissected by those armed with much stronger understanding of the regional development process (for example the processes outlined in Stimson et al (1997) it is still a useful way to organise an approach to coastal development. One very special aspect of this framework is that it focuses attention on the “ failure of momentum between stages” of growth. That exposes the difficulties that arise as a coastal region attempts to develop a new and different set of activities and move beyond an initial stage as a residential subdivision for commuters, second home buyers or retirees, and attempts to develop activities that stretch beyond locally focussed retail services. This paper suggests that these difficulties are created in large part by the characteristics of coastal development itself.

3. The Coast as the Creature of the Metropolitan Area.

One important reason why coastal regions lack the breadth and depth of some other communities is that they are really extensions of metropolitan areas. That is expressed through the many linkages between coast and city, and its effect can be judged by the diminishing level of development along the coast with increased distance from most metropolitan areas.

That sense of a spatial limit is very apparent in Australia. Although people live all around the coast, their settlement density varies enormously. Even though real estate writers periodically shout news of a new coastal frontier and report massive local change (rarely pointing out the small numbers needed to achieve the startling news), the absolute growth in new housing and especially in new commercial investment remains concentrated in a section of the coast around the major cities and stretching north from Sydney to the Sunshine Coast and intermittently on to Hervey Bay. In contrast remote coastal locations like some parts of southern NSW, the far western Victorian and eastern South Australian coast, and most of the Great Australian Bight (with the small exception of the stretch near Esperance) as well as most of the Western Australian and Northern Queensland illustrate that metropolitan area access remains the defining feature in coastal change.

The linkages between coast and city begin with commuters, retirees and second home buyers. Commuters and second home buyers retain a direct foothold in the

metropolitan area; they transfer income and mortgage finance (often assured with a metropolitan home) from city to coast. For retirees, cash for coastal house purchase generally comes from the sale of a metropolitan area house. Through those connections the vitality and change in some parts of the coast are really an outgrowth of the productivity and expansion of the metropolitan area. Any change in the character of the latter will have an important impact upon the vitality of the former, something that has been seen in the cycles of expansion and contraction in most coastal economies over the years. Once the coastal area has established housing and other facilities its seasonal holiday clientele will also be drawn mainly from the metropolitan area.

The intensity of the linkages also varies between sectors. In the retail sector national supermarket chains run local operations, hauling produce in and takings out, leaving a small local staff and rates to the council but little else. Over time the expansion in the retail sector involves shops from national chains, so once again the metropolitan links are strong. The management of superannuation funds for example, is an entirely metropolitan activity, and the management and supply of pension and related social security payments, an activity with regional offices in some coastal locations, is overwhelmingly a Canberra based activity. The banking industry has a similar geographic structure. All these sectors are important to coastal regions, but have their roots in metropolitan areas.

Many coastal dwellers perpetuate supply contacts with known service providers in the metropolitan area. Some of these links, in particular medical services, can require travel, but contact with family provides sufficient justification for trips back to the metropolitan area.

The scale of outflow from a coastal area to other parts of the nation (and the world) has been illustrated dramatically in an analysis of the linkages of a major Japanese tourism operator in Cairns by Stimson et al (1991); the non-local effects of the expenditure of the company reviewed in that study far outweigh the local effects, even though Cairns is much larger than the typical coastal settlement. The same outcome has been detailed for the Gold Coast by West (2004). These external links limit the potential for the development of a broader service sector in many coastal communities and

together limit the growth of local links that are central to any move toward an “export complex” or to “economic maturation” in a coastal region.

The effects of metropolitan linkages are felt in other ways. For example, the homes bought by commuters, retirees, and holiday home owners are taken off the market for local labour looking for housing. Perhaps more seriously, their price will probably rise well above the level set by local demand as they reflect metropolitan earnings and mortgage capacity; this will reduce their affordability for local workers. It is then likely that any local economic sector that needs labour (including those activities serving tourists) will have difficulty hiring, unless (as is common) housing is available in nearby non-coastal communities. This latter effect spreads some of the benefits of coastal development but in the process it dissipates the impact of coastal demand. In the case of retirees, they provide a demand for population-related services, but not a workforce for any new and emerging industry or service activity. Hence the housing market effects of the linkages with metropolitan areas lay the foundation for specialised local economic outcomes in coastal areas.

These insights into coastal development are important as they show that even with very substantial accommodation and tourist facility investment in major hotels and resorts along with artificial entertainment facilities and an expanded retail sector, coastal development can still be sitting on a narrow economic edge, lacking the breadth of services and interconnected sectors that are associated with a regional economy where sectors other than tourism act as the main base. It would seem the opportunity for a coastal region to reduce outflows of expenditure, and overcome the restrictions created on housing and labour supply by the very forces that shape its growth, are very limited.

In addition much of the labour employed in tourism industry is part-time and low wage earning. That is a shaky foundation upon which to develop other services and confirms that “tourism does not recommend itself as a means for achieving long term, secure employment” (Mullins 1991:336).

4. The Role of Pre-existing Towns

A variant on the leakage of demand out of the coast to a metropolitan area is the local leakage from a coastal settlement to a pre-existing larger service town, which may or may not be on the coast. This outcome arises as the coast was settled in an earlier era for agriculture, forestry or fisheries and a series of settlements developed to meet the needs of these sectors as Murphy and Burnley (2004) have shown. These places are able to meet the new demand created by coastal expansion, and in a number of cases the new demand has revitalised the commercial functions of these locations. Smith (1991) has shown how this effect can reshape the spatial organisation of coastal areas, noting that in a very few cases a new coastal node (like Surfers' Paradise) can come to outrank an established regional centre (like Southport). However the role of the established regional centre often remains significant and that presence dampens down the overall impact of new coastal development as established physical infrastructure and service sectors are used to meet new demand with just marginal increments in their capacity and labour demand. This is especially so where there is a strong seasonal element associated with the new coastal community, as that seasonal demand does not justify new infrastructure or production facilities. In that way the additional new population associated with coastal development will not stimulate as much investment in new services as might be expected; in a sense additional coastal development is a form of suburbanisation around the existing centre (although it may not adjoin the centre). The effective outcome is that new coastal subdivisions will not need to provide more than basic service delivery, as the new population will get what it needs from the existing regional centre which might of course be in a different municipality. In effect the established centre limits the possibility that new services will grow in the coastal areas that surround it.

Hence residential subdivision strung along the coast can remain just that, as the needs of the new population are met outside the area. In that outcome coastal development reinforces the existing network of cities and towns, something that has been very common along the Australian coast. This aspect of the coastal development process has limited the economic development of many coastal areas to the first wave of residential subdivision and simple population-related services.

The flow-on effects of coastal development are also weakened by the ribbon-style settlement. That pattern means population numbers, though they might be locally high in

a particular pocket of coastal land subdivision (even allowing for the number of holiday houses), may not be enough to justify local services in their own right. This low population effect reinforces the flow of consumers to the nearby regional centre.

These examples illustrate that there are elements within the way coastal development proceeds that dissipate its potential for economic development in a surrounding area.

5. Difficulties of Creating Inter-linkages Around Tourism

To evolve into a more complex local economy a coastal location or its nearby major town has to have “local production that broadens to other products and/or deepens by extending forward or backward in the stages of production ...” (Thompson 19 :15). In a major industrial or service centre that process can be seen in the addition of new industries that have links with the original export functions, creating industrial districts around clusters of activity. In a coastal area this could involve connections with local agriculture (sometimes in specialised products like wine or tropical fruit) which then becomes linked to the tourism industry either as a supplier to the population on the coast, or as a tourist destination in its own right. Beyond that the potential for new industrial and commercial activity to create a broader economy is limited by the small scale of local operations and the strength of competition from metropolitan suppliers. Roberts worked on this matter in Cairns; he showed that an international tourist industry, a successful tropical agricultural sector, some maritime maintenance and construction activity and regional service functions co-existed but did not gel into an export complex of the kind that has emerged in other urban areas.

One reason it is difficult to broaden the linkages between coastal activities and other sectors is that tourism and housing occupies land (at higher price levels than the traditional local level) and requires infrastructure in competition with other local economic sectors, which may not be able to pay the same price for land or services. In those circumstances, coastal residential and tourism development can have a push-out effect on existing land uses, so limiting the potential for inter-industry linkages and at the same time limiting the opportunity for diversification in the economic structure of an area. Tourist facilities also create seasonal peaks in traffic and labour demand, which

could lead to difficulties in the day-to-day operation of the other economic sectors. These aspects suggest that tourism is an unusual sector to build into regional economic development. Its seasonality, part-time mobile workforce, and land hunger make it a difficult neighbour in an economic sense.

At the same time the common neighbours in the Australian coast such as agriculture, forestry and mining have some aspects that work against a close alliances with tourism. Large scale operation using heavy trucks, fertilizer and insecticide, as well as dust and noise generation in some cases does not make them ideal neighbours for the “lifestyle” attractions of coastal development.

It is significant that even in an area with the scale and scope of tourism development like the Gold Coast there is still a lack of deep and intensified linkages beyond the tourism and accommodation sector. The assessment of development to date (by the Gold Coast City Council) suggests “the local economy (has not filled) out in range and quality of both business and consumer services” (Thompson 19 :16). This experience not only illustrates the unusual circumstances surrounding the economic sectors in coastal development but shows that proximity to a major metropolitan area can limit a local services sector. The proximity to Brisbane has a number of important advantages of course, not the least being an international airport and a source of day visitors and seasonal holiday makers; the latter dimension has long been part of the links between each of the major metropolitan regions and its nearby coast. It is also possible that Brisbane can act as a job market for the residential development of the Gold Coast, so adding a source of employment outside that associated with tourism and accommodation. On balance though, Brisbane is the focus of many of the leakages out of the Gold Coast economy.

One area where the scale and scope of local development might provide opportunities for more major service sector development is in education and the provision of medical services. These sectors have developed in part in response to the needs of tourism, to meet an increasing population, and also from a special decision to develop land and a University. These activities seem to be part of a small set of functions that have emerged outside the core of tourism sectors and suggest that at a very large scale coastal development may trigger some more significant regional services.

In summary it is unlikely that an economy made up of second homes, retirees and seasonal holiday makers will stimulate activity in sectors that have the broader inter-industry linkages needed to create the export complex or a regional metropolis as suggested in Thompson's stages of development.

The discussion above outlines a number of ways that coastal development has some special features, which means that the conjunction of residential land development and local population growth being associated with high unemployment and welfare dependence is not a paradox, but rather the natural economic outcome of development of a very particular set of activities in very particular locations. The implications of that interpretation are explored below.

6. The Implications of the Coastal Economic Development Process

The ideas discussed above have some serious consequences for the future development and management of coastal areas. It is likely that the continued expansion and productivity of metropolitan areas will maintain a demand for second homes, longer distance commuting and retirement residential opportunities that will be felt in residential demand in coastal areas. This could be expressed in continued ribbon- type expansion along the coast, seeking out more supply of waterfront land for subdivision at greater and greater distances from metropolitan areas, or it could be expressed in more intensive development of existing areas. These alternative outcomes will have different physical and ecological consequences, and will generate different responses among local economies.

In the first case, demand will be spread among many small centres and produce little more than low-level service sector activity, as has been discussed earlier. It will also be difficult to manage as it will be spread among a number of municipalities. Some of these will have little or no experience in the process of control of development and lack the resources to plan and provide infrastructure in anticipation of development which has become the norm in metropolitan areas. Scattered and haphazard development of this kind will maintain the social, economic and environmental problems of coastal regions.

More intensive development will require some special attention in physical and community infrastructure. It could create stronger local service economies making the provision of a broader array of population-serving functions possible by providing additional customers and by dampening down some of the seasonality in demand. It is also possible that much of the development could take place within one municipality, providing a consistent and perhaps better resourced approach to the management of land release and the provision of services. It is not clear though whether the higher density concentration approach is consistent with the perception of coastal settlement in the minds of existing residents, as Green's (2000) work on Byron Bay indicates.

Hence we have two possible futures, with different economic, management and organisational consequences. The experience in a number of locations (Gold Coast, Hervey Bay, Port Macquarie for example) suggests that the concentration effect could be the stronger of the two forces in the longer term. That outcome will stem in part from a reluctance of potential residents and second home buyers to move too far from metropolitan areas. It will be reinforced by the fact that airline connections from metropolitan areas will be provided to only a small number of coastal centres. It will also be fostered by a suburbanisation of coastal communities around these larger centres.

Looking beyond the spatial pattern however are a set of financial concerns. A local economy made up of retirees, second homes, holiday resorts and small scale retail has a very limited base from which to raise rate revenue. This is especially so when it is spread among several municipalities. At the same time its seasonality has special cost implications, with infrastructure and personal service supply needed for a short term peak population well in excess of that required by the local rate-paying population. Finally it is possible that a population with a substantial proportion of retirees could be a more expensive population to serve due to a call upon labour intensive services associated with aging population needs.

Coastal communities have responsibility for some iconic dimensions, expected to be pristine and cared-for in the minds of the non-ratepaying citizens of a nation, who will want to visit from time to time. In this view coastal councils are like a central city council which is expected to supply services for a large population that does not pay rates; the central city council of course has the benefit of a large commercial sector as a

ratepayer, and so is better placed to manage the situation. The coastal community (although dealing with smaller numbers) does not have the large diverse and stable rate revenue sources to meet demand created by non rate-paying visitors. Hence coastal development carries with it some serious financial elements that need close attention.

The economic development and financial dimensions outlined above show that coastal development represents an economic change with special geographic dimensions that are not well connected to the management frameworks and financial funding formulae of local government. This is a problem that is felt in the metropolitan regions across the world (Salet et al 2000). In effect, understanding change on the coast, and developing mechanisms to direct and manage that change, involves addressing the tension between nationally significant features (in environmental, cultural and economic contexts) that are changing rapidly due mainly to metropolitan influences, but are expressed in the confines of a local community that has limited resources and expertise. Making better connections between these different scales and providing resources to achieve national objectives while respecting the local outcomes will not be easy. This challenge will need to be met in a context where there are a range of other calls upon urban and regional planning and infrastructure funding, and where the coastal locations, though attracting substantial real estate interest, do not account for the major share of the nation's population nor of its population change.

This paper has made little reference to the coastal and river estuary ecology and environment that provides the frame for the development processes discussed here. That omission reflects the special skills and approaches needed in such a topic. However, it is not really possible to keep these two dimensions separate as development processes not only shape and change the physical world, but in turn the condition of the physical world shapes economic responses. At the extreme, poor design of urban development and excessive subdivision of coastal frontages can reduce the attractiveness of the coast and so limit the possibility of further economic change. In this way the coast is yet again a special case and understanding its change, trying to cope with the aspirations for its development and providing ways to manage and direct its future will require considerably more innovation and effort than has been directed at it up to now.

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