

THE PLAN: COMMUNITY v. GOVERNMENT

POSTED BY: CHIEF BANDICOOT 24/06/2017

■ Minutes of a special shire planning meeting, Hastings Hub, 22 June 2017.

Meeting chair – Ms Christine Haydon, co-founder of Peninsula Speaks

Present – councillors David Gill, Bryan Payne, Kate Roper, Simon Brooks, Rosie Clark [plus planning officers Allan Cowley and David Bergin] and about 300 members of the public.

Apologies – councillors Bev Colomb (mayor), Hugh Fraser (on leave overseas), Frank Martin, Julie Edge, Sam Hearn and Antonella Celi.

A further apology – Bandicoot fears this might be a rather long dissertation, but an important and interesting one: delivered by an expert, not a mere marsupial.

Guest speaker – Professor Michael Buxton, head of RMIT University’s school of global, urban and social studies, a man with a long planning background, beginning as a councillor and advancing through state government positions into the sunlit uplands of academe.



Along the way he helped write the green wedge rules that apply to 70% of the Mornington Peninsula and other large swathes of land surrounding metropolitan Melbourne – their creator and ardent advocate, Liberal premier Sir Rupert Hamer described them as “the lungs of Melbourne”, now under sustained developer attack for their value to them

(and the governments they lobby into submission) in terms of corporate financial yield rather than for their agricultural and recreational community value.

* * * * *

Professor Buxton tells the 300-strong audience – jammed into the Hastings Hub like houses into a new subdivision – that he worked in the state planning department in the late 1980s when Berwick was laid out, with about “a quarter of what’s there now. It highlights what many of your concerns are” about the Mornington Peninsula’s fate.

The plan back then, he says, was to cover the entire Moorooduc plain with that kind of urban development. It really highlighted to me that nothing is permanent in planning. All we seem to do is fight rearguard actions that hold the development industry at bay for a while but eventually they come back. [See <http://morningtonpeninsulabandicoot.com/2017/06/25/moorooduc-plain-escaped-suburban-fate/>]



And that Berwick corridor is a classic. It was never, ever, designed to be like that. And gradually, incrementally, governments have changed and added development, taken productive agricultural land out of production and put thousands of houses on it, away from public transport in the worst car-dependent suburbs on earth.

This is, unfortunately, the saga of Victorian planning. It’s incremental, and no one ever sticks to the plan.

Government has to be made to remember – they don’t remember anything; there’s no corporate memory any more. They don’t remember a thing because government and many planners are constantly reinventing the wheel, thinking they can do better than everyone else did in the past.

In a lot of countries planners build on the past. They see it as their important responsibility to ensure that the important elements of the past are remembered and that the future takes note of the past.

In the 1970s some visionaries, Alan Hunt and Rupert Hamer and people like them, planned for a 50-year period. They saw what has become Berwick happening to the Mornington Peninsula and they said 'No, it must not be allowed to happen,' because the peninsula is one of those critical peripheral urban areas that are part of Melbourne's hinterland that have to be planned in conjunction with Melbourne's development.

So they introduced the notion of regional planning. We haven't done any of it since. Regional planning is off the agenda – but the state opposition seems to have rediscovered the concept of planning that reaches out towards major regional centres.

The 50 years for which plans were made in the 1970 are up. We're back in another critical time. Development pressures really built up over the last 50 years and the Mornington Peninsula is under the pump, as you know – that's why you're here.



Governments have to be forced, through electoral consequences, to face the need to, once again, go back to first principles to protect areas like the Mornington Peninsula from the kind of development pressures that are building up.

Mornington Peninsula, between these two bays and right on the fringe of Melbourne, is being subjected to enormous development interest and pressures. It's like a dam that's about to burst.

Unless very strict controls are maintained and improved – I think they can be improved – then incrementally, we're going to see change after change, erosion of rural values, townships fundamentally altered, and the Mornington Peninsula that you hold dear is going to go.

This can be an incredibly rapid process, as occurred with the city of Melbourne, with residential towers appearing suddenly in the space of a dozen years. It is a fundamentally different city.

Our challenge is to look ahead, as Hamer and Hunt did 40 or 50 years ago, and look ahead another 50 years – 100 years; why not? – and outline the kind of Mornington Peninsula that you want protected, that you want to be passed on to your children and your grandchildren and to the people of Melbourne and the residents of this area.

That takes some thinking: it's exactly the kind of thing that those politicians did. Without that work the Mornington peninsula that you know and love will no longer exist, just as the Upper Yarra Valley and Dandenong Ranges wouldn't.



I was on one of Alan Hunt and Rupert Hamer's creations, the Upper Yarra Valley and Dandenong Ranges Authority, the equivalent of the Western Port Planning Authority [which protected the areas against uncontrolled development]. The Dandenongs are under similar threats to the peninsula.

Protecting the peninsula doesn't mean ossifying it and sending it back to the dark ages. The planning that occurred in the 1970s has created the potential – and the potential is being realised now – for creativity, for innovation, that would have been lost if this area had been developed into a sea of suburbia and rural residential.

There is nothing more final than residential and rural residential development. It closes off all other options. It stifles innovation. It descends a community into a sameness that is so boring and stultifying and prevents the sort of innovation that could otherwise occur.

What sort of innovation has occurred?

Look at some of the townships in the Upper Yarra Valley and the Mornington Peninsula. They are full of activity and interest, all sorts of start-up businesses that are occurring, and more will occur. That's because these places have maintained, been able to maintain, their amenity, and their identity and their heritage value, and they're lovely places to live.

Amenity and heritage and natural resource protection attracts. It attracts people with ideas.

In doing this kind of planning a series of principles should be adopted. One is precaution – being cautious maintains options over a time span of 50 or 100 years, particularly in times of rapid change, such as climate change and the need to protect our food resources.

Mornington Peninsula is part of the hinterland areas of Melbourne, that is the second most productive agricultural region in the state. Many agricultural economists give away these areas, they say Mornington Peninsula and the fringes of Melbourne are not important because we can just keep allowing the city to push out and we can find other land to develop in a never-ending way.

This is part of our colonial past. It is part of a frontier nation philosophy, that there is always more land. There isn't always more land. This is some of the best land in the country and it is critical to maintain the option for its future use for a wide range of activities that you and metropolitan Melbourne are going to need, ranging from landscapes that inspire people and add to healthy people, mentally and physically, to food production, biodiversity and just the maintenance of high-amenity areas.

Once they're lost they're lost forever.

Just maintaining those options is a critical responsibility that we have. This responsibility now rests with local councils [the whole peninsula was brought under the control of one council when the Kennett amalgamations occurred].

Mornington Peninsula Shire and the Yarra Ranges Shire in effect picked up the responsibility to pass on the planning that occurred during the '70s into the future. It is their responsibility, as de facto regional planning authorities – they cover the same area – to act as custodians of the work that's been done.

All too often councils fail to do this. I think there has been, over time, some good planning, but often local authorities, and particularly state governments, have ignored that important responsibility.

It really concerns me that a department like the state planning department basically has no interest whatsoever, at any level, in protecting the Mornington Peninsula, in my view. There is no corporate sense of responsibility, there is no corporate memory.

When I was in the department there were people who came into the department from the board of works, there were people who were there used to work on the regional planning authorities and had a commitment to maintain that kind of planning. One of their core beliefs was their view that they really had to protect these areas.

Nobody has that responsibility at a state level any longer.

This places a greater responsibility on you, on us, to ensure that our democratically elected representatives understand the way we feel about the importance of our areas, because you can be certain nobody in there is doing it on your behalf at a state level.

I'm not saying it isn't happening at a local level – at a local level there are some very strong advocates. It's very important that you involve yourselves in the future governance of this area.

So, what are some of the threats?

The most immediate one is the maintenance of the Urban Growth Boundary, introduced in the early 2000s by then planning minister Mary Delahunty, despite strong opposition by the development minister and cabinet. It is protected by legislation. But it has been changed – not on the peninsula, however. [The shire has long fought ferociously to maintain it, interjects Bandicoot.]

A big step forward was the green wedge zone, in 2003, and that was a big step forward, because the previous rural zone allowed just about anything to occur in rural areas.

There are new threats to townships. Former planning minister Matthew Guy brought in new residential zones; for the peninsula the most important of these are the neighbourhood residential (8-metre height control) and the general residential (9m).

The current Labor government has just liberalised those zones to allow for multi-unit development in the NRZ and raised the height limit to 11m in the GRZ. Your township areas are going to be under threat, so places like Mornington, and a lot of your other quite interesting and quite special township

areas are going to be changed, I think, because the commercial one zone has no height control.

Unless the council does a lot of really good solid work to introduce height controls this government seems to have a loathing for mandated height controls. Regrettably, the higher amenity townships are the ones that attract development.

The developers come to the most beautiful, the most active, the most innovative townships and, before long, the whole streetscape changes to a medium-rise apartment constructions – this is happening all though Melbourne; we are going to see Smith St, Glenferrie Rd, all under threat. They're going to 25, 35 storeys.

The same thing, to a lesser extent, is going to happen to your township zones.

There are other really important threats. There's a thing called VicSmart – I love the way governments, whenever they want to do something dumb, call it 'smart'. The idea was that minor matters could be pushed through council in 10 days.

VicSmart is dumb.

[Bandicoot has written extensively about VicSmart: Labor has dramatically extended its scope and is now rewriting Victoria's planning system to reflect it, which involves effectively advantaging developers and disempowering individuals in planning matters. See morningtonpeninsulabandicoot.com]

This could fundamentally change rural areas, allowing uses now prohibited or requiring a permit to be allowed without a permit and removing your right to object.

The government has talked to the industry in terms such as *We're going to free planning up, we're going to get rid of red tape* – whenever I hear *We're going to get rid of red tape* I want to yell from the rooftops, because that's a cover-up for *We want to give over the planning system to the development community*.

To end up with one of the most active current threats the potential for commercial uses in the green wedge and the rural conservation zone. At the moment there are certain limitations in the green wedge zone for commercial uses. There are limits on the number of people for commercial uses such as function centre and group accommodation, residential hotel and restaurant in particular.

What's happened in the past is that Tourism Victoria has tried to get successive governments to open up the rural areas of places like the Mornington Peninsula

to rampant commercial development, where large hotel accommodation and conference centre-restaurant complexes, of the type that you already have down here, and to open them up.

At the moment you can have these uses in the green wedge but they are controlled by the number of patrons and by land size. Had Tourism Victoria been successful in removing these controls, the Mornington Peninsula would have been opened up overnight to rampant commercial development all through the green wedge.

Another danger is that agriculture department officers want to grow houses instead of crops. That's a funny mindset. The green wedge controls are not brilliant – I actually wrote them; we got them through cabinet over 10 years ago and that was the best cabinet would agree on, because the industry minister wanted no controls whatsoever.

The threat has been to take these controls away. I think they should be strengthened. I don't think there should be any commercial uses in rural zones.

If people want to develop group accommodation, hotels, restaurants, they should do it in the towns. What we're seeing in Tasmania is a huge threat of international investment in the beautiful landscapes of the Tasmanian east coast.

International investment wants to come in and build the kind of complexes that you see all down the South China Sea in Vietnam – massive tourist accommodation complexes where people from overseas come in; they're helicoptered into these places and they're locked in, because the tourist operator wants every dollar. The township doesn't get a cent. So if you happen to run a business in a town you're not going to get any benefit from these stand-alone complexes. They're there to benefit the investor: they're not there to benefit the community.

We need order and control of these kinds of factors. I'd like to see all that removed straight away.

To finish up: a couple of really important steps forward here that I think it's critical for the council now to pick up.

Firstly, a mandatory regional statement with a powerful strategic framework stating that the current state policy to protect areas such as the Mornington Peninsula is woeful, that the shire needs the policy to be revised to include very clear statements about the need to protect the values of this area.

We also need to look at the values of the Mornington Peninsula wherever they are; in the townships and the rural areas, and identify them and develop policies and statutory means to protect them.

An example: declare this area a food bowl or part of Melbourne's food bowl. Adelaide has just done this. The South Australian government, instead of looking at an Urban Growth Boundary, to stop the urban area into the rural area, declared the non-urban areas – biodiversity, food production, high scenic landscapes – sacrosanct.

They put a line around the rural values (such as the Barossa Valley), including the townships, and said, 'Hands off!'

This is an important psychological focus – on protecting these areas with strong mandated provisions.

The Mornington Peninsula is an incredible area. I think it's internationally significant, with world scale values that you don't really have to elsewhere and appreciate. It's critical now to go forward for another 50 or 100 years and ensure that legacy of the past 50 years is not lost.

That's our challenge – a wonderful and exciting challenge.