

Brian Rickards talks to a man who was part of the team that made Noosa a special haven for tourists and residents alike. He is worried by today's planning processes.

PAUL Summers is a jolly sort of bloke – laidback, big smile, dressed for a barbie but with a brain as sharp as a tack.

Immediately, you'd hazard a guess that Paul isn't your normal stereotypical urban planner hunched over a drawing board on level 33 of a shiny office block in the heart of Brisbane.

Yet a planner he is, and with an impressive CV.

And you might hazard a guess that this warm character is just the bloke you'd have confidence in to bring a special kind of creativity and a comfortable lifestyle to any project put his way. You would be right.

Paul, who works from home just a few Ks outside of Cooroy, was one of the luminaries that in the mid-90s brought together the cutting edge Noosa town plan – one that set development limits and by default a population limit. It was a plan that essentially preserved the unique character of Noosa.

Before we got down to a serious chat, Paul just had to show me the lush 8-acre property he is restoring to environmental soundness. He's also got plans to renovate the old house, something he likes to do to keep hands-on and to occasionally swap his computer and draughting tools for a hammer and saw.

With chooks at feet, he surveys his dam and tells how he is gradually helping the place to recover from a previous owner's inappropriate maintenance practice.

So, from this idyllic smallholding, Paul starts our formal interview looking at the big picture of the population issue.

"The big problem for all of Australia is our love affair with the seaboard and how we are driven to these edges, such as Noosa which is really close to us. Overpopulating these areas will irrevocably alter the character of the locations," said Paul.

"Many of the locations are part of our major tourism drawcard and a lot of the work I did in Noosa was designed to try to maintain a tourism outcome because that was our dominant employment area.

"To maintain the area's character and our niche in the market we had to control the level of development which in turn controlled the level of population. There are very few places doing that in Australia.

"So, the result is, because of the baby boom, the attraction of the seaboard areas and the climate, everybody wants to move to these locations. However, there's another driving factor – it's jobs and the fact that most of our economy is directed to those areas."

Paul then lamented that we don't do anything to balance our population and attract more people to rural areas.

He says that many of these areas, which are quite attractive and would be nice places to live, could be transformed with new business opportunities.

"Our problem is that we've got this major growth mostly in our cities where we inject huge amounts of capital into providing for infrastructure such as roads,

Paul's plan worked



Paul Summers relaxes at his 8-acre hideaway near Cooroy

picture: Brian Rickards

freeways and tunnels just to get people from one side of town to the other," said Paul.

"It's just a commuter arrangement – instead of living closer to the places they work at, they live on the opposite side, or closer to the sea and burn fossil fuel going backwards and forwards across the city.

"So we spend a lot of money on that sort of infrastructure. Meanwhile in our rural areas we have declining population because there are no jobs and no opportunities.

"We could change the policy position and start creating opportunities for growth in those areas."

Paul then remembers how his team was ridiculed for their bold new ideas for Noosa.

"I'd walk into a room full of planners and politicians and talk to them about our work on population, and they would laugh at us as if we were crazy," he said.

"We talked to them about why it was necessary to gear your population to your capacity to supply infrastructure, to your capacity to pay for that infrastructure."

He believes proper planning looks at the resources available – financial resources and physical resources that allow you to deliver the infrastructure. You also should look at what your community wants to achieve.

Paul is not too impressed with most of our politicians. "They seem to be somewhat loath to describe or

bring to the community what their decision-making really means," he said.

"For instance, the Federal Government talks about a population of 35 million but you don't see anything about how that population is going to be accommodated across Australia, what that means to the cities across Australia or how that might impact on or change those areas."

This urban planner, sitting quietly in his cottage far from inner-city pollution, while a good number of fellow Queenslanders are probably sitting in a traffic jam somewhere, doesn't have much time for the way we are dealing with city living.

"We don't have a sensible approach to doing things -- we keep growing our cities and just treat the

symptoms of the problems. Meanwhile, in the rural areas we try to prop up economies by investing small amounts of money in small ventures," he said.

"What really makes places attractive to live in

for families, apart from the usual physical features, is the opportunity for jobs."

Paul points to the Western Corridor, between Brisbane and Ipswich, as a success story in steering people away from coastal areas and as a guide for increasing the growth potential in corridor areas and regional locations. He had been a strong advocate of that process in the time of the Goss Government

despite people saying it would never work.

"Less than 20 years later it's now the primary policy position of the SEQ Regional Plan and the Western Corridor is probably the largest in Australia. And it has all worked because of jobs created through government decision-making at that time which had earmarked land for industrial and commercial development as well as putting in infrastructure in advance," said Paul.

Paul is not a believer in the idea of official population caps, preferring instead to set limits through controlled and locked-in development.

"It's impossible to put in place. A cap implies you put in place something that can't be changed – that's not possible because community values can change."

When it comes to planning, Paul says you never have a blank canvas. There is always something that was there previously.

He said planners first have to look at the resources, the values that are in place and the capacity to supply infrastructure and to talk to the community about what they want to achieve. Then they should analyse obligations to the environment, obligations to the community – it's a marriage of those things.

Paul tells of the dramatic changes in the processes of forming a regional plan. He's not happy about them and shows how the grassroots checks and balances have been effectively reduced to nothing. It's a worrying scenario.

"We used to have a cooperative model driven from the bottom up. All the local governments got together coordinated by the state or state agencies and pooled resources and this gave them the opportunity to consider cross-boundary issues," said Paul.

"The process was fed from the bottom and done largely by

professional local government planners at regional level.

"What we have today is the state doing all that work. It takes all of the data that came to local government previously, so it becomes armed with a lot of information.

"So, these days, the state dictates and controls that process. I don't know what happens internally within the state or how much political interference occurs through that process. I have to say that I believe some occurs.

"So what was a good idea and working quite well was stopped. Now we have a Department of Infrastructure and Planning that dictates what is going to happen and uses a flat-line, straight-curve population projection that has no regard to the capacity of the region to support that population.

"What we're doing now is changing the regional plan every time a new set of population projections come out. The population projections drive everything. You have a curve that goes out – you add another five years to it and then you've got extra fertility and a lower rate of mortality and a massive immigration intake so the curve can keep going up.

"The question for Australia is not about a cap but about how we should be spacially distributing our population. The other is about size and sustainability. To date neither question has been answered."

"And the level of consultation with the state is now 'Here's our plan, what do you think of it?'"

And if you don't like it? Paul's sunny countenance clouds over a little.

"Even the community has a feeling of powerlessness at the present time. So many decisions are being made regardless of their opinion."

But there's always an election, Paul is reminded – that's when his face lights up again.

Even the community has a feeling of powerlessness at the present time