

# Joint cry for

As the Queensland government calls for growth, Coast community groups warn of dangers. **Bill Hoffman** reports:

**P**OPULATION is the proverbial elephant in the room. It looms over everything, demanding resources, infrastructure, jobs and land.

Whatever its footprint, the roads, electricity power lines, water supply and rail lines to service it chew ever further into what is left of the region's natural environment.

While the state government wants the Sunshine Coast Regional Council to show it where 98,500 new homes can be accommodated during the next 30 years, community groups are crying out for restraint.

Just where the council stands won't be known to the community until late next week when it is expected to release its submission on the South-east Queensland Plan at the same time it is sent to the state government.

Environmentalists like former Sunshine Coast Environment Council manager Ian Christesen are concerned that it won't be tough enough on population projections.

Mr Christesen wants a show-down, for the council to tell the government that the region voted at the amalgamation election for a different path from that which has created the Gold Coast.

Former Noosa town planner Paul Summers believes there is no planning involved in an agenda that predetermines the number of dwellings required before any test of the elements that could sustain that growth and the impact that would have on the environment.

Mr Summers, who built the Noosa Plan into the form that had created one of Australia's most desired locations, says that it is possible to plan for desired out-

comes for communities.

As Noosa's planned capacity nears, growth rates have slowed to 1.2%, their lowest in more than 20 years.

He is also concerned that flood prone, highway noise affected and acid sulphate laden land west of Coolool remained in the urban footprint.

Across the Sunshine Coast, community groups argue that the region's quality of life and the integrity of its natural environment will disappear under the weight of people.

The state government, however, is more interested in where an estimated additional 200,000 souls will live.

Its SEQ regional plan review was brought forward by a year, putting pressure on newly-amalgamated councils and making it clear that its focus was on accommodating growth, not testing what a sustainable level of population should be.

The state of the region report meant to inform the regional plan review has been largely buried, its damning findings on the health of a range of environmental indicators not referenced.

There are 36 external reports, the guidelines for which are still in draft form, most relating to the state of the environment that were not available for consideration by parties making submissions on the regional plan.

Others that, according to sources, were too shocking in their findings to be tabled have seen the light of day within the bureaucracy but then quietly disappeared.

Organisation of Sunshine Coast associations of ratepayers, or OSCAR, which heavily-backed mayor Bob Abbot's election cam-

paign and that of candidates who supported him, is in the process of finalising a submission that would also challenge the numbers.

Its president, Johanne Wright, was overseas at the time this article was compiled and not available for comment.

Caloundra ratepayers' association is also concerned. It will put to the government that it simply does not agree with its growth figure of 98,500 new homes by 2031.

It contends that an ecological carrying capacity needs to be established and a public discussion held about the impacts of different population levels.

"This has simply not happened," its submission states.

It wants not only the green field sites at Palmview and Caloundra South dumped from the urban footprint but also the 1400 hectare investigation area extension of Caloundra south removed as well.

President Peter Bryant said the SEQ plan review had failed to take account of the findings of the state of the region report.

He said it did nothing to address the problems identified and guaranteed the further degradation of water quality, ecological sustainability and infrastructure provision. Mr Bryant, a member of the Sunshine Coast hospitals board, said the health system in the region was already under extreme stress as were all emergency services.

No account had been made of the need to also service the 30,000 tourists who were on the Coast on any given night.

The Caloundra ratepayers' association also sees urban infill as detrimental to the quality of life to which residents aspire.

# restraint

Extra land for development would not improve housing affordability, but provide greater opportunity for developers, the submission states.

The Sunshine Coast council's growth management position paper, which it hoped would inform the draft SEQ regional plan document, was a document that council worked through line by line before finally signing off on. It carried many of the aspirations expressed by voters at the 2008 local government elections which gave it a mandate to create an Australian model for regional sustainability and to save the region from becoming the Gold Coast most fear.

However, the document did not challenge the state's population assumptions, rather conditioning them on a range of factors around infrastructure, its delivery and the maintenance of environmental, social and economic balance.

Whether or not its formal response to the plan will toughen up on population levels remains to be seen.

What is known is that councillor Chris Thompson has made it clear he is unhappy with the numbers projected for central Maroochy and he desires a show-down with the state over the whole issue of population for the region.

Mr Thompson, council's finance portfolio head, confirmed on Thursday that he would make an individual submission on the SEQ regional plan.

Population also bother the Sunshine Coast Environment Council.

Manager Narelle McCarthy has urged as many individuals as possible to take advantage of the additional month, to May 1, given for

submissions to be made.

"The draft SEQ Regional Plan 2009-2031 defines the future for the region. It allows for 735,000 new dwellings for another 1.3 million people, bringing south-east Queensland's 'target' population to 4.4 million (the size of Sydney) by 2031. In its current form, the plan is fundamentally flawed as it fails to consider the number of people that the region can sustainably support within its biophysical constraints - the carrying capacity," Ms McCarthy said.

"It continues to concentrate on the challenge of greater growth with its downward spiral of building infrastructure for the short term, based on fossil fuel reliance and urban expansion.

"With the projections in this plan, the Sunshine Coast population by 2031 will be 76% higher than the Gold Coast was in 2006."

SCEC argues that south-east Queensland is already under stress "Almost doubling the population will worsen

the problems already threatening our quality of life and the diminishing biodiversity of the region," Ms McCarthy said.

"An estimated 70,000 hectares of remnant vegetation in south-east Queensland, including massive areas of core koala habitat, are under threat from urban development within the urban footprint alone.

"South-east Queensland, and the Sunshine Coast particularly, rates as a region with some of the highest biodiversity in Australia, yet we are losing our unique flora and fauna at an alarming rate.

"In its current form, the draft SEQ Regional Plan will exacerbate those losses."



**TEST THE ELEMENTS: Town planner Paul Summers.**

PHOTO: LOU O'BRIEN