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The Crunch for the Cane Land

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INTRODUCTION

Planning tends to operate in an environment of gradual change, so when confronted with potentially gross change over a short period of time, how does it cope and can it cope?

The extensive cane lands of Maroochy Shire and to a lesser extent Caloundra City and Noosa Shires, are a case in point. This paper looks at Maroochy Shire and comments on:

- The planning circumstances of the cane land;
- The change that will be brought about to that land;
- The speculation over other changes that is occurring;
- The nature of the cane land; and
- The role that vision plays in planning and dealing with change.

PLANNING CIRCUMSTANCES

Cane operations have been a major part of the economy of Maroochy Shire for decades. As recently as the late 90s, the Moreton Mill sought to expand the available cane areas, with reports addressing the need to allocate an additional 5,000ha. of land. Considerable pressure was placed on local governments to protect and expand the area of land committed for cane purposes.

As well as a direct role in generating economic activity, the cane lands of Maroochy Shire have also had an indirect economic role. These lands form a key part of the Shire's open space and therefore make strong contributions to the region's scenic amenity. In addition, cane farming also forms part of the region's cultural heritage.

Not surprisingly then, planning schemes set out to protect land for cane purposes and as a consequence they do not anticipate change for those lands. Put simply, the vision for these lands within Maroochy Plan is for ongoing agricultural production.

CHANGE THAT WILL OCCUR

With the potential cessation of milling activities there are two other fundamental changes that can be predicted with confidence:

- First, cane crops will not be grown beyond the final crush.
- Second, land on which cane is grown will stand unused for some time.

The first is obvious, the second less so. The reasons are that there is no alternative vision for the cane land. Consequently, there is a strong possibility of a considerable period of jockeying as people compete for the land and its potential alternative uses.

SPECULATION OVER OTHER CHANGES

Because there is no alternative vision for the cane land, there is no legal footing for alternate functions. Therefore the speculation over the use of the land for urban purposes is just that - speculation.

As well as protecting land for agriculture, Maroochy Plan also envisages a level of development and population designed to fit with existing and planned infrastructure and services. These assessments of infrastructure and services needs have been carried out at regional (south-east Queensland), sub-regional (Sunshine Coast) and local (Maroochy Shire) planes by different levels of government. No such assessments have been carried out for the extensive areas of cane land.

NATURE OF THE CANE LAND

Cane is a broad acre crop and as with other such crops, it generally requires relatively level land in large tracts. Fertility is generally not a major issue as it is a simple grass and with the application of fertilisers can be grown on many of the lower grade soils found on the sandy alluvial plains of Maroochy Shire.

These plains are often flood prone, with acidic soils. In fact, prior to clearing for agricultural purposes many of these areas would have supported wallum swamps dominated by melaleuca.

Regional ecosystems dominated by melaleuca are amongst the most severely affected by land clearing, with less than half the original coverage remaining. Today, at regional, sub-regional and local planes, these ecosystems are being widely protected in part because of their depletion, but also due to their extensive biodiversity value.

THE ROLE OF VISION

Vision is the foundation of planning. Without it, planning is pointless. Planning is also about balance – the balance between environmental, economic and social outcomes sought for our land and our communities. The cane lands of Maroochy Shire currently deliver key parts of the vision and assist in providing a balance between the competing interests of environmental, economic and social dimensions of plans.

So in examining alternative uses, the key questions need to firstly relate to vision.

What is the vision?

In this instance it is twofold:

- Agricultural productivity; and
- Open space.

What must be delivered by alternative uses to achieve the vision?

Put simply there are two:

- Long term economic activity; and
- Open space elements that add value to the character of the Shire.

Does urban development deliver the vision?

No.

This does not mean some suitably located parts of the cane land capable of being serviced cannot be used for urban purposes. What it does do though, is indicate that:

- The land should be retained for predominantly open space purposes that generates economic activity; and
- Setting the land aside for broad acre urban purposes will not deliver the vision sought by Maroochy Plan and the residents of Maroochy Shire.