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Submission on draft Armidale Plan 2040

The draft Armidale Plan 2040 fails to address in any meaningful way key issues which had been raised by the community during the consultation process which led up this draft plan. As such the desires and expectations of the community have been ignored, indeed one could say they have been treated with disdain and contempt by the consultant authors of the draft plan document.

In my earlier submission on the then draft Local Strategic Planning Statement, I noted that:

- statistics show that the economic output of the Armidale Regional Council area lags behind other nearby significant council areas;
- statistics also show our region has had minimal population growth over a considerable timeframe;
- our region has a history of turning away prospective businesses;
- our region has an unemployment rate considerably higher than the State average; and,
- our region has a crime rate amongst the highest in the State.

The present draft Armidale Plan 2040 ("Plan") recognises that community consultations showed the community wants a population growth rate between 2 – 3%, in doing so the community recognised that we cannot continue to rely on education and agriculture as the principal mainstays of our economy, to do so is a risk to our future prosperity (see: 6.4.5). They also recognised accepting a plan based on a 1% growth rate target is fraught with the danger of missing even that modest target.

Yet, the draft Plan ignores this.

The draft Plan notes, without comment, that Tamworth has opted for a growth rate which significantly exceeds the NSW Government projection by adopting a target of 100,000 by 2040. The consultant authors of our draft Plan do not provide any analysis on the viability of that target or why a similar approach should not be adopted by Armidale Regional Council as part of our Plan. Instead, they refer to a need for greater spending on infrastructure. However, when a comparison is made between Armidale and Tamworth on the level of additions and renewals to fixed assets during 2018 and 2019 years it can be seen that Armidale additions and renewals over the two years equated to a 2.7% pa increase, compared to Tamworth's increase of 2.765% - almost identical. Tamworth did not see infrastructure growth as an impediment to population and economic growth and neither should the Armidale Region.

We need to plan for higher population targets if we are to be able to sustain a vibrant city into the future.

Troublingly, the draft Plan includes a series of incohesive comments on our demographics by 2040. It states, based on a 1% growth rate, we would have a population of 38,000 by 2040, with 26% of these being over 65, that is some 9,880 people (see: 2.1). Section 8.3.1 underscores this when it states that the 75+ age group will more than double from 2,200 in 2016 to 4,600 by 2041, or 30% of our net population increase. While at the same time the draft Plan states we have a need to stem the “brain drain” (see: 8.3.2). No projections are provided as to the composition of our likely population in 2040. Without that it is difficult to appreciate how our population can give rise to an increase in working age population, being the key element which will drive the economic output of our region. Nothing in the draft Plan addresses how we can attract extra young people to our region (except for the odd comment about Smart Cities and incubator hubs).

Added to the above is the issue recognised in section 2.1 under the sub-heading “Societal Changes” of our Aboriginal Community experiencing “widespread socioeconomic disadvantage” which in turn has negative impacts on their employment. Nothing at all is said as to how the recommendations in the draft Plan will address this issue. Proactive approaches to expanding our population and driving economic expansion by attracting substantial new or existing businesses to our region will assist in allowing employment opportunities for those in our Aboriginal community, in turn diminishing the overall level of their socioeconomic disadvantage. The draft Plan as presented fails to address this issue in any manner whatsoever.

In short, the demographic analysis and projections in the draft Plan fail to provide a clear plan for the people of the Armidale Region. On this basis alone, the draft Plan should be rejected in its entirety.

In addition, the draft Plan fails:

- To address the existing plans to raise the Malpas Dam wall within the next 5 years and address the impact that will have on water security for the region, both in the context of its impact on residential households and on the ability to expand business activity (agricultural and industrial); and,
- To address the existing plan to expand the airport runway capacity, so as to permit heavier aircraft to land, is not recognised and its impact on attracting business, assisting in facilitating agricultural expansion and assisting tourism has been totally ignored.

Instead of making meaningful and cohesive draft recommendations on all the above vital issues the draft Plan harps on about closer density living (without providing any solid evidence in support) and the establishment of cycle pathways (which are unlikely to prove attractive in an Armidale winter). These come through loud and clear as pre-determined inner-Sydney values being pushed onto us in a way which cannot be shown to be suitable for our location or choice of lifestyle.

Concluding comment

The draft Plan as presented condemns Armidale to become a backward stagnant regional centre by the year 2040. It is not a plan which is in the best interests of the residents or the businesses in Armidale or our region.

As stated above, the draft Plan should be rejected in its entirety. The present consultants should be left out of any redrafting of a Armidale Plan 2040, with this task being left in the hands of existing Council staff aided by a panel people, especially those with business experience.

Yours sincerely,

Russell Evans

cc: Mr John Rayner, Acting General Manager, Armidale Regional Council.