



**BLUE MOUNTAINS
OUR FUTURE**

Towards a More Sustainable Future

Beginning the Discussion

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Introduction

This paper presents an initial framework, integrating some concepts and ideas relating to 'sustainability', to stimulate broader discussion amongst Blue Mountains people about how the Blue Mountains can move toward a more sustainable future. Five papers summarising trends, issues and key ideas we've gathered so far support this paper and provide additional detail about the focus areas of economy, land use, transport and access, community and environment.

The concept of sustainability usually includes an acknowledgement that we live in a finite environment and that resources such as water, land and air are limited. Sustainability is generally viewed as having environmental social and economic components. Current thinking on sustainability recognises that human society is totally dependent on the natural environment and an integration of ecological thinking into all social and economic decision making is therefore required. This paper does not offer a new definition of sustainability. Nor does it support a particular existing definition. Rather it presents some emerging concepts and ideas in a framework that gives a starting point for discussion and offers a possible way forward for building a more sustainable future that is relevant to the Blue Mountains.

Many discussions on sustainability refer to 'quality of life' for current and future generations. Quality of life means different things to different people. Many people view 'quality of life' as something determined by material standards of living and access to wealth. This paper takes a much broader view including aspects which can be difficult to measure or translate into monetary values such as the strength of family and community ties, the quality of environment people live in and the health and well being of individual people.

We acknowledge all those researchers, writers, Blue Mountains people and work colleagues who have contributed to our 'sustainability journey' so far, and on whose ideas and concepts we have drawn. We especially acknowledge and thank the Western Australian Planning Commission for their work on Future Perth (The Sustainable City Working Paper No. 10, October 2001) and Sustainable Measures (2000) for their work on Community Capital.



The Wider Context

The new millennium marks a time when communities can take stock and consider their choices about the way forward. Some see the future more positively than others. However there are some disturbing trends worldwide that cause many to question the way in which humans have lived last century and the cumulative legacy of impacts from human behaviour on our communities and our planet.

What are some of the key worldwide trends that are causing increasing concern about our quality of life and the health of our planet?

Pressures on the environment from human settlements

There are increasing impacts on the environment arising from human settlement. Modern industrial economies are consuming immense quantities of energy and raw materials and producing growing quantities of wastes and pollutants - beyond the capacity of the earth to process them (Global Environment Outlook, 2000:3). Many of these impacts are cumulative – while the behaviour of one person may not have a major impact, combined with the whole community the impact can be significant.

According to the World Resources Institute et.al. (1996) in affluent cities such as those in Australia the most significant impact on the environment is not coming from growth in population but rather from the high resource consumption patterns and lifestyles. The concept of an “ecological footprint” is being used to show the impact of a community in terms of the resources used and wastes generated. Research on Australia’s ecological footprint shows Australia to be amongst the top five consuming nations in the world (NSW, State of the Environment, 2000). The way our cities have evolved over time has not addressed the issue of environmental impacts from human settlements.

The paper *Looking after Our Environment* summarises key issues, trends and ideas for the future that are of particular relevance to the Blue Mountains. It raises the important question that in order to move toward a more sustainable future in the Blue Mountains we need to consider how we can live in harmony with our natural environment.



The way we have used land to live

Throughout human history we have used the land to live. It provides most of the basics of life - food, water and shelter. As humans have settled together in larger and larger communities we have created ever bigger urban areas. Nearly half of all people now live in cities (UNEP 1999). Increasing poverty in many parts of the world is causing growing numbers of people from rural areas to drift to the large cities. This trend is placing more pressure on urban areas already at their limit in terms of infrastructure provision and quality of life for communities.

Increasing populations have driven the demand for land. Both locally and globally the supply of useable land for urban areas is running out. Our agricultural practices, the degrading of renewable resources primarily forests, soil and water, the drive for economic growth using non renewable resources and our lifestyle choices are all impacting cumulatively on the land and its eco systems.

In many parts of the world, land is a commodity that can be bought and sold. The more land that is in private ownership the less there is available for community use and open space.

The way in which we have used land worldwide as an unlimited resource is not sustainable. The paper *Using our Land in the Blue Mountains* summarises key issues, trends and ideas for the future that are of particular relevance to the Blue Mountains. It raises the important question that in order to move toward a more sustainable future in the Blue Mountains we need to consider how we can best use our limited available land.

The way our communities are working

A sense of "loss of community" and "of growing apart" is a significant concern to many people at the global, national and local level. Increasing disadvantage and poverty are affecting crime rates resulting in people feeling unsafe in their homes and neighbourhoods.

As population and urban sprawl increase our human settlements are becoming less liveable. Increased traffic congestion, air, water and noise pollution combined with loss of amenity and spaces for recreation are all impacting on quality of life in our cities.



Many people believe that our 'sense of community' and feelings of belonging are being eroded.

Shifts in demographics and the range of ages in our population profiles shape the balance in our communities. There is much discussion about over population in the world whereas in some countries there is concern about an increasingly ageing population and a growing gap between the young and the old.

Population growth in large cities has led to increased urban sprawl. Despite increasing urban sprawl, the motor car has provided mobility for many individuals. This in turn has led to increasing reliance on the car and the provision of road infrastructure at the expense of other transport modes and non renewable fossil fuels. Trends worldwide indicate that urban areas dominated by road infrastructure suffer poor amenity and increasing congestion. As roads are widened to carry increasing traffic they split communities and affect the extent to which people connect and interact. The need to travel to large centres for work and services is increasing traffic congestion and environmental impacts.

For those without access to a car, urban sprawl has resulted in increasing isolation for individuals and fragmentation of communities. Many aspects of modern life impact on the health and well being of individuals and exert increasing pressure on our communities and our quality of life.

An increasing imbalance in our global communities and eco systems marks the beginning of the 21st century. September 11 has focussed the world's attention on global instability and its potential affect on us all.

The papers *Moving around the Blue Mountains* and *Looking after the People of the Blue Mountains* summarise key issues, trends and ideas for the future that are of particular relevance to the Blue Mountains. These papers raise the important questions that in order to move toward a more sustainable future in the Blue Mountains we need to consider how we can strengthen and sustain our communities and how we can improve our connections with our destinations and each other.



Economic growth

Many people are concerned that 'economic growth' during the last century has driven high consumption lifestyles and used limited natural resources in a way that is unsustainable. The last decade has seen the emergence of globally linked city regions whose trading partnerships are driving the trend for globalised markets.

It is generally accepted that economic growth is a critical component in building the capacity of a healthy community. Supporting oneself by one's own work is considered to be one of the essential aspects of existence and the absence of a possibility of doing so can mean a considerable loss of community well being and personal self esteem. How easy it is to get work and how good or bad working conditions are affect the way we function as individuals and communities.

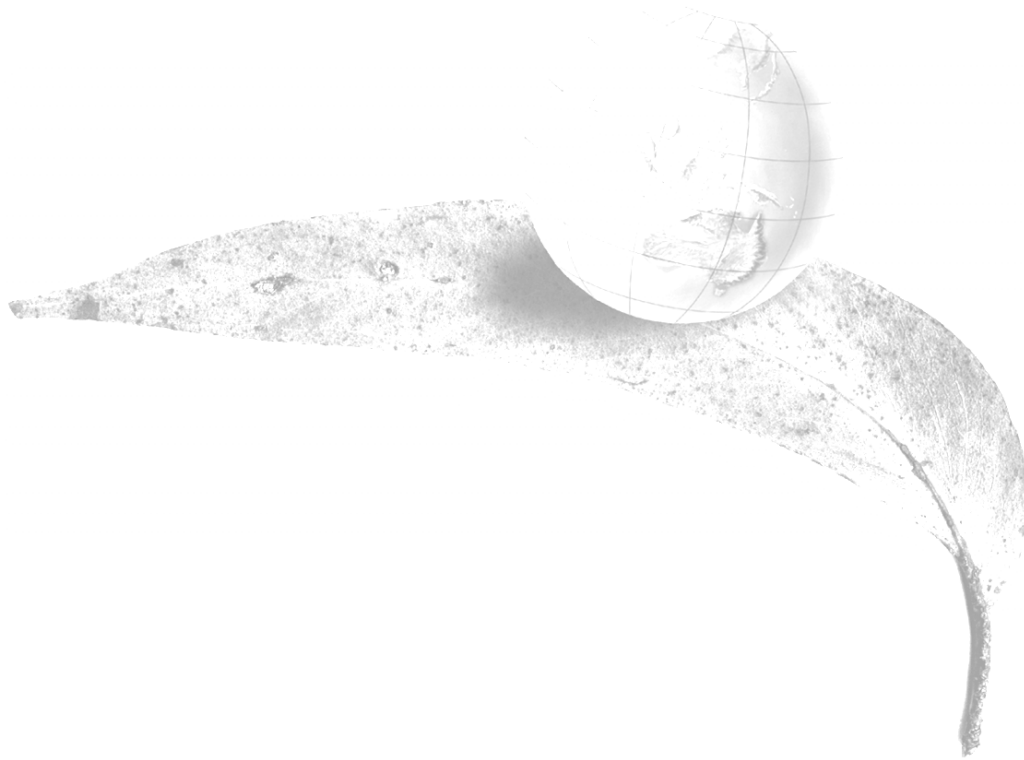
At the global level there is significant concern about the prospect of "unlimited economic growth" as it is currently understood. Many believe unlimited economic growth is unsustainable, particularly in terms of diminishing natural resources and rising inequality in income and life opportunities for communities world wide.

Our economic growth is measured in dollar terms usually expressed as Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Politicians present growth in GDP as a positive contribution to nations and communities. However recent research suggests that the GDP measure does not distinguish between good and bad growth and that many of the goods presented as growth are in fact costs. An example of this is the work generated by dealing with traffic accidents and cleaning up oil spills. A rise in GDP gives very little indication whether the welfare of the population that produced the increase in GDP is rising as well. Some researchers suggest that if GDP figures were corrected to show the "bads" they contain, the growth process in some industrialised countries is actually making the majority of their population worse off.

There is a recent focus on organisations identifying and accounting for environmental and social costs as well as economic costs. In accounting terms this is known as "triple bottom line reporting". An increasing number of organisations are attempting to apply this approach practically.



The paper *Working in the Blue Mountains* summarise key issues, trends and ideas for the future that are of particular relevance to the Blue Mountains. It raises the important question that in order to move toward a more sustainable future in the Blue Mountains we need to consider how can we build capacity in our communities through positive economic growth that is sensitive to the environment.





A Framework for Discussing a More Sustainable Future

A common theme in discussions about sustainability is how can sustainability be meaningful and practical for individuals and communities in their everyday lives.

In developing an initial framework, we have made the assumption that our quality of life and the health of our environment are significant issues for most people, thus providing common ground as a starting point for discussion. We also considered that important components for improving our quality of life and the health of the planet are

- nurturing the essentials of life that support us and
- taking action particularly at the individual and local level that will, depending on the choices we make, move us to some degree toward a more sustainable future.

The essentials of life that support us

The work from Sustainable Measures (Hart, 1998-2000) on community capital offers a useful frame for considering the question - what are the essentials of life that support us? This work notes that the "term 'capital' is most commonly used to refer to money and material goods. However in the context of sustainability communities have several different types of capital that need to be considered – natural, human, social and built capital. Together these types of capital are referred to as community capital. All four types of capital are necessary for communities to function. All four types of capital need to be managed by a community. All four types of capital need to be cared for, nurtured and improved over time".

If we are to improve the quality of our lives we need to consider how we can prevent erosion of the essentials of life - our natural, social, human and built capital (Sustainable Measures, 2000).

Natural capital can be viewed as the natural resources (air, water, land, food, minerals etc) and ecosystem processes which support life. It also includes such



intangibles as the beauty of nature that adds to our individual well being (for example through enjoyment of a sense of peace and tranquillity) and sometimes to the strength of our communities (for example through thriving tourism industries).

Social capital can be viewed as the human connections (the social glue) which support and sustain people within their families and communities. The services provided by unpaid volunteers delivering Meals on Wheels to the frail aged are an example of social capital. The ways in which we interact and help or not help each other can build or erode our social capital.

Human capital can be viewed as the individual skills, abilities, education and knowledge of people. The extent to which we invest in building our human knowledge and skills as well as how it is applied impacts on our natural ecosystems (our environment) and our human systems (our communities).

Built capital includes buildings, houses, infrastructure such as roads and telecommunication networks. These are the things we have produced or manufactured such as equipment, and clothing. Built capital can be viewed as things that meet basic human needs (processed food, clothing and shelter) as well as many 'wants' (consumer goods/ luxury items).

A sustainable city

The Western Australian Planning Commission in their work on Future Perth (The Sustainable City Working Paper No. 10, October 2001) uses an approach that might prove useful in framing our discussion about what makes a sustainable human settlement or city. The Western Australian Planning Commission identifies five key characteristics critical for the development of more sustainable cities. These include: efficiency, equity, environmental responsibility, liveability and creativity. These characteristics combine and interact to achieve more sustainable human settlements.

Equity

Promoting fair and equitable communities: an essential plank of a more sustainable city. Communities where diverse needs are met and people have access to the basic



resources they need to live are by nature more stable, healthy and impact less negatively on humans and the environment.

Efficiency

The efficient, effective and wise use of resources: an essential component of more sustainable cities. This is particularly so in the context of limited and finite resources being available for use in our settlements. Using the resources we have more efficiently and striving to improve the capability, effectiveness and productivity of our economic networks, service delivery, transport, waste, energy and telecommunications systems is important.

Environmentally responsible

A sustainable human settlement: values the environment for its intrinsic nature and role in maintaining life in all forms. With an awareness of global and local issues, the sustainable city protects, conserves and restores the environment and avoids development in ecologically sensitive area.

Liveability

Liveable communities: provide safe and healthy environments for families and people. They offer a high quality of life and are marked by vitality and a sense of place and belonging. The prime concern in the liveable city is for the community rather than the individual and with the availability of aesthetically pleasing easy to access areas for recreational and social interaction.

Creativity

A creative city: one which encourages, fosters and draws on the creativity of its residents for the betterment of the community and environment. It provides opportunities for artists and urban planners to come together to design and create more exciting, efficient and liveable communities.



Making Choices and Taking Action

Unsustainable outcomes

Many of the issues raised so far by Blue Mountains residents in thinking about what kind of City will the people of 2025 appreciate, mirror trends (outlined at the beginning of this paper) that reflect unsustainable outcomes at the national and global level.

Pressures on the environment from human settlements

Blue Mountains residents are concerned about impacts on the environment from population growth and lifestyle choices that produce waste and pollution.

The way we have used land to live

Our use of land, development, population densities and accessibility are issues locally.

The way our communities are working

People in the Blue Mountains are concerned about fragmentation of our communities brought about by many aspects of our modern life.

Economic growth

Many Blue Mountains people are concerned to build more robust communities through local employment and jobs.



Choices about change

Nowhere is change more achievable than at the individual and local level. The choices we make today will create the future for Blue Mountains people of 2025.

"The key to Australia's sustainable future lies in ourselves: our attitude towards environment, our heritage and each other. Positive change can be achieved when people see options for improvement in their quality of life and opportunities for their children and grandchildren. This change is accelerated when public awareness is translated into political action that influences the activities of our society to care for our community."

Australia State of the Environment 2001

The extent to which we in the Blue Mountains move toward a more sustainable future is a choice for each individual and local organisation including your Council.

In preparing for choice here are some questions to begin the dialogue about what a sustainable future might mean for the Blue Mountains and Blue Mountains people.

Do we understand what makes our quality of life in the Blue Mountains and how important that is for our environment?

To what extent will we make choices and take action to change behaviours to achieve the quality of life we want for Blue Mountains people and their communities?

How can we manage our population size and lifestyle choices to minimise impacts on our natural environment?

How do we get the balance right between meeting the needs of individuals versus meeting those of our communities?



What's Next?

Towards a More Sustainable Future

In 1975 the people of the Blue Mountains took time to think about what they wanted their community to be like in the future. Many of the changes the community identified have become a reality. *The 1975 Strategy*, an initiative of Blue Mountains City Council, influenced the future of the City with millions of dollars obtained from government for land acquisitions, water supply, sewerage, road works and community facilities.

A quarter of a century later, Blue Mountains City Council, working closely with the community, has initiated *Blue Mountains – Our Future* - a strategy for the City for the next 25 years. Through an extensive consultation process over the last two years, Blue Mountains people are again seriously thinking about what kind of City the people of 2025 will appreciate.

In June 2002, representatives from the community, local organisations and Council will build on extensive consultation and research to draft a clear direction for the Blue Mountains for the next 25 years.

This clear direction, together with a set of guiding principles that provide a framework for working towards a more sustainable future, will be placed on Public Exhibition in August 2002 so all people in the Blue Mountains have an opportunity to make choices about the future.

