



**WHERE HAVE WE COME FROM?  
THE 1974 CITY STRATEGY FOR THE BLUE  
MOUNTAINS**

**A REPORT**

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## **A brief history of strategy planning in the Blue Mountains**

Before I give my overall impression of the progress made to date, I think it is appropriate to look at the historical perspective of human occupation and development in the City and the way it has influenced, or been influenced by planning (or lack thereof!). The region has been inhabited by human beings for something like twenty thousand years, perhaps more. At the time of European occupation in 1788 the Dharuk, Gandangara (Gundungurra) and Wiradjuri people between them used the floral and faunal resources of the Blue Mountains to live in considerable degree of harmony with the land. To Europeans the Mountains were in turn a convenient inland barrier to a penal colony, an area of intense scientific interest because of the richness of its flora and ruggedness of its terrain, and finally, from the building of William Cox's cart track in 1815, a constriction on free access to the resources of the inland.

The first major stimulus to urban development in the Blue Mountains was the construction of the railway in the 1860s which in turn encouraged development of weekend retreats in the Lower Mountains. Few people today would know about the environmental destruction that accompanied the railway works as the ridges and valleys of the Lower Blue Mountains were scoured in search of construction timber and firewood. While the Lower Mountains villages were established in the latter part of the nineteenth century, they continued to be very small in population until well after the Second World War. In 1946 for example, there were less than five thousand people living between Faulconbridge and the Nepean River. Nevertheless, a lot of the settlers in the Mountains between the two world wars were living a fairly basic existence. Work by my colleague Robert Haworth with early aerial photographs demonstrated the defloration of the Hawkesbury sandstone areas in the Sydney Region as people used the bushland as a cheap source of fuel. The rich forests and ridge top flora that we see today in the areas close to Lower Mountains communities is thus in natural recovery from earlier phases of environmental devastation.

The Upper Mountains towns were established somewhat later, initially as mining settlements as shale oil and later coal resources were exploited. However, by the last decade of the nineteenth century the main stimulus to growth was tourism. Katoomba's heyday was actually in the 'Federation' years just prior to the First World War. Tourism revived again in the 1920s and it was the infrastructure from that revival that still constitutes the core of the tourist shops and accommodation to this day. The industry was flagging by the 1930s owing to the increasing impact of the great depression on the less affluent who could not afford holidays even if they were in work, and growth of motor vehicle ownership among the affluent. The Second World War gave the Upper Mountains tourist industry a considerable boost. There were restrictions on travel more than 100 miles from Sydney, and petrol was rationed. The local prosperity lasted until the late 1940s. By the 50s and into the 60s and 70s there was a prolonged slump as Sydney people bought motor cars and deserted the mountains for the beach. Several old guest houses burned down in mysterious circumstances; others were converted to aged care accommodation. Only in the 1980s and 90s have we seen the beginnings of a revival in



the tourist industry, but we are still a long way from reaching the levels of popularity just after WW II when Katoomba was THE place to be for new year festivities.

The laissez-faire years of development prior to WW II have left a legacy which still largely affects planning and development in the Blue Mountains. By the 1920s and 30s the map of both Upper and Lower Mountains was covered with speculative subdivision deep into natural bushland, with scattered ownership of allotments and occasional owners using their then right to occupy their land even though municipal services were not available. In those days subdividers did not have to provide water or sewer, or even to build roads. Access to bush lots was by unformed and unsealed bush tracks and a huge burden was put onto the newly formed (1946) Blue Mountains City Council. That development pattern still largely affects the City: ratepayers are still paying today for the developmental decisions of more than fifty years ago. Perhaps a long-term planning strategy and vision for development would have been helpful to guide development 100 years ago, but at that time and indeed until well into the 1960s, local planning controls, if they existed at all, were limited and strategic planning was simply non-existent.

It was not until 1946 in fact that work was begun on the Cumberland County Plan, the first regional strategy for Sydney. Unfortunately that plan did not embrace the Blue Mountains and it was the second generation of strategic plans — The Sydney Region Outline Plan of 1968 — that finally recognised the importance of extending regional planning into the Blue Mountains and westward of the Nepean River. The Sydney Region Outline Plan, by drawing attention to the likelihood of significant population growth in the Blue Mountains between 1968 and 2000, in turn spun off the need for a specific Blue Mountains vision of the future.

This eventuated in the Blue Mountains Strategy Plan of 1974, prepared to cope with expected pressures on the Blue Mountains up to the Year 2000. The Plan was presented as three separate reports: a summary of possible alternative futures, accompanying technical papers and maps and graphic materials. Some passages from that plan are particularly interesting for us now as the problems raised are still problems that we are grappling with in the Blue Mountains:

- *"The Blue Mountains City Council, recognising the conflicts between preservation of the environment and uncontrolled urbanisation, commissioned this study as the first step in the development of a strategic plan for the City". (Page 1, the opening statement).*
- *"The lack of clearly stated and fully committed strategic policies is the single most important issue determining the future of the Blue Mountains and not the embittered local battle between conservation and development". (Page 25)*



- *"Should diversities in lifestyle and employment opportunities be provided to produce a balanced community? Should tertiary education be developed? Hospitals, health and social centres?" (Page 27)*
- *"Will the exclusion of medium density housing discriminate against the retired, young singles and families, single parent families and prevent alternative lifestyles?" (Page 27)*

The 1974 Strategy Plan was a document of its time. Nevertheless it was influential in environmental, social and economic improvements that we now take for granted.

### **Proposals of the 1974 Blue Mountains Strategy Plan**

The 1974 Strategy Plan looked at five 'alternative futures'. These were based solely on the developmental capacity of land zoned and serviced for urban development, and did not consider either demographic trends or the environmental carrying capacity of the lands concerned. The population of the Blue Mountains in 1974 was about 45,000, roughly equally distributed between the Upper and Lower Mountains. The five categories were:

1 *Development freeze.* Only development currently under permit would be permitted. This would mean no amplification of then existing infrastructure, and the population would peak at 45,000 people.

2 *All current urban zonings developed plus existing subdivided and serviced land.* This future would allow continuing population growth, contingent on amplified infrastructure, until the population reached of the order of 65,000.

3 *All land already subdivided would be developed, regardless of whether it was currently serviced.* In this future, the City would have room to grow until the population reached of the order of 112, 000. Clearly amplification of infrastructure would be required to allow this to happen, and this level of population would also impact upon environmental management objectives.

4 *proposed zonings in Council's then exhibited planning scheme.* At the time the Strategy was prepared the Council had a planning scheme on exhibition. Zonings proposed in that plan went considerably beyond lands already subdivided. Were all zoned lands to be developed as proposed, then a population of the order of 170,000 would be accommodated (no doubt at considerable environmental cost).

5 *All land capable of being used for urban development brought into that use.* In this case the potential population was of the order of 275,000. However, the Strategy Plan pointed out that provision of water supply to this population would be a major problem.



The 1974 Strategy Plan made no judgement on which of these 'alternative futures' would be most appropriate, indeed it stated that different strategies would probably be appropriate in different parts of the City. It did, however, include a series of charts for each of the 'futures' indicating what public works, infrastructure, and environmental measures were implied for each level of development.

Community opinion was generally split between Future 2 and Future 3, implying population growth to 2000 between 65,000 and 112,000. The Sydney Region Outline Plan projected a population of the order of 80,000 for the Blue Mountains within the 30 year time frame of that Plan. As it happened Professor Borrie's revised projections for the Sydney region Outline Plan estimated growth to about 75,000 at the Year 2000, which is in fact what has occurred.

### **Outcomes of the 1974 Strategy Plan**

Did anything come out of the Blue Mountains Strategy Plan 1974, or did it just gather dust on the shelf? Indeed there was specific action on the Plan. On June 21 1976, the Council adopted by resolution the Blue Mountains Statement of Objectives. These were framed to provide an action program to implement key objectives derived from the Plan. There were four general objective statements, each of a paragraph or so which outlined the Council's goals emanating from the Strategy Plan. In other words, these objectives were the 'light on the hill' towards which the Council wanted to direct development:

- 1 Management
- 2 Conservation
- 3 Commercial development
- 4 Living areas

In the same document and resolution, each objective statement was supported by three policy statements which provided a more specific direction to the objectives. Each policy, in turn was supported by between 5 to 9 action priorities to be applied to Council's day to day management. These were the milestones by which movement towards achievement of objectives could be measured.

There were very beneficial and tangible outcomes from this process. Here are some examples which can at least partly be attributed to the influence of the Strategy Plan:

#### *Environmental Management:*

Controlled development areas in the interstices between towns were suggested in the Strategy Plan. Such areas have been created and now protect the integrity of most of the towns and forestall uncontrolled ribbon development along the Highway.

The Strategy Plan was directed at the operations of all agencies, not just the Blue Mountains City Council. Much of the natural land for which Council was



responsible in 1975 had an importance which transcended the recreational needs solely of the Blue Mountains community and was nationally and internationally

important. Most of these areas are now included in the Blue Mountains National Park and the National Parks and Wildlife Service has taken over their management, allowing the Council to focus its environmental protection and open space budget more on municipal needs.

#### *Transport*

The Strategy Plan made the point that growth in population consequent on accepting any alternative future other than No 1 (development freeze) would be heavily reliant on public transport. It specifically identified the widening of Glenbrook tunnel as an essential work to allow use of double decked rolling stock. There has been a doubling of rail service frequency (100% increase) since 1974 compared with a population increase of 60%.

The Strategy Plan also identified the need for augmentation of the Great Western Highway. This was a double-edged sword, as the Plan anticipated some of the adverse effects of highway widening, but suggested a solution that would not now be considered acceptable for ameliorating those effects.

#### *Services*

The real likely bottleneck identified in the plan was in amplification of water supply to serve a large and growing population in the Blue Mountains. The problems of providing sewerage services to bushland subdivisions, and the environmental degradation caused by septic systems, were also dealt with. Solution of these problems was even then clearly beyond the means of the Council. However the impact of water pollution in the Blue Mountains on the Sydney water supply became so important that responsibility for management of these services in the Blue Mountains passed to Sydney Water Board. As a result there has been massive investment on upgrading which could never have been contemplated by the Council.

#### *Social and economic effects*

The Strategy Plan identified the potential of the tourist industry in the Blue Mountains. There has been a turn-around in the fortunes of the industry in the past two decades and the Blue Mountains now has more sophisticated tourist facilities and accommodation that it had in 1975.

Naturally, the detailed implementation of these things was by other agencies and private enterprise, but the Strategy Plan did anticipate them and perhaps clarify a way to achievement in a way that was reasonably congruent with Council's overall objectives for the City. Policies for approval and monitoring of such developments were thus clearer



and more coordinated, and more easily accommodated into Council's day to day procedures.

Did the Strategy Plan get anything wrong? Certainly it did. No such document ever sees the future with complete clarity, nor should it ever be expected to. A notable example is in the widening of the highway. In 1974 the Australian people as a whole were still very much in the first delirious stages of their love affair with the motor car, and to suggest any solution to the problem of increasing traffic other than bigger and better roads was virtually unthinkable. The Plan did indeed identify one of the main deleterious effects which highway widening would cause — the unfortunate division of communities north and south of the main ridge — but its proposed solution, influenced by the UK 'Buchanan Report' and the traffic planner's bible at the time, of by-passes completely missed the point. Nevertheless this is a good example of why Strategic Plans need continual updating. Nowadays the community is certainly in two minds about whether widening the highway is really a good thing. This is one of the many strategic planning problems for the Blue Mountains that we in turn must take on board.

Strategy planning therefore, is not always spot on, but it provides a focus for the whole community to consider its options. Twenty years is not really a long time, and the future of the City of the Blue Mountains in twenty years time will be very much conditioned by the decisions made by government, Council and citizens within the next few years.

We must also be able to look beyond the local government area boundaries of the City to place our planning in perspective. What can we see in the overall national and global picture that might affect the development of the Blue Mountains? How will the trend towards use of electronic technology affect the way work is done and what implications might this have for the Blue Mountains? Will there be a higher incidence of self-employment and home working? How will current trends in family formation affect development of the Mountains? Is the sort of housing we plan for the sort of housing people will want? The Blue Mountains has long been seen as a transport and access barrier between Sydney and Western NSW. Would projects now being talked about such as the Melbourne-Darwin inland rail bridge affect the way that we see the transport connections through the Mountains? On the other hand, do we sometimes get too starry-eyed about the future, given that the useful lifetime of infrastructure such as water supply and sewers, or railway passenger rolling stock is several times the twenty-year time scale that we are looking at?

### **What we have learned so far for the 2020 Strategy?**

To respond to these sorts of questions we need to firstly tap into the collective wisdom of the people, then have the issues raised clearly debated by the community. As I said earlier we are still at an early stage in the reporting process. Nevertheless, some strong feelings are already standing out, and seem to be pretty well universal.

The IRIS Survey demonstrated that the top four concerns of the general population are:



- 1 A protected environment
- 2 Local employment
- 3 Improving community safety, and
- 4 Improved public transport

These priorities also seem to be reflected in comments from the workshops. The maintenance of environmental quality is clearly the outstanding priority. There is substantial agreement on this from all of the workshops. There are very different understandings of what *sustainability* means, but most participants have no great difficulty with the idea that we should pass on to the next generation an environment at least as good, and preferably better, than that which we inherited.

There are considerable areas of disagreement and debate also. Many workshop participants support the notion that growth of population in the City should be halted by some means or other. This is, however, by no means a consensus position. Many see in static or declining population the loss of opportunities to provide employment. Without employment, especially for young people, the social fabric of the community is seen to be under threat. There are tensions also about required types and styles of development. There are both supporters and opposers of residential development other than traditional detached cottages represented in the workshops. The question of car dependency has been raised, but most participants are having difficulty reconciling the impact of the motor vehicle on development with needed ways of changing the community's car-dependent habits.

The notion of a stable demographic — where individuals that make up the community change but the general proportions of the population in each age group remain reasonable stable — has received considerable discussion. Most workshops were wary of the possibility of 'gentrification' of the City, and an increasing proportion of older age groups is not generally seen as a positive.

Participants from transport and infrastructure authorities have provided valuable insight into the way that services affect development prospects. In particular there appears to be a critical problem looming with respect to renewal of the older sewage infrastructure in the Upper Mountains. This will not necessarily preclude development but provision of sewerage services will certainly be calling for creative solutions as it is simply not practical to replace existing pipes and infrastructure as they reach the end of their service lives.

I was surprised that bushfire management and protection of towns from bushfire did not emerge spontaneously as a significant matter for discussion in any of the workshops. Perhaps it is so long since a really serious fire disaster in the Blue Mountains that people are less aware of the relationship between fire and the natural environment. That such an important matter can be virtually ignored is an indication of the way that public



consultation will not necessarily bring out all important issues that need to be openly debated.

### **A final thought**

I conclude with an idea that has struck me quite strongly as I have listened to the extraordinarily valuable discussion of the workshops. Environment, economic development and community are traditionally seen almost as mutually exclusive outcomes in the development process. An increase in economic development, for example is almost always seen as being accompanied by declining environmental quality. It seems to me, however, that in the Blue Mountains environment, community and economy are locked in a mutual symbiotic relationship: each supports the other and in turn depends upon it:

- Should environmental quality diminish, then the Blue Mountains loses its *raison d'être* as a place to live in, work in or visit. This in turn will adversely affect the economy and then the community.
- Should that unique and supportive community which has long characterised the Blue Mountains be weakened, then so will its economy. In turn the will to protect and nurture the environment will be weakened.
- Should opportunities not eventuate for young people to earn a living and to live interesting and productive lives in the Blue Mountains then they will leave. The community will age and lose its vitality. This in turn will affect the ability and willingness of the community to protect the environment.

The circumstances most likely to support and enhance the environmental quality that appears to be the first priority of the Blue Mountains community are those which permit a, perhaps modest but vital, economy and community to be sustained.