

Strategic Planning in Regional Cities –New Conceptions

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ABSTRACT

New actualities associated with environment, urban morphology, global relationships, overlaid with calls for participation in local democratic processes by community interest groups are driving changes in planning for regional cities. Taking the case of Bendigo, a regional city in Central Victoria, the paper places these new actualities into physical, spatial and temporal contexts. Respectively, these contexts describe a city removed from a major metropolis, but with high-quality transport and communication links; a remnant grand Victorian urban centre surrounded by less distinguished mid-20th Century suburbs, protected forests and farmland; and a low-growth 20th century city seeming to give way to higher growth in the millennium. The democratic-participation overlay is characterised by newly-formulated viewpoints and supporting organisations concerned about natural and built environments, heritage conservation, and population growth.

The paper describes a provincial-town social outlook like many others in Western developed countries, focussing on individual needs, lifestyle preservation, private worth and personal wealth aggregation. Specific regional-city planning challenges in this environment are urban amorphism, water security, sustainable growth, application of new planning policy, and the very local clash between heritage and modernism. Reorientation of the City government, city administration structure and approaches to strategic planning are needed. The City Council is attempting to restructure itself at the same time as embarking on processes designed to reorient interest groups towards goals that address the shape of the city and its place in the world. Building and developing participatory processes with the new actualities foremost is necessary for the city to realise its potential.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how strategic planning for regional cities has to take account of new actualities associated with:

- Environment and natural resource protection
- Urban morphology
- Global relationships.

Strategic planners and their communities need to respond to these actualities in addition to, and at times instead of conventional planning certainties such as land capability, topography, urban history and precinct separation.

Locally, overlaying the substantive themes is the call for participation in local democratic processes. For these demands to be met in a society focussed on individual needs, reorientation towards community goals that address the shape of the city and its place in the world is needed. Building

and developing participatory processes with the new actualities foremost is necessary for the city to realise its potential.

The paper uses Bendigo in Central Victoria as a case study, but the authors also draw upon experience in other centres in the State including Geelong and Ballarat. The common feature of these centres is proximity to, and hegemony of a large metropolitan region, Melbourne – with a population of over 3.5 million dispersed across a vast suburban area of 8,800 square kilometres.

Significantly, the Melbourne city region is the focus of a metropolitan strategy, *Melbourne 2030*, which has been instrumental in bringing the new actualities into focus for the authors. *Melbourne 2030* was launched in 2002 – the first citywide strategic plan in over thirty years. Trademark features of the strategy are:

- Urban consolidation
- Reduction of urban sprawl
- Protection of open spaces
- Management of growth, including in adjacent regional corridors
- Equity in access and participation in city life
- Improved public transport.

THE PHYSICAL CONTEXT

Bendigo is 200 kilometres from Melbourne. Newly upgraded 4-lane road and rail facilities serve a regional population of approximately 150,000 settled in a string of towns and hamlets, each close to the corridor transport services. Bendigo is the largest town on the corridor, just beyond reasonable commuting distance from the metropolitan area.

European settlement in and around Bendigo was stimulated by the 1850s gold rush following the discovery of the richest alluvial gold deposit in the world. It is conjectured that modern Australia began here – as it became the destination for the largest immigration movement in history to that time. Mining dominated the city until the early 20th Century, by which time it had become an important regional service centre for agriculture and grazing industries in north western Victoria.

For most of last Century, Bendigo grew at less than 1 per cent per year – experiencing periods of near stagnation in the nineteen thirties, and, like many Australian provincial centres, very slow growth in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s when the major coastal capital cities, especially Melbourne and Sydney absorbed and attracted people, jobs and investment. In its role as a centre serving a rural hinterland of 2275 square kilometres, Bendigo could be described as a quintessential regional capital providing significant education, finance, legal and health services, including a university, private and State schools, County Court sessions, and large acute health and aged care facilities. It is also a major entertainment and recreation centre. The City is a major transportation and transit centre transected by two major highways. It is an originating and transit point for the Regional Fast Rail passenger service to Melbourne, and rail and road freight.

Distinctive Features: Open Spaces

Urban Bendigo is surrounded by bushland, much of which is National Park – prompting the conceptual appellation “City in the Forest”, a concept adopted by a cross agency team focussing on management of the interface which incorporates parks management, fire management and housing development.

Public open space comprises 21 per cent of the municipality in forests and farmland. The expression ‘green wedge’ is applied colloquially to open space between urban settlements elsewhere in

Australia. In Victoria it has a statutory connotation. Green Wedges were introduced to the Victorian Planning and Environment Act and into the State Planning Policy Framework that forms part of every municipal planning scheme in 2004. A Green Wedge Zone is applied to land in metropolitan Melbourne that is outside the Urban Growth Boundary and within the metropolitan boundary. It describes limits to growth that are able to be altered only by a resolution of both Houses of the State Parliament.

The Green Wedge Zone has not been applied to Bendigo (nor indeed applied to land in any other regional municipal planning scheme). Instead the open spaces are protected either by zoning (with application of the Rural Zones in the planning scheme) or by declared forests and parks (which are also zoned for recreation or public use in the planning scheme).

Places of Historical Significance

Over 600 heritage sites are listed in the City's planning scheme to protect a rare Victorian Colonial urban environment, comprising grand buildings, public spaces and private dwellings. Some sites are listed on the State Heritage Register. The established core is surrounded by an outer suburban form whose landscape is characterised by wide suburban streets in a grid pattern, with modest bungalows in relatively low densities of 8-10 units per hectare. Further out, abutting the forest are residential estates developed or developing over the last 30 years in which densities are often lower, private transport is necessary, and community facilities are dispersed. The historic Victorian city centre represents a strong retail-service-transport core that is complemented, rather than seriously challenged by two or three outer suburban shopping and service precincts.

Energy and Water

Bendigo, like other cities in regional Victoria is energy dependent – electricity is transmitted from coal-burning power generators in Latrobe Valley almost 400 kilometres away. Natural gas is distributed to most Victorian centres from the offshore Bass Strait gas field, also about 400 kilometres away.

A distinctive feature of Bendigo is its reliance on water that is reticulated in an open-channel system from reservoirs located 70-80 kilometres up the catchment. Despite this, until recently water dependency has not been regarded as a significant constraint to growth, still less, residential development in Bendigo. Below we discuss the recent drive by the Victorian Government to establish water security through implementation of regional water strategies.

WHAT NEW CONCEPTIONS ARE

This section of the paper discusses the hypothesis implicit in the subtitle 'new conceptions', and proposes that there has been a major shift in emphasis in regional city strategic planning in the last 5-7 years, away from a supply-demand, land-use planning approach to one that takes account of internal and external factors that influence planning as a result of globalisation, popularisation and standardisation of urban design, and importantly for Victoria, action to contain threats to physical and urban environments.

New conceptions have their genesis in real changes that have taken place globally and regionally, events that have had impacts, movements and trends that have accelerated in the past five years. The following discussion refers to changes that illustrate the idea of 'new' conceptions.

New Conceptions in Civic Administration

State-directed council amalgamations occurred in Victoria in 1993 and 1994 when 210 municipalities were amalgamated into 78. In Bendigo six former municipalities combined to form the new city. Simultaneously competitive tendering and corporatisation in government and local

government services required councils to tender out 50 per cent of their activities, and act more like businesses.

The radical shifts that occurred in civic administration are documented elsewhere (Williamson, 2002). Meanwhile, longer-term impacts include city administrations that are now required to compare themselves more critically, and account for themselves more seriously to their constituents. The challenges of community accountability have become a daily feature of civic administration – and planning decisions in particular become the substance of public notification, discussion, and controversy.

Linkage: The Economic Profile of the City

Escalation in the influence of Australian banks, assisted by a small-investor friendly taxation regime, in the social and economic life of Australians is vividly illustrated in Bendigo which hosts the only Australian bank head office in a regional city. Bendigo Bank has expanded nationally, concurrently its new headquarters is being constructed in Bendigo at the cost of \$74M. The influence of the Bank on the city and the region can hardly be underestimated. Its presence was influential in the Victorian Government's relocation of the Rural Finance Corporation to Bendigo, so there are now two major financial institutions located there.

But the Bank brings another important factor to provincial life that often eludes other similar cities to their detriment – young, skilled, energetic people. These people have three significant modes of influence: new sources of income into the local economy, energy to local social institutions, and national and international stimulus that has been virtually absent since the first Gold Rush.

While this migration does not presage the emergence of Richard Florida's Creative Class in provincial Victoria with its promises and threats (Rainnie, 2005, 4) it does contain elements of both. Apart from providing demand for higher quality housing and urban amenity, many of these people, living in a city in a forest, have very high expectations that the natural environment, now on their doorstep will be protected, nurtured, even expanded.

Bendigo Council is a nominated agency for the Australian Government Skilled Migration program which aims to fill vacancies not able to be addressed by local markets. The finance sector and affiliated businesses will be a source of demand for these new workers. It is clear that if the program is successful it will bring more international influence to the region.

Old to New: Mining

Bendigo Mining is listed on the Australian Stock Exchange, and has invested over \$100 million in a venture that will extract ore from literally beneath the city. The venture employs over 100 and has added stimulus to growth. The mine has been required to prepare and Environmental Effects Statement under Victorian planning law. Its main impact derives from the need to relocate thousands of tonnes of by-product into the surrounding landscape. Here has been keen interest among citizens in the outcome – encouraged no doubt by a desire to prevent replication of the visual blight produced by mountains of contaminated overburden that is a legacy of former mining heyday. Conspicuous tracts of land unsuitable for residential or commercial uses exist within walking distance of the Bendigo city centre.

STATEMENT OF CHALLENGES

Urban Amorphism

The city was described recently in a national newspaper piece as 'Vienna in the bush' – an allusion to an illustrious legacy of German architects who brought their visual dreams to life in the rough gold-rushed landscape. Along with this accolade comes a special challenge to control urban

amorphism. Bendigo declined as a fashionable, globally-connected town over most of the 20th Century – the glorious Victorian streetscape gave way to dreary residential suburbs, dispersed industrial zones and downtown commercial buildings whose design declares victory of function over style.

The challenge is not merely to revitalise urban form, but to find ways to develop the ‘modern’ city that satisfy the demands of residents and developers at the same time as respecting, celebrating, evangelising the distinctiveness of the city.

Water Security

The Victorian Government in 2005 published a millennial water strategy (*Our Water Our Future*, June 2004) for a State which had been growing relatively rapidly with seemingly little reference to climate change, water security, and the adequacy of water allocation and use arrangements. The policy declares with characteristic succinctness:

We need to immediately change the way we think about water. Our traditional approach to managing water has been to exploit rivers and aquifers, create dams to supply towns, industry and irrigation, and then dispose of the ‘waste water’ back into rivers or the ocean. (*Securing Our Water Future Together*, 11)

The Regional Action Plan for Bendigo was released in September 2005. This outlines the policy directions and actions required from key stakeholders in the regional water industry. It includes as policy:

Victoria’s cities and towns will have safe, secure and reliable supplies and provide for growing populations into the future, while managing environmental impacts. This can be achieved through sustainable urban water management. (*Region Action Plan*, 16)

Water security for industrial and domestic users is an end product of these strategies, coupled with the restoration of environmental flows to stressed rivers, particularly in the regional Murray-Darling system. ‘Environmental flow’ restoration is a relatively new factor in the water security equation and a good deal of political capital is invested in its restoration.

Sustainable Growth

Melbourne 2030 is the key sustainable urban growth and management policy issued by the Victorian Government. Direction 3: Networks with Regional Cities advocates application of the sustainable growth principles and practices for the metropolitan area. The principal individual challenge to long-term sustainability of Bendigo is environmental sustainability – climate change and its impacts on water security are specific challenges. This threat is not seen in isolation from the capacity to manage its impacts by sensible growth planning and efficient regional place management

Global Obligations

Greater Bendigo is a member of Cities for Climate Protection undertaking the CCP+ program, focussed on the council’s role as a corporate citizen in Greenhouse abatement. Its function is to “enlist cities to adopt policies and implement measures to achieve quantifiable reductions in local greenhouse gas emissions, improve air quality, and enhance urban liveability and sustainability.”

Demographics and Dependency

The current population of Bendigo is in excess of 94,500. A challenging demographic factor is the estimate that between 2001 and 2030 the number of people over 65 will almost double – meaning

that the proportion of older citizens not performing paid work in the community will rise to 27 per cent.

These statistics are relatively common in regional, and pockets of metropolitan Australia. In a regional city they have extra significance because the aged cohort does not coexist geographically with a high number of younger people – who, in other parts of the Australian economy are local, visible net contributors to national income which is redistributed by a national system of transfer payments to older, not-contributing citizens. The income dependency that this process sets up in a place like Bendigo (and some other relatively remote rural centres throughout the country) makes it a potential target for discrimination (until now mercifully not seen in Australia) by governments focussing opportunistically on constituents whose egalitarian sensibilities are modified by private worth and personal wealth aggregation.

The other side of the demographic profile stimulated by growth of Bendigo as a finance centre is high levels of social disadvantage. A recent study (Vinson, 1999) identified the top 10 most disadvantaged postcodes, three of which are in Bendigo and another three in the Bendigo region.

Within the municipality there are significant public housing estates. In two of these, the State Government is implementing the Neighbourhood Renewal program which focuses on improving long term situation of people in public housing. This involves reconfiguration of physical housing, the development of community infrastructure and establishment of social programs. The program operates on the laudable assumption that improvements in public and private urban domains will provide a catalyst for community renewal¹.

Community Self Interest

As a corollary to the above, Bendigo has attracted, and settled a population for whom the preservation of its comfortable lifestyle is a distinct priority – most plainly manifest when there is a sniff of a threat to it. Bendigo enjoys mild climate, accessibility to modern community services and access to a major metropolitan centre.

The idea of the common good as distinct from personal convenience, is often veiled by combatants on both sides of local debates about urban improvement and major development projects. Public debates become most difficult to resolve when the most evident self-interest attempts to clothe itself in the cloak of community interest. This ruse is a feature of national and not just local ‘political’ life in Australia. It does present particular challenges in smaller polities where electorates are small, public debate is often sharp, and character assassination can be swift.

Melbourne 2030

The metropolitan strategy has implications for regional centres and the transport corridors between them. An important challenge occurs at the point where a ‘regional’ strategy is required to be implemented at the local level where the planning ordinance does not contain a section dedicated to ‘regional’ policy or strategy. The Bendigo Corridor Growth Strategy (similar to those prepared for Geelong and Ballarat corridors) aims to assist council planning authorities to manage growth stimulated by a growing metropolitan region. The principal challenges are, in towns close to Melbourne, to protect township character from urban sprawl; and in the rest of the corridor, ensure that landscapes and natural environments are least disturbed by inappropriate rural residential development.

¹ <http://www.neighbourhoodrenewal.vic.gov.au/ooh/web/nrwsite.nsf>

The special challenge for Bendigo is to absorb growth while not destroying the existing amenity dominated by heritage precincts and proximity to public open space, and to forestall the extension of suburbs characterised by low-density, low-rise residential developments. And as a regional centre just beyond sustainable commuting distance from Melbourne, Bendigo must optimise employment and business opportunities for its region.

The relative complexity associated with meeting these challenges to everyone's satisfaction is symbolised physically by the presence of a very large telecommunications dish mounted atop a 5-storey building in a location that is visible for almost a kilometre along Victorian-villa lined approaches to the city centre. The city must modernise and provide infrastructure and telecommunication facilities in its role as a commercial hub, but it also must protect the visual landscape that contributes so significantly to its preferred character and its success as a tourist and residential location.

Heritage and Modernism – the Post Modern Reality

Debates about preservation of the heritage milieu, and also particular sites, are often carried out with very narrow terms of reference. For example, the widely accepted practice of observing 'supplementary design features and quality' is translated into a narrow debate about how different a proposed new building is from those surrounding it.

The Burra Charter counsels Australians that *new construction, demolition, intrusions which would adversely affect the setting or relationships are not appropriate* (Article 8). The convention produces heated argument in which protagonists on all sides proclaim that it is self evident that the Charter prohibits demolition, disallows new construction, and prejudices all new forms to be intrusive.

In Bendigo, as other local areas, the debate often rages around building heights. The local anti-development lobby may claim that any protrusion above existing heights is inimical to the spirit of the charter (which it isn't), while others may argue that building height is irrelevant so long as the building is well-designed and doesn't cause excessive overshadowing (which is also a misinterpretation).

In regional cities like Bendigo (and Geelong and Ballarat) which have graceful legacies in built form, these and other conundrums are complicated further by the need to reconcile the values of heritage and place with the need to stimulate and grow strong local, globally-connected economies.

Consciousness / Mindedness of the Global Environment

New residents and visitors to country towns are often quick to attribute differences in 'attitude' amongst their hosts and new neighbours to lack of connectedness to the 'outside' world. Trevor Budge notices this phenomenon:

Many commentators have sought to identify these images (*i.e. which set small towns apart from cities*) and contrast them with the observed characteristics of cities. (Budge, 2003, 27)

He goes on to adapt the contrasting images of small towns and big cities proposed by Swanson (1985) in a comparison of factors including population, world view, pace, ideology, etc. The 'small town' characteristics do provide an ironic fit to Bendigo which, by Australian standards is a large town, if not a big city. A selection of these illustrates:

| | |
|------------------|------------|
| Population _____ | Homogenous |
| World View _____ | Parochial |
| Pace _____ | Slow |

Ideology _____ Conservative
Citizen participation _ Low

However, in one important pair Bendigo appears to oppose the trend – in contrast to *citizen participation – low*, Bendigo demonstrates a ‘big city’ characteristic in the pair *Issue resolution – conflict* where the ‘small town’ characteristic is *consensual*.

While the world view might readily be able to be described as ‘parochial’, there is evidence, particularly in the elevated environmental consciousness, of a globally connected community.

RESPONSES AND NEW CONCEPTIONS

City Government

In the Greater Bendigo City Council elections in November 2004 nine councillors were elected, 5 on a platform of greater community consultation. The environment in which council was experiencing continual confrontation and adversarial situations lead to consideration of new ways of engaging with the community so that the ‘inside’ of the organisation is seen to be more responsive to, even directed from the ‘outside’.

City Management and Administration – Reform and Redirection

From September 2005 The City corporation now has an entire directorate of City Strategy of which the Strategic Planning Unit forms the nucleus. The unit was established originally following the abolition by the State Government of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) in 2000.

While creating financial efficiencies, and improving processes, CCT had a detrimental affect on the city administration by creating competitive management regime, and promoting the idea that operations staff should not work beyond their immediate work units as it was regarded as counter productive to the competitive environment. This created a situation in which staff units competed for work, and in some cases, their own jobs. Trust, effective networking and cooperation within the organisation (on the service delivery side) fell to an all time low.

The Strategic Planning Unit’s purpose was to build knowledge and trust within the organisation through the establishment of internal project teams to develop the council’s corporate and major project plans. The Unit has a mandate to work across the organisation to coordinate and facilitate the development of strategic plans. Over the last 5 years, the organisation has undertaken substantial strategic planning in a manner that has engaged operational staff whose commitment and understanding is critical in implementing plans successfully.

The recently introduced corporate structure has been developed to respond to the current environment which is influenced strongly by:

- The Victorian Government policy *Growing Victoria Together* which broadly outlines the goals to grow the state, and *A Fairer Victoria*, a policy that addresses social disadvantage, and in particular sets direction towards more effective working relationships between local and state governments utilising a community planning approach
- Local community priorities identified during the recent Community Visioning exercise undertaken titled Bendigo +25
- New Councillors’ priorities resulting from Council elections in November 2004 which focus on greater community consultation, emphasis on social policy and protection of the natural environment.

Social concerns have a new place driving planning for good urban outcomes. In the recent past 'town planning', with its precepts, proformas and preferences has been implemented in direct response to (frequently unquestioned) and uninterrupted urban space demands. Some new approaches to urban planning have their genesis in social policy. For example, the Bendigo Residential Development Strategy identifies local activity centres as appropriate locations for medium density housing, based on the knowledge that older populations need the choice to reside in smaller homes in the neighbourhood they are familiar with, within walking distance of shops and services. It is likely that cardio vascular disease and depression will be the most common illnesses suffered by communities in the future. By locating small homes near activity centres, the City is encouraging older people to walk to a destination daily, providing exercise and human contact - the counter-indicators of disease.

Make it Happen Campaign

The State Government has developed a promotional campaign to highlight to Melbournians the benefits of living in regional cities. Greater Bendigo City Council has activity supported the campaign by contributing financially to promotions and seeking opportunities to promote the city. The newly created City Futures directorate which will focus on growing the city's population includes the functions of city marketing, major events, conferencing, cultural facilities, tourism and economic development.

Bendigo 25+ and how it Contributed to Understanding the Challenges

Following the election City councillors agreed to hold a search conference involving 100 community participants in determining the community vision, values and priorities for the next 25 years. The project itself was a new conception which emphasised the use of regional community leaders as resources in discussions about important futures. The project showed that by sharing understanding of the breadth of concerns within the community participants moved from a position of self interest to better understanding and support of the common good. For some individual participants, this involved conceding that a particular issue was not the greatest concern for most people. It activated the community to deliver commentary that is strategic in the sense that it educated participants in the scope of strategic thinking that enables people to formulate achievable, measurable, comprehensible objectives and realistic strategies to implement them. In a restructure of the council executive and corporation influenced strongly by the determination to deliver on Bendigo +25 a new position to drive its implementation has been created.

Communication Mobilisation and Community Focus

The realisation that the City has distinctive, if not unique features that facilitate community understanding and mobilisation is a major factor in the Council's approach to the 'new' strategic planning.

The Health and Wellbeing Framework (HWBF) is a Council policy informed by new research in public health planning undertaken by the Victorian Government which draws on a social model of health in which community wellbeing is not just the absence of disease. As planning authorities, local community services providers and policy-makers councils control much of what makes a healthy environment from food safety, recreation facilities, urban design, walking paths, access to public transport and the availability of housing.

The HWBF recognises the effectiveness of partnerships with agencies and organisations that have similar objectives. For example, the Bendigo Safe City Forum an alliance of health and safety agencies has among its achievements the Bendigo Liquor Accord - a voluntary agreement between licensees to promote responsible alcohol consumption and reduce anti-social behaviour. The Accord is now used by the Liquor Control Commission as a model for the State of Victoria.

Harnessing Business Leadership

Bendigo Bank, through its community bank division has been able to provide tangible proof of the efficacy of business leadership in 161 communities in provincial, suburban and urban Australia. Innovation in the Bank is also evident through broader business activities in Bendigo. An executive of the Bendigo Bank is the chair of the Central Victorian Business Network that has been operating for 3 years with council support. Its aim is to provide opportunities for professionals to network and undertake professional development.

The Bank and other major businesses including the Health Care Group and the Council have formed the Bendigo Community Telco which provides telecommunication services to many of the larger and smaller businesses in Bendigo. By acting as a service broker and provider it is able to provide economical service by bulk purchasing arrangements with national carriers.

Similarly, Bendigo Innovations Park, a partnership between the Victorian Government, Latrobe University and Bendigo Bank has built a Data Recovery Centre which operates as a real time data holding centre whereby in the event of a breakdown of electronic access to usual sources, data records can be accessed instantaneously from this remote site, to ensure seamless service to customers.

Bendigo CAD Strategic Planning Project

The development of a structure plan for the Bendigo central activities area provided an opportunity to address many challenges. At the outset the City engaged Village Well, a community development organisation to provide reflections of the urban form, its activities and opportunities. This encouraged the project managers to take a broader view of the project than seeing it as a simple land use planning exercise.

The project was managed by Council but the steering committee included a range of selected state government staff who were targeted for the special contributions they could make to the project particularly in respect of implementation. Their commitment to the project and their ability to advocate across government and other sectors are critical success factors. The project itself considered land use, design quality and the activities essential for a vibrant city. It focussed on attracting more people to the city for longer periods of time. This involves an understanding that as the city grows and the range of activity increases the significant qualities of this Victorian city should be preserved.

In particular it provides for:

- Further residential development contributing to diversity in choice of housing and reducing the pressure of urban sprawl.
- Increased pedestrianisation to improve amenity by limiting the access for vehicles and creating priority streets for pedestrians and cyclists.
- A height policy to permit buildings to 3 and 5 storeys, encouraging consolidation in a manner that respects the existing heritage buildings.
- An expert design review panel to ensure architectural quality of new developments.
- An event program which utilises various locations as key contributors to the success for events such as a night hawkers market in the historic Chinese precinct.
- Development program for traders which involves marketing and promotion of the retail core.

Residential Strategy

The strategy sets out where housing development will occur over the next 25 years. It addresses housing choice and diversity, protection of the forest, improved design of medium density housing, sustainable subdivision concepts such as water-sensitive urban design, community building, land availability and land release.

Bendigo has an urban growth boundary which has recently been reviewed. This boundary is not hard and fast but has criteria which enable the council to consider development at its edge. The City is encouraging higher residential density in and adjacent to Activity Centres, and along transport corridors. Four new development areas on greenfield sites will be rezoned to residential only after Local Structure Plans have been prepared by Council which identify areas for residential development, open space, commercial centres and forest buffers.

The strategy requires the City to take account of environmental factors in residential development as well as promoting excellence in residential built form. Environmental factors include the requirement to provide green buffers in a practical application of the ‘city in the forest’ imperative. Forested public space surrounding the city does not in itself guarantee a perpetual limit to urban sprawl. This function of open space must be supported by planning policy, and preferably by legislation.

Just as infrastructure, or absence of it should not be regarded as an marker of planning certainty (because it can be modified, installed, removed – albeit often at a formidable price), public open space can be modified, removed or otherwise manipulated to make way for urban development. In Victoria in the 1980s it became fashionable to refer to public spaces as “assets”. This shift in conceptualisation brings with it the danger that open space can be treated like other assets – improved, modified, enhanced, and ultimately, sold or removed from the balance sheet. By applying legislative protection in the form of the Green Wedge or other zoning, the land can be lodged permanently on the balance sheet (i.e. implementing triple bottom line accounting literally). In the case of the Goldfields Heritage Park surrounding much of Bendigo the ultimate protection has been sought – placement on the World Heritage Register.

Development Standards and Built Form

Developers are required to meet higher standards if they are seeking to have land zoned for residential purposes which exceeds new development areas identified.

While council is seeking to increase the stock of medium density housing to achieve greater housing choice, there is a need to improve the quality of design to ensure this type of development is attractive to future residents. Most examples of medium density housing in Bendigo are mediocre. This has meant educating local developers, many of whom are small developer-builders who are often conservative and averse to what they perceive as “risky” contemporary design features. Greater Bendigo City Council initiated the Bendigo house design competition which received sponsorship from the Bendigo Bank and the Bendigo Advertiser newspaper to encourage innovative design which respond to local climatic, social and market conditions.

The ‘new’ Planning

Strategic planners find their role changing. Conventional approaches to ‘town planning’ which refer to typical planning certainties such as land capability, topography, urban history and precinct separation have given way to more complex, if not unresolved influences, including the demands for sustainable communities planned in a wider spatial context, taking account of regional interdependencies, reconciling local and strategic problems, and significantly taking ‘opportunities to plan outside the constraints of the statutory planning system’ – characteristics of what Thompson describes as the advantages of the sub-regional approach (Thompson, 2004, 88).

Melbourne 2030 has been influential in promoting the ‘new’ planning with emphasis on the interrelationships of all elements of the city region, including the networked regional cities, but especially, green spaces, equity and access, safer neighbourhoods and active public places.

Energy Efficiency

Greater Bendigo City Council together with 12 other councils in the region, and 7 corporate members, have formed the Central Victorian Greenhouse Alliance in recognition of the need to address energy dependency.

The Alliance is working to achieve attitudinal and behavioural change that will result in this region taking full responsibility for its contributions to global warming. At the same time, the Alliance is moving the region towards a future based on renewable energy with triple bottom line benefits to the regional economy (increased competitiveness); the social fabric of the community (new employment opportunities) and the local environment (accelerated land reclamation). (*CVGA Articles of Association*).

The Alliance recognises that the Mediterranean climate experienced across much of the region leans itself to collection of solar energy. Recently the Alliance has lodged a bid for the Solar Cities program. This is one of 21 bids for four projects for which the Federal Government is providing \$70 M for converting existing private dwellings to solar energy and installing energy saving appliances and techniques.

CONCLUSION

We have attempted to place strategic planning processes in a regional centre into a context which includes descriptions of features of the landscape that are not merely physical, nor simply related to the procedural functions they evoke in the local planning scheme. In doing so we have tried to demonstrate that there are ‘new’ conceptions at work which influence not merely the processes, but increasingly the outcomes of strategic planning.

These new conceptions include new planning policies and new skills, structures and approaches in city planning, as well as external influences emanating from the regional business community and locally-organised interests groups. It is possible to account for the rise of these new conceptions, in part at least, with reference to the emergence of a new consciousness in the regional city of the place of the city in the world. This is relatively easy to demonstrate by referring to the influence of new executive staff migrating to the region to work for the nationally-headquartered bank, and the (State) significant mining company. It is valid to attribute it also to less concrete influences including the increasing connectedness of local community interest groups with their State national international counterparts – stimulated no doubt by the presence of university community, but more speculatively, by the pervasiveness of global communications in the regional environment. In this respect the city is turning the full circle, having been born of world-wide migration connecting it to Europe and America, it is now absorbing influences from elsewhere and applying them in conscious strategic planning practice.

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