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Attention Strategic Planning – City Centre

Firstly I would like to praise Wollongong City Councils' thorough undertaking of a detailed – and much needed – revitalisation plan for the of Wollongong. It is one of the first steps in a process of fulfilling the potential of the city.

My comments on the draft documents of the Revitalisation Strategy relate primarily to the Access and Movement Strategy and the Local Environment Plan.

The Access and Movement Strategy emphasizes the need to consider forecasted growth in car use, vehicle kilometers traveled and car congestion in the city. I believe more important than these private motor vehicle issues in consideration of an Access and Movement Strategy is the forecasted increase in the cost of oil. This is due to the much-discussed 'peak oil' phenomenon, which is predicted to occur most optimistically in about 30 years – although many experts believe it is more likely to occur before this decade is out (Monbiot, 2003; Robinson, 2002).

The implications of the world's current oil vulnerability became evident with the recent hurricane Katrina in the Gulf of Mexico off the USA. Oil prices rose and production from the oil facilities in that region dropped, and this trickled down to an increase in the bowser price of petrol.

Depending on the severity of the increase of oil prices over the next 2 decades, and the measures taken by our Government to begin adapting to a new energy climate, our lives will be impacted heavily by this trend. At the least, lower-socio-economic communities will not be able to afford to own or travel by car, and public and active transport infrastructure and facilities need to be developed as a matter of priority.

It is heartening, then, to see both active transport (walking/cycling) and public transport well addressed in the Draft Access and Mobility Strategy.

PEDESTRIAN ACCESS AND MOVEMENT

The Access and Movement Strategy, Pedestrian Access and Movement section mentions the amenity, safety and convenience for pedestrians in the mall. This should be broadened to amenity, safety and convenience for ALL pedestrians in all areas. Pedestrian activity will not increase without 'walkable' environments. This is

particularly applicable to pedestrian shortcuts and other areas where safety is a perceived barrier to pedestrian use, especially out of usual business hours.

A potentially popular pedestrian route, from Wollongong Train Station east along Burelli Street, is an obvious example of a need for active street frontages, and this impacts the perceived safety of that route.

The provision of footpaths to encourage pedestrian activity is often not enough: the footpaths need to be - as all pedestrian routes - well lit, wide, even and free of irregularities that may cause unstable or elderly people problems. In all circumstances where possible, pedestrians in the city center should receive much higher priority in relation to vehicles than they currently do. The use of pedestrian islands is a good way of facilitating safe mid-block crossings, and there are many points in the city where these would be beneficial (for example: Keira St, between Crown St and Market St; Burelli St, between Keira St and Church St, and between Church St and Kembla St).

CYCLING ACCESS AND MOVEMENT

Some of the environmental benefits of increasing the amount of people cycling are made in the Cycling Access and Movement, although I believe as much emphasis should be placed on the health and financial benefits of increasing the number and length of trips made by bicycle. There is a lot of evidence pointing to the ill-health effects of our increasingly sedentary lifestyles, and many positive health impacts exist for those who implement exercise like cycling into their daily routine (The Warren Centre). Some of the financial benefits of choosing to ride over driving should also be highlighted – including no parking fees, and petrol savings (which is a cost becoming increasingly intrusive in a households' usual expenditure).

A key issue not mentioned in the Cycle Access and Movement section is the need for road markings for cyclists. The limited road space on the city streets was mentioned elsewhere in the document and is compounded by competing uses – parking, buses, loading, and cycling, although we have to accept bike paths are not going to meet all cyclists routes' needs, and appropriate, clear and consistent road markings and signage will facilitate greater, and more safe, levels of cycling.

Additionally, to increase accessibility and parking for vehicles in the city, whilst seeking to encourage cycling, could be seen as sending mixed messages. In all instances possible I strongly recommend that vehicle restrictions apply through the main center of the city, and that viable alternatives are available. These alternatives could include satellite parking stations away from the city center with shuttle buses running via the stations (T-Team, 2002); or preferably access from Wollongong Train Station improved so that catching a train to the city is a good option. The walk from

the train station to the mall really is quite short and certainly achievable by most able-bodied people. Reducing car accessibility also fits with the current trend of increasing residential density in the city.

CAR PARKING

The needs of transport for people visiting the entertainment district would be better met not by additional parking but again by public transport. This public transport would link to the greater public transport network (a shuttle bus from Wollongong Train Station might pick up and drop off at the stadium/entertainment center, for example), or at least link to satellite parking stations removed from city. This is additionally beneficial when keeping in mind the high pressures on limited land in the CBD.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

The overarching notion of giving buses priority at lights in the city is an excellent idea that has been successfully implemented in other Australian Cities. Signage and information relating to bus routes should be greatly improved. A first basic step is to provide timetable information at every stop throughout the city (and LGA), allowing users to know, when they are at the bus stop, when the next bus leaves.

The concept of opening the Keira St should be one approached with utmost care – in almost all circumstances more roads creates more traffic and congestion, not less. In particular for what is currently the Keira St bus mall, introducing cars will create a less pedestrian-friendly environment in an area that is one of the hubs of the city. The Wollongong City Centre Revitalisation Strategy should be working to minimize and eradicate traffic congestion, not accommodate it.

WOLLONGONG CITY CENTRE DRAFT LOCAL ENVIRONMENT PLAN

A few concerns arise from Part 1 of the Wollongong City Centre Draft Local Environment Plan (LEP).

4. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Whilst the need for the LEP to encourage and secure economic growth and employment for the region is clear, it should not be the first objective of the LEP. The health of the people and environment should be the paramount objective of the plan. Closely behind this the next most important objective should be sustainability and preservation of standard of living and the environment for future generations of residents. The ordering of the objectives should reflect the importance and priority of those objectives.

I believe that economic prosperity and environmental health and sustainability considerations are not mutually exclusive, but that a balanced approach to local environment planning will provide benefits in all areas. Neglecting the importance of environmental health and sustainability concerns will have adverse affects on the economic and employment outcomes of the plan.

5. STRATEGIES

Zoning has an extremely important role in determining both the sustainability of the city's transport, and the health of Wollongong's people. The link between planning and health and environment is becoming increasingly acknowledged in all professional and academic sectors (Humphrey, 2005; National Heart Foundation of Australia (Victorian Division) 2004). It is vital that the link between development planning, health, environmental protection and sustainability forms the basis for the strategies underpinning the LEP.

I praise Wollongong City Council's thorough strategic planning process for the City Centre Revitalisation, and trust that you will implement community input into the process and hold community environment and health considerations as highest priorities.

Regards,

Ben Grounds
Community Environmental Health Officer

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