**MASS TRANSIT and INCREASED DENSITY/DEVELOPMENT EXPLAINED**:

By Cr Joe Natoli Feb 22nd 2021

This is a very complex issue and I acknowledge many in our community do want some sort of Mass Transit System, better and efficient public transport. But unfortunately, this debate has been hijacked since 2016. When the SEQ Regional Plan was brought in 2016, the State Government and Council agreed to change the formula for growth going forward from 40% infill and 60% greenfield to 62% infill and 38% greenfield. That was a massive change.

The Council then decided that a majority of the infill would be concentrated in what is called the ‘Enterprise Corridor’ of Maroochydore to Caloundra. With a predicted population growth forecast to be in the order of 200,000 in the next 20 years, the infill percentage equals 124,000 new residents to be mostly accommodated in the Enterprise Corridor.

The Mass Transit Corridor for the light rail for stage one is 13 km long with 16 stations. It commences at Maroochydore and runs along Aerodrome Road, Alexandra Parade onto the Mooloolaba Esplanade, then turns right onto Venning Street, continues along Walan Street turns right at Brisbane Road, goes over the Mooloolah River and Parrearra Canal and heads along the Nicklin Way until it turns right into Main Drive and then left on the Kawana Way until it reaches the Sunshine Coast University Hospital.

It is proposed to increase the density in a 400 metre radius around each station - which means, if each station is of equal distance apart, that equates to 800 metres x 16 stations equals 12.8 km. So when they say it won’t be high density the entire length of stage one, they are right: there is a gap of 200 metres of no development between the Mooloolah River and Parrearra Canal stretch.

The current population in that 13 km stretch of stage one is 23,000 people. It has taken decades to get to that point. In the next twenty years, Council plans on putting an extra 81,000 people with the balance of the 47,000 of the 128,000 to go between the Sunshine Coast University Hospital and Caloundra.

The density is nothing like we have ever had in the past. It represents 5 times the density that currently exists. If you want to imagine what that means in simple terms, just add another 4 on top of what exists now. If it is a house, then add another four houses on top; if it is a three storey unit block add another 9 storey building on top and if it is a 10 storey building, add another 40 storey building on top.

Current Residential A properties will be replaced with multi-storey buildings.

Placing all of that density close to the coast is fraught with all sorts of danger.

We know how popular our beaches are, so apart from a massive increase in density of permanent residents, there will still be a large rise in day and short term visitors to the coast.

Can we trust the State Government to make sure we have the modern, efficient and high-frequency public transport system to cater for this massive increase population?

I can only gauge my opinion on current commitment to the coast, which has been nothing short of pathetic. Massive under investment on state roads is causing most of the congestion experienced by commuters. We have an old and antiquated bus system which has failed to attract more than two percent occupancy. It’s true that you can not survive on the coast without a car. If you have to visit a friend or go anywhere which is out of the way, you need a car. So no matter how good the public transport system is, most of the 80,000 new residents in stage one will at some point in the week need to use their car. Well, good luck if they can get on the reduced lanes in stage one because the light rail will take up two lanes of traffic.

**So what is the alternative?**

The current Planning Scheme will still see an increase in density on the coastal fringes. The alternative to driving the growth along the coastal corridor is to look at the greenfield sites of Aura and the future Beerwah East. Aura has developed about 10 percent of the intended 50,000 people it will eventually house and Beerwah East will also have about 50,000 people. The Camcos Corridor for the future passenger fast-rail will go right through the middle of those two developments. A Spurr line from Beerwah to the Maroochydore City Centre will have a station at Aura/ Beerwah East, Caloundra , at Kawana near the hospital precinct and Maroochydore at the new city centre.

Would it not be smarter to rethink the planning of Aura and Beerwah East and increase the density now, plan it from the ground up and plan it around a fast rail passenger station with good bus connections? A smart, transit-oriented community can allow for taller buildings with wider roads and extensive parklands. Build it with all the infrastructure in place. Retrofitting existing urban centres requires extensive upgrading of infrastructure which the rate payers will have to fund, compared to the developers funding all of the infrastructure in greenfield sites. A fast-rail from Maroochydore to Beerwah to Brisbane would service many., as an inter-city and intra-city service.

Finally the light rail was, and I believe remains, the only option the State Government will choose as it can deliver the highest population density. The fixed track with the industrial look of overhead wires will impact the look and feel of our coastal communities.

The public consultation which is planned will be extensive and the community will have its say, but once the Options Analysis is handed to the State Government to undertake the Detailed Business Case, it will be in the hands of the State Government to make the final decision.

If you thought we had a battle with TMR over the M2M, then this one will be epic. We must all voice our opinions strongly. We must ensure the State Government and Council listen. We must be prepared to fight for our lifestyle.

The other part of the puzzle is the new Planning Scheme. That’s where the Council will try and push ahead with the increased density. The Mass Transit and the new Panning Scheme are like conjoined twins they can’t be separated. Each needs the other to survive. The Mass Transit needs a massive increase in density to justify the spend of billions of dollars of investment. But what happens if we don’t get the funding for a Mass Transit solution? The Council will have committed to the massive increase in density under the Regional Plan. Is it possible that we could end up with a massive increase in density and have no Mass Transit solution? The recent planning scheme report indicated that increased density was inevitable whether we got a Mass Transit Solution or not. The councillors will be the ones making the final decision. We all must fight and make sure they know what we, the public they are elected to serve, want.

Yes, there will be growth. But let’s look at other options rather than shoving all the growth into one small corridor. That was the only option Council gave consultant to consider. We deserve better. Our lifestyle and that of our children depend on it.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I was elected on a platform of listening to my constituents, so please tell me: what are your thoughts?