Forum Notes from Strategic Sustainability in the Scenic Rim

One-day forum November 18 2010

"All things are possible once enough human beings realise that everything is at stake"
Norman Cousins

Background and Context

On Thursday November 18 2010, over 50 sustainability leaders from the Scenic Rim region and some neighbouring communities, gathered at the Arts and Cultural Centre in Beaudesert to learn more about each others' work, network, and engage in a regional conversation about the meaning, purpose and elevation of integrated or 4 Bottom Line sustainability in the Scenic Rim.

The sectors involved in this 1-day forum were:

- Business and industry – particularly local Chambers of Commerce, tourism industry networks and exemplary sustainable businesses
- Nature conservation NGOs and groups – including regional natural resource managers, local Landcare associations and regional and local environment groups
- Sustainability NGOs and groups – including regional facilitators and local community groups
- Indigenous organisations – the Mununjali Elders were represented in the Welcome to Country and the Yugambeh Language and Cultural Heritage Museum and Drumley Walk organisers were present
- The Arts – community based organisations integrating arts and ecology in their onground community engagement and education activities
- Scenic Rim Regional Council – a number of Council departments were represented including Regional Development - Economic and Tourism Development; Health, Building and Environment; Sustainability; Planning; Waste Management and Community Planning. In addition, a number of Councillors attended portions of the forum as well.

Appendix 1 provides a list of attending organisations with contact details of representatives.

The purpose of the forum was to:

- Bring together the key players and community leaders from the nature conservation, sustainable business, Local Living Economy, sustainable community sectors, the arts and education, and Scenic Rim Regional Council to:
  - Share information about our organisations/networks and sustainability aims/aspirations, priorities and activities
  - Network and build positive relationships between sectors, organisations and people involved in sustainability in the Scenic rim region
  - Identify common interests, themes, aims, strengths, opportunities and priorities between these sectors, organisations and people

- Identify the threats, gaps, contradictions and areas of potential dispute and contestation between organisations
- Begin to discuss an aligned, synergised and strategic vision and pathway forward for the implementation of whole-of-region, 4 Bottom Line sustainability in the Scenic Rim

- To connect and inspire these key players and community leaders through information sharing, conversation and networking

- To overview Scenic Rim Regional Council's nature conservation, sustainable business, Local Living Economy, waste management and planning scheme priorities and activities and offer Council's role and resources as a strategic and community facilitator and enabler

- Look for areas of common ground between community-based organisations and Council which will create opportunities for collaborative sustainability planning, activity and collective learning.

The forum proved to be a strong success based on participant feedback. Appendix 2 collates all written feedback from the event.

The forum had three main sessions:

1. Defining and framing sustainability and the importance of collaboration.

2. Snapshots from local and regional organisations and key Council departments who overviewed their aims, purpose, activities, priorities and their perceived threats and opportunities for the Scenic Rim Region. Appendix 3 identifies these presentations and presenters

3. Two strategic conversations about:

   (a) the region's sustainability strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats and priorities leading to an emerging vision of sustainability in the Scenic Rim; and

   (b) identifying strategic priorities, intervention points, priority activities and stakeholders in order to prioritise and amplify sustainability in the Scenic Rim.

Appendix 4 contains detailed notes from the two strategic conversations. The following section presents a summary of discussion outcomes.

Summary of Discussion Outcomes

After a full day of networking, learning, purposeful and informal conversation and connecting, a number of important themes and priorities were identified and discussed at the forum.

1. Diversity of activity brings strength

There is a tremendous diversity of planning, piloting and testing, and grassroots activity going on in organisations and communities across the Scenic Rim. Within this diversity there is much connectivity, common ground and emerging strength.

We also noted the high levels of enthusiasm and passion in Scenic Rim communities and amongst active sustainability players.

2. We live within living systems

We live within regional ecosystems and global ecological systems and cycles. We also live within social systems, political systems and economic systems. These systems are complex and continually adapting and evolving. To effect positive change, we must think systemically and look for patterns, connections, networks and the most effective intervention points.

3. The clock is ticking

- Energy – business-as-usual vulnerabilities and renewable energy opportunities
- Food and farming – threats from resource extraction, vulnerabilities from global industrial economy and scales, opportunities in local and sustainable
- Natural resources including water – variety of vulnerabilities (quality, lack of security, health of waterways etc in some communities and natural systems), water security in some communities
- Local business and local economy – potential to foreground and enable
- Social and community wellbeing – linked to natural assets and ecosystem services, local economic health, places to live, work and play
- Atmosphere – global warming and climate disruption
- Pressures on the region – industrial and urban development, resource extraction, farming, population growth

We need to move fast to create the foundations for a healthy, resilient, low carbon region.

4. Communication, information and education is crucial

How and what we communicate is crucial and turning systems thinking, complexity and emerging disruption (the bad news) into compelling and activating stories is vital. We need to make these stories are part of our everyday conversations in our streets, neighbourhoods, families, businesses, networks, communities, schools. Learning and education can be informal, incidental, planned, purposeful, formal – there are many methods and vehicles. These processes of communicating, informing and educating were continually referred to during the forum.

The term ‘pay it forward’ was adapted at the forum to express our commitment to create a healthy future for future generations.

5. Local is powerful

Local is powerful and how we think about, live, learn and work in *place-based ways* is very important. The concept of Local Living Economy came up repeatedly from many different people and organisations throughout the day. This notion is becoming a powerful gathering point and cross-sectoral bridge for the Scenic Rim region.

Living Local – local economy, local food and farming, living regional landscapes, local renewable energy and so on – 'solves for pattern' by creating the conditions for all to flourish in our region – our underpinning ecological systems; our local economies, businesses, employment opportunities/job creation; our education sector; our communities...

6. Cross-sectoral solidarity

The potential for cross-sectoral solidarity and communication in this region is huge. Connections between Council and the Scenic Rim communities are vitally important as we prepare ourselves to positively influence and innovatively manage the pressures upon this region, particularly with regard to looming industrial and urban development and resource extraction threats.

Finding the common interests and common language that connect local business and industry with sustainability and nature conservation organisations, and Council to create influential, cross-sectoral solidarity for sustainability in the region is a priority.

7. The health of our natural capital underpins everything

Our region's living landscapes, biodiversity, natural capital/assets – healthy soils, clean air and water, interconnected ecosystems, biological integrity – were recognised throughout the day as the foundation of the Scenic Rim economically and socially. From our interface with cities as their 'recreational backyard' through to our capacity to sustainably grow our own food and generate our own energy, we recognised that everything depends on maintaining and restoring the health of our regional ecosystems.

We also identified an emerging discussion from neighbouring city councils about their recognition of the interconnectedness of the regional landscape and because of this, the potential for some nature conservation resourcing and funding to begin to come from city ratepayers who rely on the health of the ecosystem services within the Scenic Rim.

8. Create a vision of sustainability for the Scenic Rim

The need to create an inclusive, overarching sustainability vision for the Scenic Rim region was raised. One suggestion was "Prosperity Without Growth" which:

- builds our future around the maintenance, protection and restoration of the region's natural capital
- creates self-sufficient, resilient local communities and economies that value flourishing beyond material wealth
- manages 'outside' impacts in innovative and aligned ways
- connects the great diversity in our region in ways that strengthen our resilience

9. We are facing some formidable threats and gaps

- Mobility issues across the physical landscape and between the communities of the Scenic Rim. Traditional measures that identify mass public transport thresholds are not appropriate for the Scenic Rim region and we need other means to both trigger mobility and public transport infrastructure and enable other forms of communication and connectivity across the Scenic Rim
- Bromelton done badly...the opportunity lies in planning and creating a world's best practice green industrial development
- Resource extraction threats particularly in agricultural land – coal seam gas exploration leading to mining is right on our doorstep
- Weeds and environmental degradation
- Poorly managed growth (industrial, urban, housing etc) that doesn't integrate the primacy of healthy ecosystems and natural capital
- External inputs (eg) electricity, manufactured goods, business products – these represent the leakage of local dollars out of our regional economy and the loss of local jobs and businesses. They also represent opportunities to develop local and regional inputs in areas such as renewable energy generation, sustainable local manufacturing etc
- Red tape that is not scaled appropriately for local business and enterprise
- Potential contestation and disputes between sectors regarding the perceived threats and opportunities within issues such as population and economic growth: urban, industrial and economic development etc
- Limited time – see point 3 'The clock is ticking'
- Peak Everything – oil, water, natural resources...

We noted the concept and prevalence of 'wicked problems' – complex, interconnected, systemic problems that cannot be solved with the same linear level of thinking that created them. A number of the threats facing us in the Scenic Rim are wicked problems such as growth in population, urban and industrial development, and resource extraction which could have huge, negative and long-term ramifications for this region.

10. There will be change and we need to prepare for it

Change will arise from different places including global drivers such as atmospheric and climate disruption; oil and energy supplies; large scale financial and economic systems; technology. It will arise within the relationship between Federal, State and Local Government and particularly for our region, State Government priorities and legislation and their likely imposition on Council. It can also arise through proactive and collective grassroots organising – in relationships between communities and Council, within communities and between community organisations. We know the next 20 years will be nothing like the past 20 years and we need to be informing, up-skilling and organising ourselves to prepare for change.

Emerging strategic priorities

Following a series of short presentations (snapshots) from 20 key sustainability organisations and players as well as small group conversations about the strengths, weaknesses opportunities and threats for the region, a number of strategic priorities began to emerge:

- Valuing, protecting, maintaining and restoring the region's natural assets and ecosystem services. Establishing targets, policies, procedures and a Council/community region-wide ecological strategic plan

- Education (formal and informal) at many scales, in many forms and in many locations in ways which organise and activate our communities

- Proactive engagement with the region's planning and population processes to help ensure best practice sustainability, ecological protection and community resilience are at the forefront of these processes

- Cross-sectoral collaboration and solidarity – creating a collective voice, vision and influence

- Mobility across the region that is non-mass and eco-friendly – encouraging Council's role in leading this initiative

- Renewable energy generated in the region – the potential for the community to engage with State and Local Government leaders to help enable this priority

- Local food security and distribution

- Water security

- Local Living Economy

- The need for multi-faceted approaches - all good ideas have many facets and to be effective, we need to implement many or all facets (eg) Local Living Economy is more than just a 'buy local' campaign.

Potential 2011 activities

Many excellent suggestions were made regarding activities that will progress integrated sustainability, low carbon transition and greater community resilience in the Scenic Rim:

- Design, implement and evaluate a multi-faceted Local Living Economy pilot program and hub in the Scenic Rim
- Establish a Centre of Sustainability Excellence in the Scenic Rim
- Develop a network of community gardens as sustainability hubs
- Establish environmental targets, policies and procedures to protect and restore our natural capital
- Establish a regional wellbeing index and reporting system
- Develop a strategic plan for environmental restoration across the Scenic Rim (inspired by the strategic plan developed by Tamborine Mountain Landcare and the Upper Logan River restoration program by Beaudesert & District Landcare) – focus on community environment groups collaboratively developing the plan and informed by regional environmental priorities
- Develop the capacity to generate renewable energy within the region
- Develop effective networks and communication systems and enable our collective voice to emerge:
  - Immediate starting point is the Sustainable Scenic Rim website – we can create member-only and public discussion forums and other communication tools on this site, beginning from December 2010
- Engage purposefully with the Scenic Rim Community Planning process
- Implement the Regional Food Strategy
- Host a number of sector-based sustainability forums and workshops
  - Business and industry
  - Farmers
  - Schools
  - Other?
- Host regular 'Pay it Forward' Forums with a broad community reach and relevance. Bring in high profile speakers by linking the Scenic Rim to existing 'tour' circuits including Brisbane
- Host fearless stakeholder conversations about sustainability and wicked problems such as growth, development etc
- Link more actively and closely with the schools in the region. Note, BOSS has already established a schools waste minimisation program in collaboration with Council; Council provides support to Wild Mountains Earth Education Centre to bring local school groups to its centre – these school connections can potentially provide important regional links and be amplified through collaborative efforts
- Host an annual sustainability forum where we can review our progress, celebrate our successes and vision more strategically
- Create a network of community markets
- Host sustainability briefings as a collective, for political leaders
- Create Council-maintained local transport hubs in each community
- Develop ongoing sustainability communication tools such as:
  - Regular media articles
  - Increasingly effective use of the Sustainability Scenic Rim website and other alternative media
  - Displays in community libraries
- Establish an education network that extends beyond traditional methods
- Council's role as a facilitator, enabler, regulator and incentivisor according to priorities and needs. Ensure regulations and legislation are scaled appropriately to enable regional sustainability to flourish
- Let a thousand flowers bloom...

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