



MANNING VALLEY COMMUNITY PLAN DISCUSSION PAPER

Investing in our Future

November 2009



About this discussion paper

What is the paper about?



This document forms a starting point for the next round of discussion about the 20-year plan for our community.

Council started the planning process earlier this year, after releasing the findings from Professor Allan's study on our finances and infrastructure. We also held a round of community discussions in May-June, this year, about our aspirations for the future.

This document contains the results of those discussions and suggests some directions for the future. It also includes some options on how we can invest in our future and provide the resources for the things we need. There are three sections in the discussion paper.

The first section looks at where we are now and is provided as background information.

The second section looks at the results of the community discussions we held earlier this year - the things that people said they valued for the future of the Manning Valley

The third section looks at some of the directions we might take to achieve these things. Throughout this section there are some shaded boxes containing a list of Ideas for discussion.

These are provided as a starting point to help people think about the directions that council, the community and other stakeholders might take and the things we might do.

We encourage you to add to these ideas and share your thoughts with other members of the community and council.

The ideas will help to inform the strategies and actions that are included in the Community Strategic Plan for the next 20 years.

What if I don't have time to read it?

If you don't have time to read the entire document, a summary version



is available. This includes the key messages and some ideas for being involved in the consultation process.

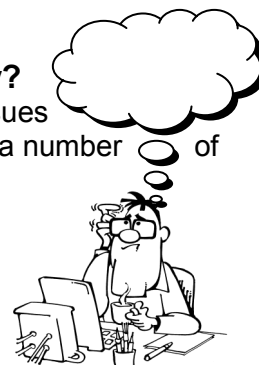
What if I want more information?

This document provides the basic story of where we are now, where we want to be and how we might get there. There is a range of technical information that supports this story, such as details of our assets and financial projections. This information is available on council's website: www.gtcc.nsw.gov.au.

How can I have my say?

You can respond to the issues in this discussion paper in a number of ways:

1. Send a written submission to Council. You may want to base your submission on the ideas lists or discussions questions. Submissions should be addressed to:
Have your say on the Community Plan
Greater Taree City Council
PO Box 482, Taree, 2430.
2. Attend a community meeting. Dates and venues of community meetings are available on council's website
3. Participate in the consultation on-line. Go to Council's website: www.gtcc.nsw.gov.au and click on the Building a Better Future logo.
4. Participate in the community survey. Council will be undertaking a random phone poll on the key issues. If you are contacted for the survey please participate.



Challenging times - tough decisions

The next five years will be one of the most critical times in the Manning Valley's history. We have come to the proverbial "fork in the road" where we as a community must choose one pathway over another. And there are some tough decisions that need to be made.

This discussion paper looks at what we have learned so far in preparing our long-term plan for the community. It has been developed from two main sources of information:

- Things we already knew about our city, from various plans and studies in the past - including Professor Percy Allan's review of our financial sustainability.
- Things the community told us during the first round of community engagement, about their hopes and aspirations for the future.

In planning for the next 20 years, our community needs to answer three basic questions:

- Where are we now?
- Where do we want to be?
- How will we get there?

This paper is divided into three sections, each addressing one of these questions.

I won't pretend for a moment that where we are now as a City is a healthy, or sustainable picture. We have a wealth of good people in this valley, with a real passion for this place - but we also have some serious financial problems.

There are some harsh realities to be faced.

But I believe we can move forward, if each of us is prepared to invest in our future - not just financially, but emotionally and intellectually, building a stronger community, sharing ideas and celebrating the positive things about our Valley. It is our choice what we will become.

I want our community to be a strong community - full of hope for the future, proud of the place in which we live, moving forward with confidence.



Mayor Paul J Hogan

But we can only achieve this if we are prepared to make some hard decisions in the coming years. I say "we" because I include myself and my fellow Councillors in this commitment. I know that in the past, Council, as an organisation has not performed as well as we would have liked to. We have tried to spread the dollar too thinly on the ground, particularly with our roads.

We need to stand back and take a good look at the problem so we can find a way forward. As you read this, the General Manager, myself and fellow Councillors are overseeing a comprehensive overhaul and restructure of the council as an organisation. This will particularly focus on the way we build and maintain our infrastructure and the way we manage our resources. I believe that we will see positive change in the months ahead.

As my fellow Councillors and I have moved around the Manning recently, talking to people about the long-term plan, we've been greatly encouraged by the vision that people have for this place and the strong sense of community that we enjoy. I believe we can all work together to build a positive future for the Manning Valley, not only for this generation, but for the generations to come.

I encourage you to read this discussion paper and to participate in the community engagement program in the coming weeks.



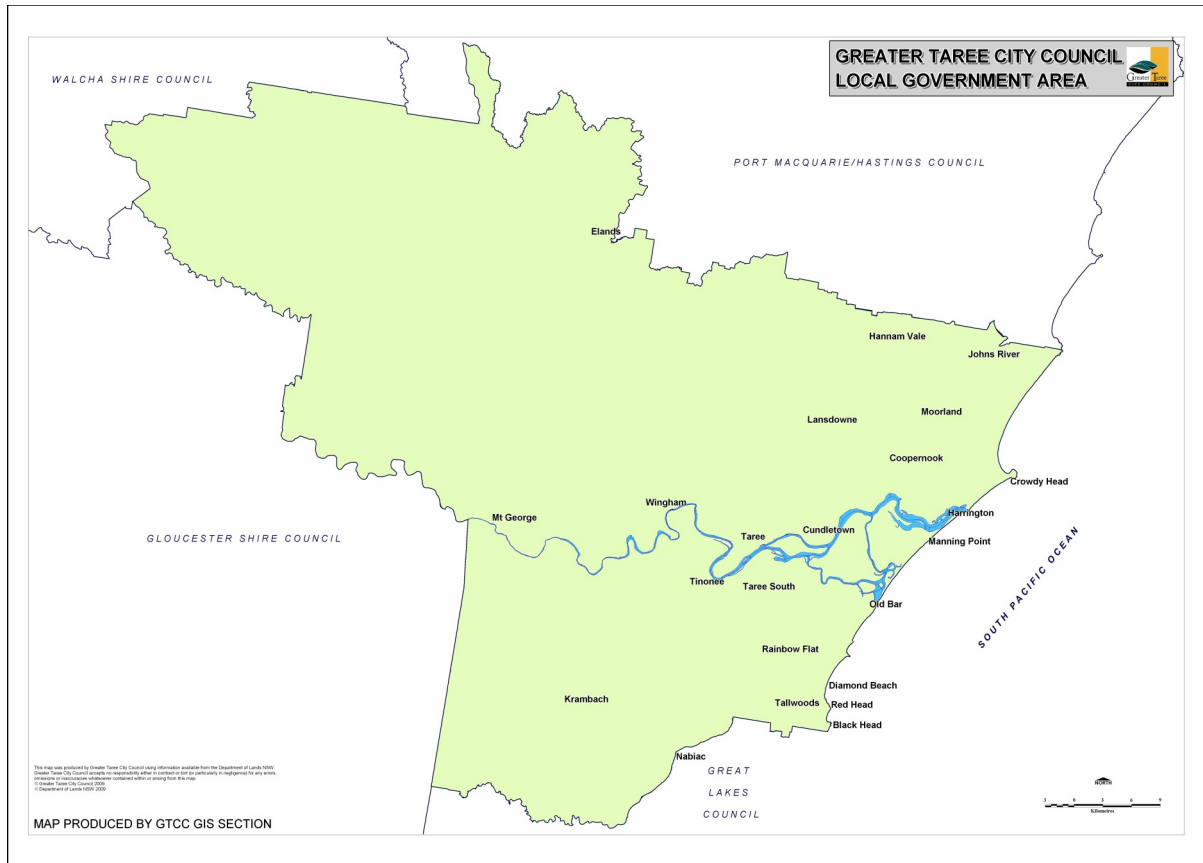
SECTION ONE

WHERE ARE WE NOW?



WHERE ARE WE NOW?

A snapshot of the Manning Valley



Boundaries and land use

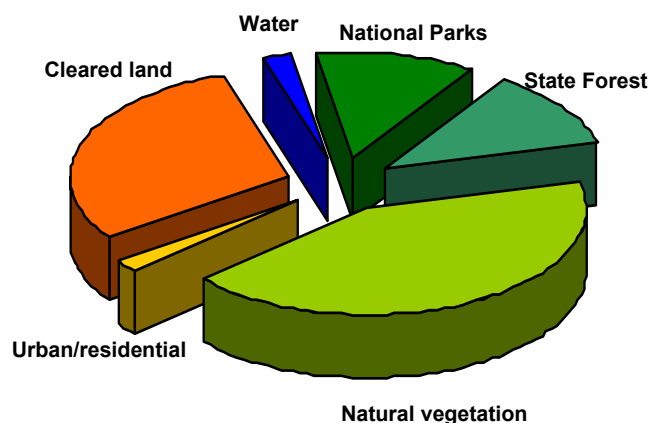
The local government area of Greater Taree covers 3,753 square kilometres, stretching from Johns River in the north to Wang Wauk River in the south and up to 100 kilometres to the western hinterland. The area takes in a 50 kilometre coastal strip from Hallidays Point in the south to Crowdy Bay in the north.

Greater Taree is bounded by Walcha Shire and the Port Macquarie-Hastings Council area in the north, the Tasman Sea in the east, the Great Lakes Council area in the south and Gloucester Shire in the west.

Only a small proportion of Greater Taree's total land area (2%) is devoted to urban and residential use.

The majority is devoted to national parks

and nature reserves, state forests and the protection of natural vegetation. Some 32% of the land is currently cleared and 2% is covered in water. The graph below shows major land uses within our area:



About our community

Population characteristics

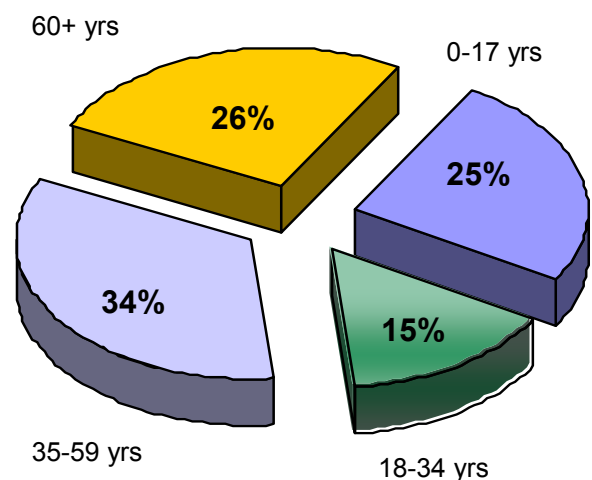
The population characteristics of the Manning Valley reflect those of many regional local government areas on the eastern seaboard.

Coastal areas tend to have a higher proportion of retirement-aged people and a lower proportion of young people. This is particularly so in the Manning, as there are few opportunities for tertiary education, so young people have to leave the area to continue their studies.

The Manning also has a significant Indigenous population, with some 1,927 people, or 4.3% of the population identifying as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. This is a comparatively young community, with the median age of our indigenous people being 18 years.

Total population: **48,000**

Age distribution

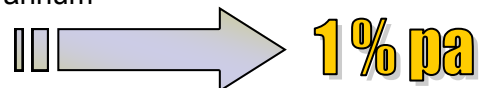


Where were our people born?

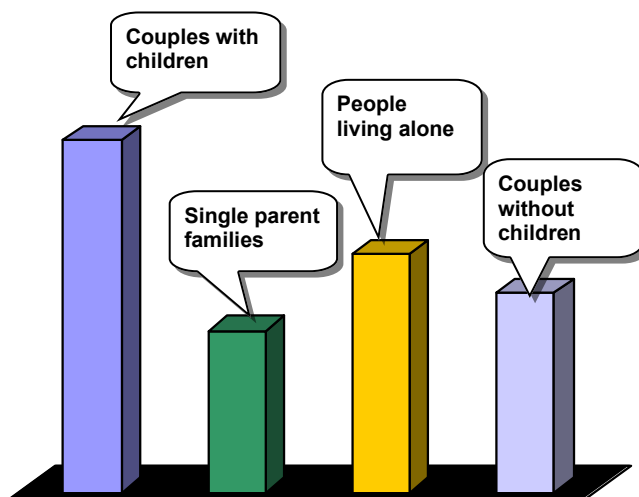
The majority of residents were born in Australia (86.9%). Of those born overseas, the main countries of birth were the United Kingdom (3.4%), New Zealand (0.9%), Netherlands (0.5%), Germany (0.4%) and the Philippines (0.2%). 98% of residents speak English as a first language, or are proficient in the use of English.

Expected population growth

The expected population growth for the area over the next 20 years is about 1% per annum

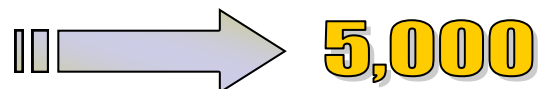


Types of households



Expected housing growth

Over the next 20 years, Greater Taree expects to see an additional 5,000 households in our local government area.



Home ownership

The area has a higher than average rate of home ownership, with 43.1% of residents owning their own home and a further 27.2% paying off a mortgage. Mortgage repayments tend to be lower than in other areas. Most dwellings (75%) are single houses.

Other facts about the Manning Valley

Employment

51.5% of residents are in full time employment and 35.6% are employed part-time. The current unemployment rate is 10.5% Some 31% of local households earn less than \$500 per week, 9% of households earn more than \$1700 per week.

Ratepayers

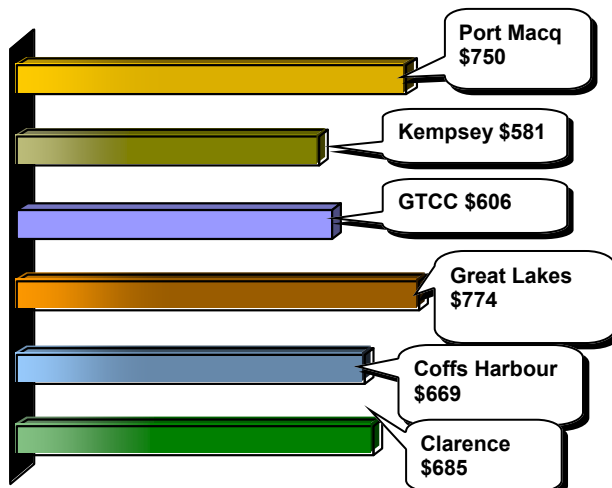
There are 23,000 ratepayers in the Manning Valley. Average rates are shown below. Rates in the Manning Valley are lower than for other comparable council areas (regional coastal councils).



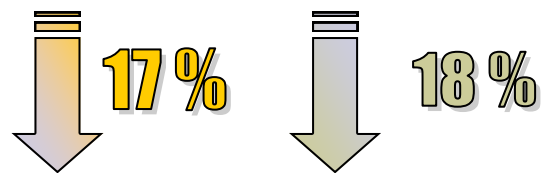
Ratepayers		
Type of property	Number of ratepayers	Average rate 2009/10
Residential	20,361	\$706
Farming	1,535	\$1,078
Commercial	1,230	\$2,286

Residential rates of Mid North Coast councils

From the Department of Local Government's figures for 2007-08 rates



Compared to other regional councils, GTCC's average residential rates are 17% lower and commercial rates are 18% lower.



Residential Rates

Commercial Rates

Figures from Professor Percy Allan's Sustainability Review

Local infrastructure

The Manning Valley has a large amount of infrastructure per head of population. This is because of the fragmented nature of settlement in our area, with two major centres, three smaller urban centres and numerous villages. Our current network represents an investment of \$15,300 worth of infrastructure for every man, woman and child in our city. "Infrastructure" includes things such as roads, bridges, parks and sports fields stormwater drains, kerb and gutter, foot-paths and buildings.

Infrastructure per head of population

\$15,300



Major Assets	
Length of sealed roads	742 km
Length of unsealed roads	950 km
Timber bridges	105
Concrete bridges	114
Sports complexes	9
Swimming pools	6
Libraries	5
Regional Airport	1

Celebrating our strengths

The Manning Valley community has a great deal to celebrate as we look forward to our future and remember our past. We are surrounded by one of the most beautiful natural environments in Australia and we have so many opportunities to experience and enjoy our surroundings.

Each of us has found our own special place in this valley and there is a common thread that weaves through each of our lives — our connection with the river.

Over the years, the Manning has quietly sustained, our community and the surrounding areas that rely on its water supply. Each of us connects in some way, each day, with the valley's river systems and the life that they bring.

There is still a sense of wilderness and "frontier" about this place - a sense of self reliance and independence that you do not find in major cities and suburban sprawl. We have learned to rely on our own initiative and our own resources.

We have grown our own industries and business opportunities and developed strong connections and alliances to support this activity.

We have learned to work hard and "make do" when times are tough, to help each other and to value what we have.

This is our greatest strength in moving forward for the future.

Connecting communities

Earlier this year, Council spoke with some 1200 local people about their sense of connection with this place. Of the many who responded, only two said they didn't "love where they live". Generally people identified strongly with their locality, such as "Wingham, Harrington, Cundletown or "up river". They also felt connected to social groups and interests, such as sports clubs, church groups or school communities.

But there was a great sense of sadness about the disconnections between our indigenous community and the wider community. Many people hoped for Reconciliation and a greater understanding of Aboriginal culture, but were at a loss to know where to begin.

There was also a sense of disconnection between the various towns and villages in our Valley because of the distances between them and the different lifestyles we choose to lead. It was sometimes challenging for those in the towns to understand the needs of the rural communities and visa versa.

Council has the task of balancing needs and resources across the city. As we continue to plan for the next 20 years, it will be important to build strong connections between our various communities and to strengthen relationships between the community and Council.



Looking after what we've got

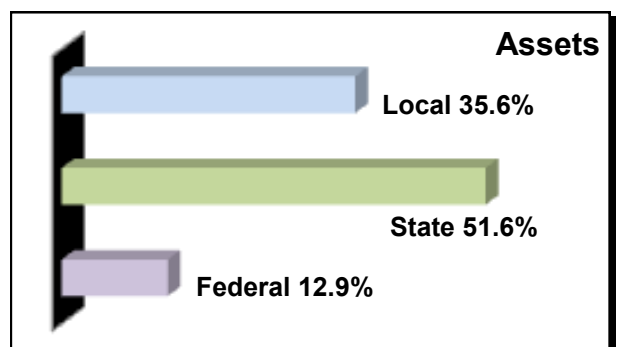
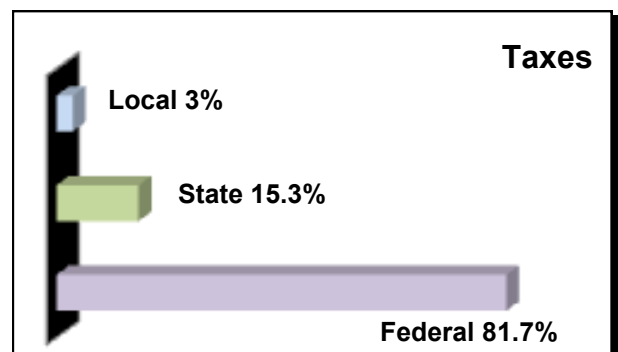


Ask people what they love about the Manning Valley and “lifestyle options” is usually on top of the list - you can live by the beach, try your hand at hobby farming, or retreat to the mountains for a quieter life. Although only 2% of our total land area is taken up by urban settlement, that small percentage is spread over five urban centres and numerous villages, with an average distance of 30 km between the various settlements. People enjoy the fact that the Manning isn't over-crowded and many say they don't want the population to grow too much. But the lifestyle comes at a cost, both personally and on the wider scale. There are only 48,000 of us to look after some 3700 km² of land - that's about 13 people per square kilometre. By comparison, a city suburb such as North Sydney has 5,985 people per square kilometre. While everyone loves the village lifestyle of the Manning they also, naturally, want services close to where they live. They need roads to get to town, a local library branch and a swimming pool, parks for the children to play, sports fields and footpaths and cycleways. This has resulted in a huge web of community infrastructure, including more than 1600 km of local roads, woven across an area where infrastructure is difficult to maintain. In his assessment of the Manning Valley's infrastructure issues, Professor Percy Allan calculated that this area had invested some \$15,300 in community infra-

structure per head of population. That's about \$30,000 worth of infrastructure to maintain for every household.

Infrastructure costs

The cost of effectively managing these assets city-wide is about \$36 million per year. Most local infrastructure (except the highway and the Martin Bridge) comes under the direct care of the local community. Council currently collects a total of \$20 million in rates and receives about \$6 million in government grants. It spends about \$16 million on maintaining, repairing and operating community infrastructure. The remainder is spent on providing services and carrying out duties required by legislation. That leaves a shortfall of about \$20million per year on infrastructure spending. The result is that our roads, bridges, buildings, drains, parks, airport etc are starting to deteriorate rapidly. The diagram below shows the situation from a national perspective. Local communities look after 35.6% of all the public infrastructure in Australia - yet they only get 3% of the total taxes collected to help them do it!

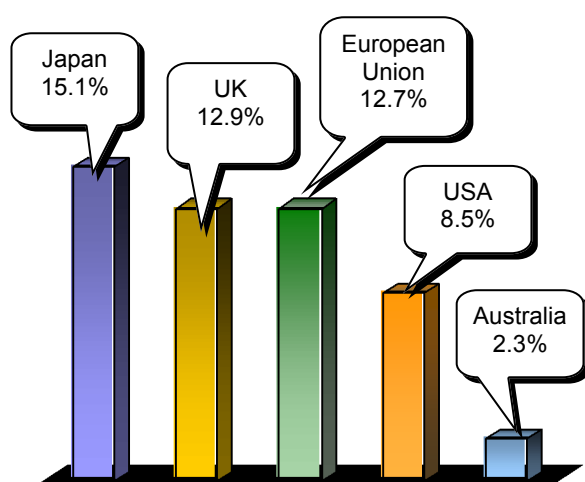


WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Looking after what we've got

What do other countries spend?

Other countries allocate a much greater share of their revenue to local government. The diagram below shows the proportion of Gross Domestic Product that local government receives.



councils having a large amount of infrastructure and not enough money to maintain it. The table below shows the results of the study.

	Sustainable	Vulnerable	Unsustainable
Inner metro	13	4	2
Outer metro	11	4	7
Regional Coastal Urban	3	3	12 (includes GTCC)
Regional Inland Urban	6	3	8
Regional Rural	13	2	8
Total	46	16	37

Are councils sustainable?

Professor Allan conducted a study into the largest 100 councils in NSW to determine their financial health. He classified these councils as either "sustainable" or "unsustainable".

Sustainable Councils were those that could manage their finances and assets over the next 10 years without major increases to rates, fees and charges.

Unsustainable Councils were those who would need to increase their rates and charges by more than double the inflation rate, each year, to effectively manage their finances and assets.

Greater Taree City Council was classified as one of 37 "unsustainable" councils.

The study showed that the majority of regional coastal councils were unsustainable. There are a number of reasons for this, including settlement patterns and levels of service, but the problem boils down to these

A tale of two councils

The problems that regional coastal councils face can be illustrated by comparing Greater Taree City Council with an inner city local government area, such as Kogarah in Sydney's south.

Greater Taree City Council

Population: 48,000
 Total area: 3,753 km²
 Density: 13 people/km²
 Average rate: \$606 (2007/08)
 Highway: 70 km (RTA)
 Regional roads: 102 km
 Other roads: 1594 km



Kogarah Council

Population: 55,861
 Total area: 15.5 km²
 Density: 3,604 people/km²
 Average rate: \$736 (2007/08)
 State roads: 13.2 km (RTA)
 Regional roads: 11.4 km
 Other roads: 159 km



As you can see, although both councils

Looking after what we've got

provide the same type of services, Kogarah is in a more sustainable position. It has a much smaller area to administer, more opportunities for income because of the density of its population, and fewer financial liabilities, because there is less infrastructure to maintain.

A 50-year problem . . .

Professor Allan found that, while all councils in Australia were suffering from failing infrastructure, Greater Taree had one of the most serious problems in the State.

It's a problem that has grown over more than 50 years and there are a number of reasons for it.

One of these is the large amount of infrastructure our council "inherited" when it was amalgamated in 1981. Before that, the area was governed by three local councils, as

well as a county council. With the formation of Greater Taree, all the infrastructure was transferred to the new council's care. This included a series of bridges that were already some 80 years old. Council also took on the operation of the airport, which was previously run by the county council. At the time of the transfer, the airport received federal monies towards its operation. However, this scheme was later abolished by the government.

A lot to look after . . .

Our valley's infrastructure problems are probably best illustrated by the story below. It captures the experience of some of our local "tree-changers" who came from the city to enjoy the country lifestyle of the Manning.

Wendy and David's story

Wendy and David had good jobs in Sydney, but they wanted a better life for their family, so they sold up and moved to the Manning. They got a good price for their home and were surprised at what they could buy - 22 acres of picturesque farmland, about 30 km from Taree. They set about building a large house with wrap-around verandahs, a big entertainment area and a three-bay shed. They couldn't believe how much space there was. Soon the shed was full with a new ride-on mower, a grey "Fergie" tractor, a slasher and a quad bike, along with the fencing gear, general farming equipment and feed, drenches etc for the cattle they'd purchased at the saleyards.

David got a job in Taree after he'd finished building the house and Wendy picked up some part time work in a supermarket, packing the shelves at night. It was an easier life but they earned a lot less than in the city - their household income fell by 50%. They started to notice it first with the groceries and the cost of fuel,

how quickly prices seemed to rise. Then the ride-on and the tractor broke down and the driveway needed new road base and drainage. After three years, all their savings were gone. They stopped going on holidays and cut down on trips to town.

But they couldn't keep up. The fences were in poor condition and David kept patching them as best he could. They couldn't afford to have them replaced and the cattle started to get out onto the road. The neighbours complained about the roaming stock, the fences and the increasing number of weeds on David and Wendy's land. Finally the couple got tired of the arguments and sold all the cattle.

After nine years, Wendy and David put the property on the market. They realised they couldn't afford to keep up the maintenance on the farm and pay for their daughter's uni course and accommodation. They got the best price they could for the land and settled into a villa unit by the seaside - poorer, but wiser for their experience as hobby farmers.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Looking after what we've got

Many people will relate to Wendy and David's experience. But what happened to them on a personal scale is what is happening to our valley on a larger scale. The couple made a few decisions that seriously affected their situation:

1. Focusing on the present

Wendy and David mainly thought about the "now" when buying the farm - what their needs and dreams were at the current moment. They invested considerable in a large home, but didn't anticipate what might change in the future - their income, their family situation etc.

As a city, we've done a similar thing. When our roads and bridges were built earlier this century, they were designed for the cars and trucks of the day. No-one envisaged that trucks would evolve into massive "B Doubles" that would shake our wooden bridges apart. We didn't imagine that the sort of civic buildings we needed in the 1960s wouldn't necessarily be the type we needed in our



The Marlee bridge - now on the "critical" list - was handed over to council's care when the structure was 60 years old.

present technology-focused world. When government decentralisation and economic stimulus schemes came along, we accepted money for new infrastructure because we needed the facilities. We didn't always plan for future maintenance or replacement costs.



The Aquatic Centre - one of the major infrastructure items council has added to its list of responsibilities in more recent times

2. Whole of life costings

While David and Wendy thought about the capital cost of their property, they didn't put too much thought into the "whole of life" cost of what they had created. They built a large house on 22 acres of land that needed a lot of maintenance. They purchased equipment that needed repairs and they invested in livestock that needed regular care and reliable fences to keep them contained. They didn't realise until it was too late - and their savings were gone - the high level of on-cost involved in the property. By that stage the remedial measures (such as cutting back on holidays) weren't enough to stem the tide.

As a city we've done the same. Over the years, we've built a lot of infrastructure - but we haven't implemented a system of whole of life costing to determine if we can afford to maintain it all. Often, new infrastructure comes as a "gift" in the form of a government grant to build something the community needs or wants. Unfortunately, there is no ongoing government money to maintain what is built through grant funding. The cost of these "gifts" passes on to the community for the next generation.

Because of the high cost of maintaining their areas, Australian councils generally haven't been able to put large amounts of money aside to fund maintenance in the future.

Looking after what we've got

They also haven't excelled at strategically managing their assets. Until recently, the law has only required councils to plan up to three years ahead.

3. Restricted income

David and Wendy were so keen to enjoy their rural lifestyle that they built the biggest house they could and invested in equipment, livestock etc that they ultimately couldn't afford. They simply didn't earn enough to support their lifestyle and had few options of increasing their income because of their situation (they lived a good distance from town, wages are lower, unemployment is high).

As a city, we have similar problems. We planned a series of diverse urban settlements and invested in infrastructure to make each of those settlements more liveable. The result is multiple swimming pools, libraries, parks and playing fields and a large network of roads that, ultimately, we can't afford to maintain because our income is limited.

Professor Allan found that local government in Australia has consistently been underfunded, however councils in NSW face extra challenges because their income is limited through the rate pegging system. While this might sound like a good idea to those who have to pay the rates, at the end of the day, rate-pegging means there is not enough money to fund the things the community wants and needs.

Greater Taree has been reluctant to raise its rates because of the low income base of our community. Our residential rates are currently 17% cheaper than comparable councils.

In theory, lower rates should result in fewer services and less infrastructure, but be-



One of our local rural roads - now at the stage where it needs major repairs.

cause there has been pressure from the community and other spheres of government over the years to provide more facilities, we haven't always cut our garment to the cloth.

4. Cutting corners

When David and Wendy realised they were running into difficulties, they started to cut corners and do "temporary fixes" on the fences to keep them going. Ultimately, this only made matters worse because they were throwing good money after bad. The fences needed to be replaced. They also neglected to maintain the paddocks because they couldn't afford to keep the weeds down. Ultimately, this made the property less viable.

As a city, we've also tried to spread the dollar too thinly, particularly with our roadworks. The result has been poorer quality roads that don't stand the test of the elements. But, because we don't have enough money to rebuild the roads, we have to keep patching them up as best we can. Eventually, things just get beyond repair.

Running out of time . . .

A growing problem . . .

In 2008, Professor Allan calculated that some 23% of our City's infrastructure (\$148 million worth) had reached the point where it needed major reconstruction or replacement.

He also predicted that this percentage would continue to increase over the years if we continued to under-invest in maintenance. The figure has now grown to about \$170 million worth of infrastructure and we are starting to see major examples of what Professor Allan predicted - such as the recent problems with the Marlee and Duffs bridges.

There are currently 34 bridges on the "urgent repairs" list. Each year, there is only enough money to fix or replace one or two of them.

If nothing changes, then in 20 years' time our infrastructure backlog will have grown to \$422 million and 70% of infrastructure will be at a point where it needs major repair or replacement.

This essentially means that most of our communities will be isolated - the roads and critical bridges that link these communities will be gone. We won't be able to get supplies delivered to our supermarkets, collect produce from our farms, or get the kids to school on the bus.

At 70% infrastructure failure, our valley would come to a standstill.



Tipperary Rd Bridge - one of the bridges on the critical list

Financially unsustainable

Professor Allan also found that Council was not financially sustainable if it continued at its current level of income.

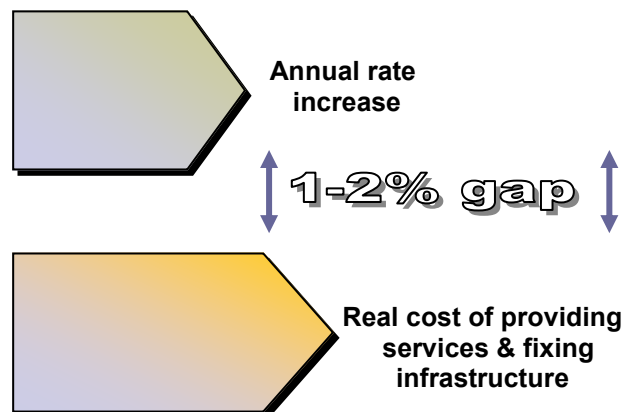
Council has since undertaken more detailed financial modelling and believes that the "crunch time" will arrive even sooner than Professor Allan predicted.

At present, Council just manages to cover its bills and is struggling to keep pace with rising costs.

Each year, the rate peg limits rate increases to a maximum of about 3.5%. However, the actual cost of running a local council and carrying out major infrastructure works increases by more than 3.5% per year.

Australian Bureau of Statistics figures for local government indicate that the real annual increase in day-to-day operational costs for councils is 4.4% and the real annual increase in capital costs is 5.5%.

So the amount we collect in rates each year does not keep pace with the amount it costs for the services and road works council provides.



This is a situation that most people experience on a smaller scale at home. While the "official inflation rate" that is announced each quarter is around 3%, that does not reflect the reality of how much our groceries, petrol, electricity prices etc have

Running out of time . . .

really gone up during the quarter.

Like most households, Council can help to bridge the gap by reducing its spending and trying to make savings. But there is only so much that can be done before this starts to impact on services.

The current state of our infrastructure is a direct result of cost cutting and under-spending over the years. Further reductions would speed up the rate at which our roads and bridges will ultimately fail.

While Council can still keep its head above water at the moment, any major infrastructure failures could seriously affect its future viability. For example, the recent failure of the airport runway has meant that Council has to borrow substantially to pay for the repairs. There is a limit to how much Council can borrow on its current income. There may come a time where it won't have the money to fix major infrastructure problems and will not be able to borrow further funds.

Could efficiencies help?

Many people say that Council should "just be more efficient" to save money. While it's true that all organisations can become more efficient, these savings alone will not be enough.

For example, Council currently collects some \$20 million in rates, per year. It needs to spend all of that money on infrastructure maintenance, just to stop the problem getting worse - that doesn't include rebuilding the roads and bridges on the critical list, or providing services such as libraries, health inspections and building assessment.

Although Council can become more efficient and is working towards that end, there will still never be enough to go around when it comes to addressing our infrastructure backlog.

As a follow-on from Professor Allan's review of its financial situation, Council also commissioned a Corporate Overheads Study from

an independent assessor.

This study was designed to show if Council was over-staffed compared to industry standards. The study showed that GTCC is currently running leaner than similar sized councils.

This doesn't mean that there aren't savings to be made through improving work practices, but it does give us an indication that the potential savings available through this will not be sufficient to make a dent in our infrastructure backlog.

As part of its move towards greater efficiency, Council has recently started a comprehensive review and restructure of the organisation. Part of this work will be a full review of the services it offers and the assets it currently maintains. The review will identify any potential savings that could be made through changing service delivery arrangements or rationalizing assets.

Although there are savings to be made through "working harder and smarter", at the end of the day, the equation is fairly simple: Council needs to increase its income if it is going to increase the amount of resources it can devote to fixing our infrastructure. Otherwise, the state of our roads and bridges will continue to decline.



SECTION TWO

WHERE DO WE WANT TO BE?



Telling our community's story

When Greater Taree City Council made a commitment to prepare a long-term plan for the community, earlier this year, it also made a commitment to involve as many people as possible in the consultation process. This included family groups, school children, older residents, government agencies, business leaders, farmers, community organisations and our neighbouring councils.

Phase One of the Community Engagement Process - Imagining the Manning - was completed on June 12. This discussion paper marks the start of Phase 2 of the program.

24 opportunities to have a say

Phase One of the program focused on two questions: "Where are we now?" and "Where do we want to be?" It aimed to capture community perceptions of the Manning, what makes it special, how residents and others perceived the area and what their aspirations are for the future.

A variety of engagement methods were used, with the main focus being on "face to face" contact, to allow open discussion and questioning.

The program was delivered over an eight-week period, encompassing some 24 engagement activities. These included:



Floating ideas at the launch event

- Seniors Week luncheon
- Youth and Politics Forum
- Official program launch event
- Follow-up launch session
- Home and Lifestyle Expo
- Bonnie Wingham Scottish Festival
- Envirofair
- Future of Agriculture Forum
- Economic Futures Forum
- Imagine the Future community survey
- Planning Focus Group for State Agencies
- Meeting with State and Federal politicians
- Elands community meeting
- Wingham community meeting
- Wherrol Flat community meeting
- Krambach community meeting
- Harrington community meeting
- Old Bar community meeting



Students from Manning Valley Anglican College present their ideas for the future to Councillors

Telling our community's story

- Mt George community meeting
- Projects with Manning Valley Anglican College students
- Projects with Old Bar Public School students
- Community Safety survey
- Planning Focus meeting with Gloucester Council, Great Lakes Council and Mid-Coast Water.
- Discussions with Premiers Department representatives

There was also considerable media coverage of the events and contributions to talk-back radio, letters to the editor etc.

The program resulted in face-to-face contact with more than 1200 people.

Participants were invited to fill out the community survey form, make a written submission, or "float their ideas" on the river by writing suggestions on a cut-out boat.

There were also ideas sheets on offer for general written comments and "soapbox" forums were utilised to capture comments on particular themes.

While many took advantage of these opportunities, the majority of people preferred to have a discussion about their ideas. Staff recorded notes from the discussions and meetings and added them to the collection of written submissions. The results of Phase One are shown on the diagram at right:



Face to face contact
1200



Community surveys
550



Written submissions
15



Recorded comments
1600



"Float your ideas"
228



What did people want for our future?

Phase One of the consultation collected more than 1600 written comments from individuals, gatherings and workshops. As expected, these comments covered a wide range of subjects, with many at opposite ends of the spectrum.

For example, some favoured population growth through increased development, while others believed that population limits should be set.

Some comments agreed on a particular theme, such as “protecting the Manning River” but there was great variance in what respondents meant by those comments.

For some, protecting the river meant keeping its entrances open, for others, it meant leaving them closed.

Similarly, while many respondents called for more cycleways to be constructed, there was great variation in their reasoning for this. For some, it was about reducing environmental impacts, for others, about promoting healthy communities or increasing tourism opportunities.

Despite the differences, by the end of Phase One, a number of clear themes had begun to emerge.

These themes will form the foundation for the Manning Valley Community Plan.



Filling out the survey at the Home and Lifestyle Expo



Discussing ideas on Community Wellbeing at the Launch event

Emerging themes

- *A place to be proud of* - capturing the community's sense of identity and its aspirations for change
- *A sense of community* - reflecting the value that all respondents placed on their community and the “country atmosphere” of the area
- *Moving around* - acknowledging the strong focus on transport and infrastructure throughout the engagement
- *Respecting our Environment* - reflecting the emphasis respondents placed on the Manning's natural heritage
- *Places for living* - capturing aspects of the built environment and recreational facilities
- *A healthy economy* - reflecting the strong emphasis on generating employment and strengthening the economy.

The themes are explored in more detail on the following pages. Results of the community surveys undertaken during the consultation are at the back of this document.

A place to be proud of . . .

One of the strongest messages to emerge from Phase One of the community engagement process was that people loved living in the Manning Valley and really valued a sense of community.

There were strong views expressed about the need to hold on to “country values” and the friendly nature of the community. A number of comments focused on the need to promote opportunities for people to be involved in their community and to contribute to its wellbeing.

But there were also concerns about the image of the area, particularly Taree, the apparent lack of civic pride and the sense of being seen as “a \$2 town”. A common theme amongst the comments was that people were tired of reading negative news stories and were worried about the impact these had on residents and visitors.

Many comments also focused on the poor state of the city’s roads. They saw this not only as a traffic problem, but as a message to visitors and locals alike that the town was not doing well.

There was a particular emphasis on the entrances to the city, the state of Martin bridge, the general appearance of the main shopping centres and the state of the roads leading into Taree from the main urban centres, such as Old Bar, Hallidays Point and Wingham.

Although there was considerable discussion about the lack of civic pride and concern with community attitudes, there were very few solutions offered by those participating in the consultation.

There was general consensus that “someone should do something” but no examples of successful models or programs from other communities.

“We’re tired of being seen as a \$2 tracksuit town, people should be proud of where they live. There are some wonderful people here”

Comment from launch event

“I came back to Taree after a few years away. I had told my wife how great this place was and we were looking forward to coming home. But as we drove into town, with all the potholes in the road and everything looking untidy I was so ashamed. I don’t know what happened to the place.”

Comment from Bonnie Wingham festival

“We’ve got some of the most amazing, intelligent, creative people in our city, but we never hear about them - we don’t celebrate what we do, what we achieve. We just focus on the bad stuff.”

Comment from launch event

What’s in a name?

The name of our local government area also drew a reasonable amount of comment during the engagement program.

The general feeling was that the name “Greater Taree” was not a true reflection of the area (though some favoured retaining the Taree name because of its indigenous heritage). The most popular alternative name was the Manning Valley. This issue could be pursued further, with a view to holding a referendum on the name at the next local government election.

A sense of community

There was a wide range of comments concerning our sense of community and the value that people placed on family, friends and community life.

Many respondents wanted to preserve the “country atmosphere” of the region, where neighbours helped each other and community members were generally more friendly and engaging than they were in larger cities. A number of contributors suggested strengthening opportunities for volunteering to allow people to connect with their community and to utilise the skills and experience of older residents.

Public art and cultural activities also emerged as significant, with an interest in place-based activities in local villages and suggestions for sculptures and other artworks along the Manning River.

“We are searching for connection. We want connection to people, ourselves, our family, our community, our friends - to food, to place, to life. We want connection to all that it means to live . . . ”

Written submission

When I was sick, I just couldn't believe how many wonderful people came to help us. We had only just moved here, but everyone was so kind. It wasn't like this in our old community. I'm so grateful that we came here.

Comment at community meeting

There is a well-worn track in this community that leads from the hospital, to Centrelink, to the court house and back around again. We've got to find a way to break that cycle. Building bigger hospitals and police stations is not the answer.

Comment to council staff



A number of respondents suggested establishing outdoor areas for the performing arts, such as music shelters or an open air stage.

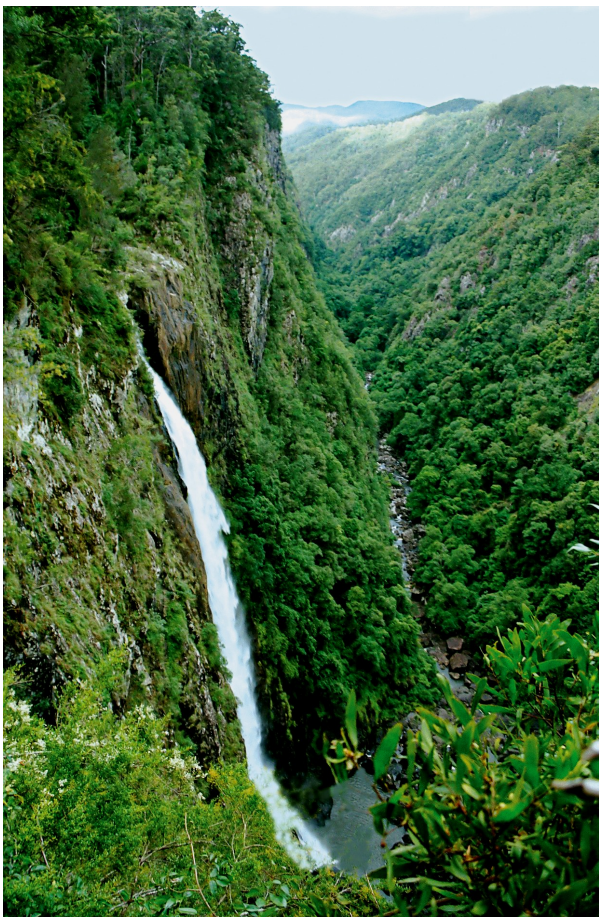
There were also calls for more activities in the CBD during weekends and evenings and more social activities for young people.

Many comments focused on relationships with the indigenous community and the need to develop an understanding and respect for culture. Some respondents suggested establishing an Aboriginal cultural centre for the Manning. Others highlighted the need to provide more education and employment opportunities for indigenous people.

Other respondents focused on improving services to children and there were a number of submissions calling for the establishment of a neighbourhood centre in Taree.

There was also general acknowledgement of socio-economic problems within the community and various perceptions about community safety. While, statistically, the area's crime rate is quite low, there appeared to be a perception that “it was not safe on the streets” because of very visible anti-social behaviour in the CBD area.

Respecting our environment



One of the strongest messages from Phase One of the engagement process was the high value that people placed on the natural environment of the area. It was the reason they came here to live - and the reason they stayed. Many people identified with natural icons such as the Manning River, the escarpment or the beaches as giving them their “sense of home” and community identity.

While most respondents signified that the environment was important and “should be preserved and protected” there were few detailed suggestions as to how this might be achieved.

The question of sustainability was addressed in a large number of submissions, with some

“The river and the valley are the essential focus of our community. Our relationships with the river underpin community life, through social, economic and recreational activities and through the intangible sense of belonging and place. The Manning is our river and we are its people . . .”

Written submission

respondents favouring the establishment of alternative power sources, such as wind and wave energy within the local government area.

Self sufficiency - embracing a variety of sustainable farming practices, and increasing the availability of locally produced food also figured highly in the various comments received.

There were also general comments about the need to promote environmentally sustainable development and to reduce the “footprint” of various public activities.

Generally, people wanted to learn more about the environment and to be actively involved in programs to protect it, or share knowledge about it.

The Manning River was a key focus of many submissions, though opinions on the state, and future of, the river varied widely.

There were some who saw it as essential that the entrances to the river should be opened through dredging, or construction of training walls - while others saw it as essential that the entrances remained closed until natural processes dictated otherwise.

One common area of agreement, however, was the need to monitor and improve water quality in the river and to open opportunities for people to “connect” with the river in many ways.

Moving around

The state of the local roads featured strongly in comments at all engagement events.

There was a particular focus on major roads, including the entrances into Taree, the Taree CBD and the main connecting roads from urban centres, such as Hallidays Point, Old Bar, Harrington and Wingham.

Many respondents expressed the view that “the roads weren’t being fixed properly”.

The Martin Bridge also attracted a considerable amount of comment, with some residents believing that Council was responsible for the bridge.

Most comments related to the state of the bridge and the need to repaint it. There were a few suggestions to paint the bridge in indigenous designs.

The question of whether a second bridge across the Manning would be required was also raised by a few respondents.

Another popular theme throughout the engagement program was the need for more cycleways. This was raised at all engagement events, however the reasons behind the request were varied.

Some saw cycleways as a way of reducing environmental impacts. Others saw them as a way of encouraging active living and improv-



“A lot of elderly people in the outlying areas have handed in their licences and the only way for them to get to town is on the local school bus. The bus is noisy and crowded and they worry about tripping over the school bags . . .”

Comment at launch event

“We need to give leadership in making our communities less dependent upon motor vehicles. To do this, we must provide safe, user-friendly alternatives

Written submission

“Just fix the bloody roads!”

Comment at launch event

ing public health. Some could see tourism potential in providing scenic bike tracks along the coast. There was also variance in where people thought the cycleways should be. Most respondents saw them as a way of moving around a particular community, while others favoured establishing longer links between centres, such as a cycleway between Taree and Wingham.

Public transport, or the lack of it, also featured strongly in comments throughout the consultation. This was a particular issue for elderly residents in the outlying areas.

The main requirement was to link the outlying areas with Taree, however some respondents also saw a need for transport around the main centre as well.

Places for living

There were a wide variety of comments about the built environment and future development in the area. Some respondents wanted to see slow and steady growth, others wanted to actively encourage more development in the area and some wanted to put the “no vacancy” sign out and limit population growth.

Although there were varying views about the rate of development, there was a general preference for “low-scale” development (under three storeys) and larger sized housing lots.

Many respondents said it was important to provide a variety of housing styles, particularly as the population aged, so that people could remain in the area through the various cycles of their life.

There was also strong support for maintaining the separate identities of the various villages and towns. Some respondents suggested doing village plans for each place to help residents capitalise on each village’s identity.

Generally, respondents appreciated the many housing and lifestyle choices the area offered through its various settlements, though there was some acknowledgement that this had created a financial burden for the community with a large network of infrastructure and duplicated services.

“What Taree needs is one decent building!”

Comment at launch event

“We don’t want high rise buildings - we don’t want to look like Forster or the Gold Coast. People come here for holidays because it reminds them of when they were kids, when the world was less complicated. ”

Comment at Bonnie Wingham festival

“Welcome to Taree - cross a rusty bridge and have rocks thrown at you! We’ve got to fix the entrance ways to town!”

Written submission

The role of Taree as a regional centre was also explored. While most respondents felt Taree had the basis for being a regional centre, there was concern about the image of the town, the poor state of its entrances and the need for urban renewal to attract more people back to the central districts.

The importance of the airport was acknowledged in achieving regional status and there were also many calls to establish a university in the area to strengthen its regional status.

Recreational opportunities also featured in many responses, with a number focusing on the need to provide regional sporting facilities.



A healthy economy

One of the key themes emerging from the engagement program was the need to create a strong, diverse economic base for the Manning Valley.

Respondents varied in their views on how this should be achieved, but all agreed that jobs were important, and the availability of employment was fundamental to the region's future.

Some favoured lower-impact industries such as home-based businesses, educational facilities and encouraging government departments to relocate to the area.

Others saw a future in manufacturing and larger scale industry, while a number of respondents favoured a focus on "environmental industries".

There were a number of innovative suggestions to encourage employment, including establishment of a conservatorium of music or a "finishing school" for young people.

It was acknowledged that facilities, such as the airport, educational institutions, the security of the region's water supply and the availability of suitable land would be important to developing the Manning's economic future.

Many respondents raised the issue of tourism and the role it would play in the Manning's future. There were varying views on this subject. Some felt that tourism should be low-key and provide a supplement to other economic activities. Others felt that tourism should play a more dominant role with the area actively seeking to increase visitor numbers.

There was also considerable interest in the future of agriculture in the region. While most considered that broad scale beef and

"People will only stay here if there are jobs or if they are free to create their own work where they live"

Written submission

"We've got to change this "cargo culture" mentality - solve our problems locally, fund locally, don't rely on government sources"

Launch event comment

We should encourage people to grow a variety of crops and animals and process and sell them here. This will naturally create jobs.

Comment from Elands community meeting

dairy farming would continue to play an important role, there was also interest in developing a broader range of horticultural pursuits.

The concept of "local food" was widely canvassed and the possibility of establishing "farmgate" trails and regular supplies of locally grown products.

There was a general view from respondents that the area should be actively seeking to attract new economic interests by promoting the advantages of the area.

“The Big Four”

The first phase of the Community Engagement Program has captured a wide range of views and aspirations from the community, but there is one strong feeling that emerges from the many meetings and discussions - people love the Manning Valley and they believe in its future.

Those who took the time to respond to the program were reasonable and realistic in their views. There were no “wish lists” or way out schemes - people asked simply for the things that were important to community life and important to their future.

There were four main messages that emerged from the consultation process:

1 Respect the environment

It was clear that the natural environment is important to the community - it's why they chose to live here and why they choose to stay. Residents want to see the environment protected and enhanced, but would like more information and guidance on how this can be achieved.

2 Fix the roads!

The state of the roads is important to everyone- not just for practical reasons, but for the message it sends to the outside world about how well our community is doing. Town entrances and major link roads received a higher priority from most respondents.

3 Employment opportunities

Employment and a broad-based diverse economy is essential to a positive, sustainable future for the Manning. Although there was a variety of views on how this could be achieved, all agreed that jobs and education were fundamental to building strong communities.

4 A sense of hope

People wanted a more positive future – to be proud of where they lived and optimistic about the opportunities ahead. There was real concern about the negative images that have surrounded our community and a genuine hope that we could move forward together to build a better future.

“I am heartened by the appreciation people expressed in the beauty of the Valley ... but more importantly ... I heard how many people in this community have a strong sense of a positive future...and believe that it will be healthy, inclusive, creative and compassionate. Many people indicated a willingness to contribute ... not only their time and energy ... but their ideas and dreams.

This will be very important going forward. This Council and community will only become more sustainable by working together ”

*Gerard José
General Manager, Greater Taree City Council*





SECTION THREE

HOW DO WE GET THERE?



How do we make it all happen?

Our community has sent a strong message that it believes in the future of the Manning Valley and wants to see positive change. But we all understand that it can't happen overnight.

The problems that currently face our community have developed over a period of more than 50 years - we expect that it will take at least 20 years to really turn things around.

To move forward as a community we need to collectively invest in our future - not just financially, but intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. There are things that both Council and the community can do to make this happen and some of these ideas are explored in the following pages.

The first step

The first step towards a better future is to put the Manning Valley Community Plan together. This plan will outline the community's key objectives for the next 20 years. It will form the basis of all future plans that council prepares and will help inform State government planning for our region.

Councils will now be required by law to report on how well they have delivered the long-term objectives outlined in the Community Plan.

The ideas from the first round of community engagement earlier this year have given us the basic shape for the Community Plan.

Your response to this discussion paper will help us to further refine future directions for the community, so that a draft plan will be ready for public exhibition in March next year.

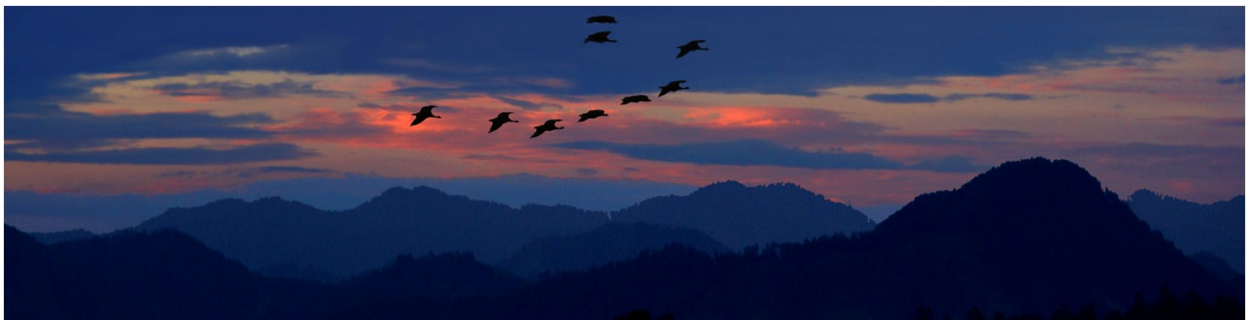
The next step

The next step towards the future is to think about how we can resource all the things we want. There is no point in planning for things if we don't have the capacity to deliver them or we simply can't afford them.

The following pages outline some paths that we could take in this regard. None of the paths are easy. They require some tough decisions. Some things will need to be provided by the community, others by state and federal funds, or opportunities through private enterprise. As a community, we will need to decide how much we're prepared to pay, or what we're prepared to miss out on.

This discussion paper provides an opportunity to put your views on this subject. There will also be a series of community meetings and on-line opportunities to contribute to the discussions.

Greater Taree City Council also has some tough decisions to make about its future. Council understands that it needs to change to strengthen community confidence in our capacity to deliver. Council is committed to making that change and the final page of this document includes a message from the General Manager, outlining these plans.



Respecting our environment

Manning residents have sent a strong message that they value the environment and want to see it protected and enhanced.

There are a number of key directions that we can take over the next 20 years.

1. Respect the Manning River

Our community has made it clear that it respects and values the Manning River for many reasons - environmental, economic, social and spiritual. We need to be mindful of this as we move forward into the future, with the understanding that we won't always all agree on what is best for the river.

There are many stakeholders involved in the future management of the Manning - the Catchment Management Authority, MidCoast Water, Council, State agencies, local aquaculture industries, farmers, recreational fishers and "boaties" to name a few. There is a web of approvals, consultation and consent that needs to be navigated to move any projects forward.

One way of solving this would be to develop a whole of river catchment plan. This would allow all the stakeholders to openly discuss the future of the river and address issues such as dredging, irrigation, managing the entrances and protecting water quality that have been such a bone of contention over the years.

The plan would provide a "roadmap" for future management strategies and projects and could help our community in applying for special funding for river projects.

Council also has plans to make the river more accessible to the community. It has recently filled in the old Taree Pool and will be developing future options for the public use of the land. Plans for the future include a cycleway along the Manning, starting at the old pool site and winding its way along Queen Elizabeth Park, across Browns Creek to the Taree recreation ground and aquatic centre and, ultimately, on to Cundletown.



The perched freshwater wetland at Cattai - Council is working with a team of volunteers to restore this site.

2. Protect and restore sensitive areas

This process is currently underway with the Cattai Wetlands project. Council, on behalf of our community, purchased a 486 ha property near Coopernook in 2003, with the aim of restoring the ecological balance of the land. It has since expanded the site to 592 ha, following acquisition of adjoining land.

The property had been a wetland area in the earlier part of the century, but had been drained so that the land could be used for farming. This had resulted in acid sulfates leaching into the waterway and the loss of the many native animals, birds and plants that relied on the wetland for their survival. Over the years, Council and volunteer workers have been painstakingly restoring the wetland area, providing new habitat for birds and animals and addressing the acid sulfate problems. Council aims to continue this project in future and to ultimately provide a place where locals and visitors can learn about this special environment and the connections between this land and our local indigenous culture.

We are currently working with members of the Aboriginal community on the possibility of establishing a cultural centre on the site.

3. Encourage sustainable development

The Manning's coastal areas currently house

Respecting our environment

Over the past five years, more than half of all new residential subdivisions were located in the coastal villages. This type of development can place significant pressure on sensitive environmental areas.

Impacts include weed invasion, loss of food and habitat for native species, higher rates of soil erosion, stormwater pollution, predation of native wildlife by domestic animals and damage to habitat through recreational activities.

Our challenge for the future is to find a balance between increasing population and protection of the environment.

One of the main methods of achieving this will be through local land use planning instruments, such as the Local Environment Plan (LEP) and Development Control Plans, ensuring appropriate zoning of land, providing buffer zones to protect areas of high value biodiversity and encouraging environmentally sensitive development design.

4. Protect biodiversity

Our region is home to 86 threatened fauna species, 38 threatened flora species and nine endangered ecological communities. Preserving these species for future generations will require sensitive land management,



particularly the management of vegetation. Over the years, there has been extensive land clearing, both in rural and urban areas, resulting in increasing loss of habitat.

Approximately 70% of vegetated land in our area is currently under private ownership. This means that preserving biodiversity in our region for generations to come will require a working partnership between private and public landholders.

5. Plan for climate change

At this stage, we do not have a clear picture of how climate change will affect the Manning. However, we do expect significant sea level rises to occur in the next 100 years. Our council subscribes to a regional environmental group, which is currently preparing projected sea level rise figures for our area. When these are finalised in early 2010, we will undertake a community consultation program to discuss the impacts of the projections and how they should be incorporated into our Coastline Management Plan and land use plans.

6. Consider the coastal erosion issue

Coastal erosion and the effects of climate change are a hot topic in our community and there are many and varied views on what should be done. It is also unclear as to what role federal, state and local governments will play in the future management of these issues.

At this stage, Council is not in a position to commit community funding to large scale coastal management projects - our latest expert advice suggests that these would be ineffective in resolving erosion issues. We need to move forward cautiously, relying on the best expert advice we can obtain and aligning our direction with advice from State and Federal Government.

Respecting our environment

7. Reduce energy consumption

Council and many local businesses are currently working on a state-wide program to reduce energy consumption in their operations. In the next 20 years, our community will need to explore access to alternative energy sources. Our local climate isn't suitable for establishing wind farms, but we can explore other possibilities, such as provision of natural gas and solar initiatives. As a community, we can all take responsibility for reducing our household energy consumption. There are currently a number of government programs available to assist and new technologies are likely to be available in coming years.

8. Reduce reliance on motor vehicles

Reducing the use of cars is a real challenge for the Manning because of the distances between our various urban centres and rural settlements. Public transport options are also limited and it is not expected that these will increase substantially with our current population levels. In the longer term, we can help to reduce vehicle movements through better urban design - for example encouraging different styles of development in Taree, such as residential options in the CBD. We can also provide more cycleways and walkways to encourage people to move around their town or village without the use of cars.

Ideas for discussion . . .

What the community can do

- Get involved in local volunteer projects to protect and restore sensitive environmental areas.
- Participate in community environmental programs, such as recycling and Earth Hour.
- Reduce the amount of energy and water your household uses
- Participate in partnerships to protect native vegetation on privately owned land
- Think about the environment when purchasing new products - eg energy consumption, packaging and disposal
- Use alternative transport means, such as cycling and walking wherever possible.

What Council can do

- Take the lead on protecting areas of great environmental significance
- Encourage sustainable development within our region
- Bring stakeholders together to develop the Manning River Catchment Plan and implement the parts of the plan that are within Council's control
- Develop local projects to improve access to the river, such as cycleways and other recreational facilities

- Continue to seek expert advice on the impacts of climate change and coastal erosion and develop a Coastline Management Plan for the entire local government area coastline.
- Continue to lobby higher levels of government to provide leadership and funding on climate change issues.
- Develop strategies to reduce reliance on vehicles, through better urban design and provision of cycleways/walkways.
- Continue programs to reduce energy usage in community buildings and facilities
- Develop community education and participation programs to encourage involvement in environmental initiatives

What other stakeholders can do

- Support the Manning River Catchment Plan and participate in its implementation
- Provide funding for environmental projects
- Provide leadership in addressing regional or national environmental issues

For more discussion ideas, see Council's latest State of the Environment Report, available on the GTCC website

Fixing our roads and bridges

While the focus of recent community discussions has been on our Valley's roads and bridges, it is important to remember that our infrastructure network also contains substantial drainage works, parks, sports fields, footpaths and public buildings. All of this infrastructure needs to be effectively maintained to keep people safe, provide important connections between communities and opportunities for recreation and social activities.

What is the "backlog"?

Professor Allan's report looked at the condition of our major asset groups and the percentage of each group that has fallen below an acceptable level of repair. These works were classified as "backlog" works. In deciding what was an acceptable level, the condition of the asset was rated between 1 and 10, with 1 being brand new and 10 where the asset had completely failed. In between 1 and 10 there is a level where the asset has deteriorated so much that it needs major repairs to bring it back to an acceptable level. For roads, this happens at condition level 8. Everything in worse condition than an "8" is classed as backlog work. The picture below shows an example of a road at Condition Level 9. This road would be classed as "backlog". The infrastructure study found that nearly



30% of our roads were below Condition Level 8. This represents the biggest part of our infrastructure backlog.



Why are the roads deteriorating?

Every asset has a natural deterioration cycle. If you buy a new car, for example, you expect to carry out basic maintenance and servicing on the vehicle to keep it in good condition. If you can't afford to do repairs or maintenance, the vehicle's performance will be affected. A similar principle applies to roads. Sealed roads should have a lifespan of at least 40 years, but, of course they don't stay in "as new" condition for very long. Heavy traffic, rain, heat and flooding take their toll. If the road doesn't receive regular care it will start to decline, slowly at first, but more rapidly after the first 15 years. If nothing is done, it will be lucky to reach its 40th year.

But, if regular maintenance is carried out at key intervals, the life of the road can be extended well beyond the 40 year period. There are critical stages in the life of the road where it needs preventative maintenance works and resealing of the surface to keep it in good condition. If these works aren't carried out at the right time, the road will go into decline. Eventually it will reach the stage where expensive reconstruction work is required. Unfortunately, many of the roads Council inherited at the time of amalgamation had not received the regular maintenance required during their life cycle. Since then, Council has not had sufficient funds to keep up with key preventative maintenance requirements.

What's happening with our bridges?

Bridges also have a natural deterioration cycle.

Fixing our roads and bridges

cle and this can be accelerated by heavy traffic loads. Many of our city's bridges were designed in the 1930s and 40s and had already substantially deteriorated when council inherited them in the 1980s. There are currently more than 200 bridges within our local government area. Over the past years, Council has received some government funding to help replace some of the smaller timber bridges with concrete structures. However, there was not enough to replace some of the larger wooden structures. There are currently 34 bridges on the "critical" list. The cost of replacing these bridges ranges from \$80,000 for smaller crossings to \$2 million for the larger structures.



What's happening with our other assets?

Apart from roads and bridges, our community also has an extensive network of assets such as stormwater drains, footpaths, parks and reserves, signage, swimming pools, community buildings and the airport. Although these don't represent a large proportion of the infrastructure backlog, they all require regular maintenance to prevent their condition from deteriorating.

Some of our community buildings include club houses and change rooms for sports groups, community halls and meeting places. These are important facilities to retain and



Community buildings, such as the Wingham Town Hall, also require substantial maintenance commitments.

Council is reviewing its management of the buildings to ensure that those who use them contribute to their upkeep and care.

What can be done to fix our roads?

There are three things that can be done to help address our community's infrastructure problems:

1. Increase our investment in infrastructure maintenance
2. Improve the way we build and maintain our infrastructure
3. Improve the way we plan for our infrastructure.

Increasing investment

Professor Allan estimated that we are currently under spending on community infrastructure by some \$20 million per year - this equates to our city's entire rates income at the moment.

To improve infrastructure maintenance, we need to raise extra funds. Some of this can be done through borrowings, but we also need to raise extra revenue through rates.

At the end of this discussion paper there are three options for addressing our infrastructure problem and an opportunity for residents to indicate which option they would prefer.

Fixing our roads and bridges

Improving techniques

There are always ways to improve asset building and maintenance techniques and Council is currently undertaking a comprehensive review program to assess the way it carries out its works and plan improvements. This will include a review of the way we build and fix our roads and the way we inspect and assess our bridges.

To increase the amount of maintenance that is carried out on our local infrastructure will require an increase in resources, both human and financial.

Council will be considering possibilities for out-sourcing some of its additional maintenance or construction works to local providers.

Improved planning

To improve our city's infrastructure outlook, it is important that we take a longer-term view of asset management, including whole of life costings and maintenance plans.

As part of its improvement program, Council will be introducing a long-term asset management strategy and developing maintenance plans for each class of asset. This will ensure that, given sufficient resources, our community's assets will be effectively managed in the future.

The asset management strategy will be linked to the priorities in our long-term community plan and funded through a 10-year financial management strategy.

Ideas for discussion . . .

What the community can do

- Invest in our local infrastructure by supporting one of the resourcing options at the end of this discussion paper
- Be involved in infrastructure issues and work with Council and other stakeholders to find solutions
- Help to care for our city's infrastructure by reporting any incidents of vandalism and encouraging others to respect community facilities.
- Be involved in volunteering projects to help care for our local parks and buildings
- Support local facilities, such as our libraries, the entertainment centre, art gallery and our swimming pools.

What Council can do

- Improve our long-term planning for asset management
- Improve our asset maintenance and construction techniques

- Develop and implement a comprehensive program to help stop asset deterioration and address our infrastructure backlog
- Explore new technologies and techniques in asset management
- Involve the community in asset management issues.
- Work with other councils to explore opportunities for shared resources
- Lobby higher levels of government for additional funding for community assets.

What other stakeholders can do

- Increase State and Federal funding for asset management and extend the guidelines of existing programs to include repairs of existing assets, rather than just construction of new facilities.
- Ensure that State assets within the Manning, such as the Martin Bridge, are adequately maintained.

Providing employment opportunities

The future of our community will depend on our capacity to build a strong, broad-based local economy. To move forward, we need jobs, income and educational opportunities for our people. While the Manning has always relied on its agricultural industries - and will continue to do so in the future - we need to diversify our economic activity, so the area can better withstand global financial pressures.

There are a number of growing trends within our local economy. These include:

- An increase in service industries, particularly knowledge-based industries
- An increase in retail trade
- A higher proportion of employment in health and community services
- A stronger trend towards home-based business

Finding the right balance

Our challenge for the future is to find a balance between the need to encourage investment and the need to preserve the things that our community values - our environment and our way of life. High density developments and heavy industries may provide jobs, but they are not in keeping with the directions and priorities our community has identified for the future.

To help find the right balance, council proposes two broad directions for the future:

1. Support and strengthen existing businesses
2. Capitalise on emerging opportunities, such as enviro industries, knowledge-based services and local food production.

Strengthening what we have

The Manning is home to a wide variety of businesses - though not all of them have a visible "shop front". Agricultural and home-



based industries are scattered throughout the valley and contribute substantially to the local economy. There is also a strong base of small businesses (up to 10 employees). The local construction industry also provides a sound economic base, however, it is vulnerable to downturns in development, such as those currently being experienced across NSW. To build a stronger future, we need to strengthen and support our existing business base. This could include:

- Providing opportunities for local businesses to contribute to long-term economic planning for the region
- Developing local training programs to ensure businesses have access to skilled employees
- Developing local programs to promote traineeships and opportunities for Indigenous employment
- Providing mentoring and support programs to small businesses, including "business incubators"
- Encouraging residents to support local enterprise and buy locally produced products.
- Developing opportunities for agricultural industries to diversify their products and participate in local "farmgate trails" and farmers markets.

Providing employment opportunities

- Providing opportunities for shared resources, such as a commercial grade “community kitchen” where small businesses can prepare their products.

Capitalising on opportunities

The Manning Valley has a number of opportunities emerging which could help to strengthen our local economy.

These include:

- Increasing interest in enviro-based industries. There is substantial land available in the Manning for activities such as carbon sequestration. A number of regional areas have already capitalised on these opportunities by forming alliances with city areas who want to reduce their carbon footprint. There are also opportunities in enviro-tourism activities that could be developed to enhance the Manning’s current tourism strategy.
- Increasing interest from tertiary providers to establish a university presence in the Manning. This would not only improve the retention rate for young people within our community but offer a source of employment and cultural activities for the valley.
- Reduced travelling time to major centres such as Sydney and Newcastle, following improvements to the Pacific Highway is

also making the Manning more attractive to business. Other areas have succeeded in attracting business relocations by targeting specific industries, particularly those that are missing in the local supply chain.

- Improvements in communication technology are opening up more opportunities for home-based businesses. The Manning is well placed to take advantage of the increasing trend in “working from home”, with attractive lifestyle opportunities and ample supply of residential land within easy access of communication networks.
- Identification of Taree as a “regional centre” in the State Government’s regional development strategy will also help to raise the area’s economic profile and increase opportunities to attract government agencies to relocate to the area.
- Availability of a secure water supply, with long-term management strategies in place, is also an advantage for our area. It provides a good selling point to attract residential and business development from other areas.
- Availability of a regional airport. Our airport is strategically located to take advantage of flight training and other aviation industries who wish to relocate from more expensive city facilities. Council is currently investing some \$4 million to upgrade the airport runway and plans to further develop opportunities for aviation industries at the site.
- Increasing interest in cultural enterprises, particularly Indigenous culture, also holds opportunities for our area. Council is currently working with the local Aboriginal community to explore the possibility of establishing a cultural centre.



Providing employment opportunities

Strategies for moving forward

If the Manning is to take advantage of these emerging opportunities, then everyone in our community should have the opportunity to play a role in economic development. One of the first strategies is to develop a long-term plan for economic development within our area.

This plan will require the co-operation and support of a wide range of community members and will provide us with a “road map” of where to invest our energies in encouraging future activities. Part of the process of preparing the plan will include a gap analysis of the area, identifying businesses that could be suitable to establish or relocate to the Manning and highlighting missing links in the local process chain.

Council has a number of roles to play in encouraging local economic development. This includes ensuring local land use strategies provide for adequate employment and residential lands and consider the needs of home-based businesses. Our valley is currently well placed to take advantage of any upturn in residential development, however, to attract new residents, we need to build a healthier local economy.

Ideas for discussion . . .

What the community can do

- Support local businesses and provide feedback on their services
- Be involved in economic development planning activities
- Contribute your ideas on economic development opportunities and preferred directions -
- Which industries and what type of jobs should be targeted for our future?
- Promote our area's advantages and opportunities through personal and business networks.

What the business community can do

- Be involved in economic development planning activities
- Provide support and mentoring through business incubators and business networks
- Consider opportunities to diversify products and strengthen customer service
- Support local employment and training initiatives

What Council can do

- Take the lead in facilitating community economic development planning
- Ensure land-use strategies are in place to provide for adequate employment and residential lands
- Act as a community advocate in attracting government funding and support for economic development activities.
- Lobby for relocation of government agencies to our area
- Ensure the regional airport continues to operate and develop business opportunities at the site.
- Consider income-generating opportunities for other council-owned lands and other assets

What other stakeholders can do

- Provide government funding and economic stimulus programs to assist local business development

Building a sense of hope and civic pride

One of the strongest messages to emerge from the community engagement program was that people wanted to be proud of where they lived. There was a strong sense of community within the Manning and residents wanted to see it preserved and enhanced. People particularly identified with their own town or village and wanted to preserve the special nature of their community. There were also strong views about the way the wider community perceived the Manning and some of the negative images that have prevailed in the media. Building a sense of hope and a positive outlook for our community is a challenging road for the future - but one that we need to travel together. While Council, State and Federal agencies can provide leadership, our sense of community and our pride in this place will ultimately come from the respect we have for each other and the experiences we share together. Key directions for the future could include:

Strengthening understanding

Over the past year, there has been an increasing commitment in our community to build understanding between the Indigenous community and the wider population, and to learn more about Aboriginal culture and our local heritage.

As individuals, we can all contribute to increasing understanding and compassion between cultures through our actions and attitudes.

Wider community directions could include

- Providing formal opportunities to learn about indigenous culture through a cultural centre, or local cultural awareness training activities
- Providing opportunities for all community members to be involved in community celebrations and events
- Strengthening local indigenous employment programs
- Increasing opportunities for public art and cultural activities.



Working in partnership

At present, there are a number of organizations and agencies working together to provide services and support to our community. However, there are also sections of our community who would like to contribute to building a better future, but don't know how to be involved - members of the corporate sector who would like to provide support, residents who would like to volunteer their time to help others. To move forward, we need to provide opportunities for a variety of community members to work together in meaningful partnerships. Council can play a role by supporting volunteer networks, providing small amounts of seed funding and connecting key stakeholders, but the success of the project will ultimately depend on the ideas and enthusiasm of community groups and individuals.

Telling our story

One of the great opportunities for our future is to bring what is good and positive about our

Building a sense of hope and civic pride

community into the public arena.

There are many great stories of the Manning - stories of individual courage and achievement, stories of communities and their history, stories of our indigenous heritage. These are part of the fabric of this place - what makes our valley special and different from all other places.

Ways of “telling our story” to the world could include increasing public art and performance opportunities, supporting local literature and other cultural activities, raising awareness of achievements through public ceremonies and media and providing positive recognition for those who are contributing to community life.

Providing opportunities

One of the foundations to building a sense of hope for our community lies in providing opportunities and support for the people who live here. The Manning should be a place where people can look forward to achieving their dreams - of gaining an education, finding employment, raising a family, owning a home and enjoying a healthy lifestyle. It should also be a place where people will feel included and safe. Our challenge for the future is to open the way for these opportunities to occur, through encouraging and supporting education providers, strengthening our local economy, providing healthy and sustainable urban design and community development programs.



Celebrating a sense of place

Because locals identify strongly with their particular town or village, there is an opportunity to build on this strength in the future with a system of place management for local communities.

Under this system, the Manning's various communities could work more closely with Council to exchange information and plan local solutions to asset management and maintenance.

It would also open the way to develop village plans and provide opportunities for local community projects, such as entranceways and public art.

Council could build on this network by establishing a series of community cabinet style meetings, each year, to allow more direct contact with community groups, elected representatives and council staff.

Revitalising the centre

Although the Mid North Coast Regional Strategy identifies Taree as a “regional centre” for the future, there were concerns at the recent community engagement that the town doesn't have the look and feel of a vibrant “heart” of our region. There were calls to revitalize the central areas of Taree, to refocus on the river as the centerpiece of the town and provide more opportunities for public space and recreation. Options to bring more residential development into the heart of town could also be explored.

Council will continue to seek government funding to do a review of the central area of Taree, including its connection to the river and public use of the foreshores.

Places for living

The community engagement program also highlighted that most locals are happy with the current scale of development in our valley and don't want to see high-rise or “city style” development in our community. One of our chal-

Building a sense of hope and civic pride

Challenges for the future will be to encourage a range of different housing styles which will accommodate the needs of our community. There is an increasing number of single person households in the Manning and a growing number of older residents. This may influence the type of housing design that we choose and the public facilities that are provided. There will be a stronger need to connect people with others in the community, so public meeting places will become increasingly important. It will also become more important to involve local communities in urban design and creating their own sense of place in their town or village.

What's in a name?

The first round of community consultation created a lot of interest in the prospect of changing our area's name. The most popular alternative was the Manning Valley, rather than Greater Taree.

However, changing your name is not something that should be considered lightly. There is a lot of history and issues of community identity to consider. It is important that members of the community should participate in these discussions and come to a consensus view. One option to test consensus would be to hold a referendum on the name issue at the next local government elections.

Ideas for discussion . . .

What the community can do

- Be involved in local volunteering programs
- Participate in community events and festivals
- Be involved in place management activities and share ideas for improving your town or village
- Support reconciliation and be involved in cultural awareness activities
- Get involved in "telling our story" through public art and performance
- Start your own neighbourhood programs to tidy up your street, or promote local get-togethers.

What Council can do

- Work more closely with communities on place management
- Provide opportunities for feedback from residents through "community cabinet" meetings or other forms of community engagement
- Promote more public art and performance activities
- Support cultural awareness training and indigenous employment programs

- Assist and support plans to establish an Aboriginal cultural centre in the area
- Take the lead in plans to revitalise the Taree CBD
- Improve maintenance on public infrastructure, particularly town entrances
- Ensure good urban design and a range of housing styles for local communities
- Encourage development that is in keeping with the size and scale of existing settlements.
- Take the lead on the issue of changing the "Greater Taree" name and provide opportunities through referendum

What other stakeholders can do

- Work with Council and the community to ensure that State Agency plans for the Manning are in keeping with our community's long-term goals
- Provide funding and support for community development programs.

How much are we prepared to invest?

This discussion paper has considered a number of issues and future directions for our community, but at the heart of these discussions is one central message: If we are to move forward as a community, to be vibrant and sustainable in the future, we need to invest more heavily in our local infrastructure.

Without this investment, our roads, bridges and other important community assets will continue to decline. At present, some 23% of the city's infrastructure is at the point of needing major repair or replacement. In another 10 years' time, that figure will have increased to 46% and by 20 years, 70%. Towns and villages will be isolated and our local economy will be crippled. This is not a future that anyone in our valley would willingly choose.

Without further investment, we will also not be able to achieve some of our long-term aspirations for the Manning, such as environmental programs for the health of the river, boosting local economic activity, or strengthening our community.

While nobody likes to pay higher taxes, the reality is that our community's 23,000 rate-payers, contributing an average of \$700 per year, cannot pay for the standard of living that residents expect.



Patching potholes in the Taree airport runway



Landslip on the Bulga Road

Compared to other council areas, we currently pay considerably less in residential rates - up to 17%. Council rates are also comparatively lower than other basic costs, such as electricity, water and telephone and less than costs for regular services such as internet access or pay TV.

Long-term investment

Because the infrastructure problem has grown over 50 years, it will take a long time to stem the tide and turn the problem around. Professor Allan estimated that it would take at least 20 years. Based on these projections, Council will be preparing a 20-year Community Plan and mapping out a 10-year financial strategy.

Finding the funds

There is only a limited number of ways that our community can raise extra funds to help fix our ailing infrastructure. These include:

- Borrowing more money
- Raising more money, through increased rates
- Seeking government funding

It is expected that any solution we develop will include elements of all three of these things.

How much are we prepared to invest?

In preparing for this discussion paper, Council looked at three broad directions that the community might take in addressing our infrastructure problem over the next 20 years. Because it is difficult to do detailed financial models for 20 years, these directions focus in more detail on the first 10 years. The three directions that we might take as a community are outlined below

Direction 1: Do nothing different

If the community wanted to, we could maintain the status quo - keep investing at the same rate as we always have, with rate increases keeping pace with inflation and a conservative borrowing program. If this happened, we would not have any extra money to fix our infrastructure or do extra things such as environmental programs, additional

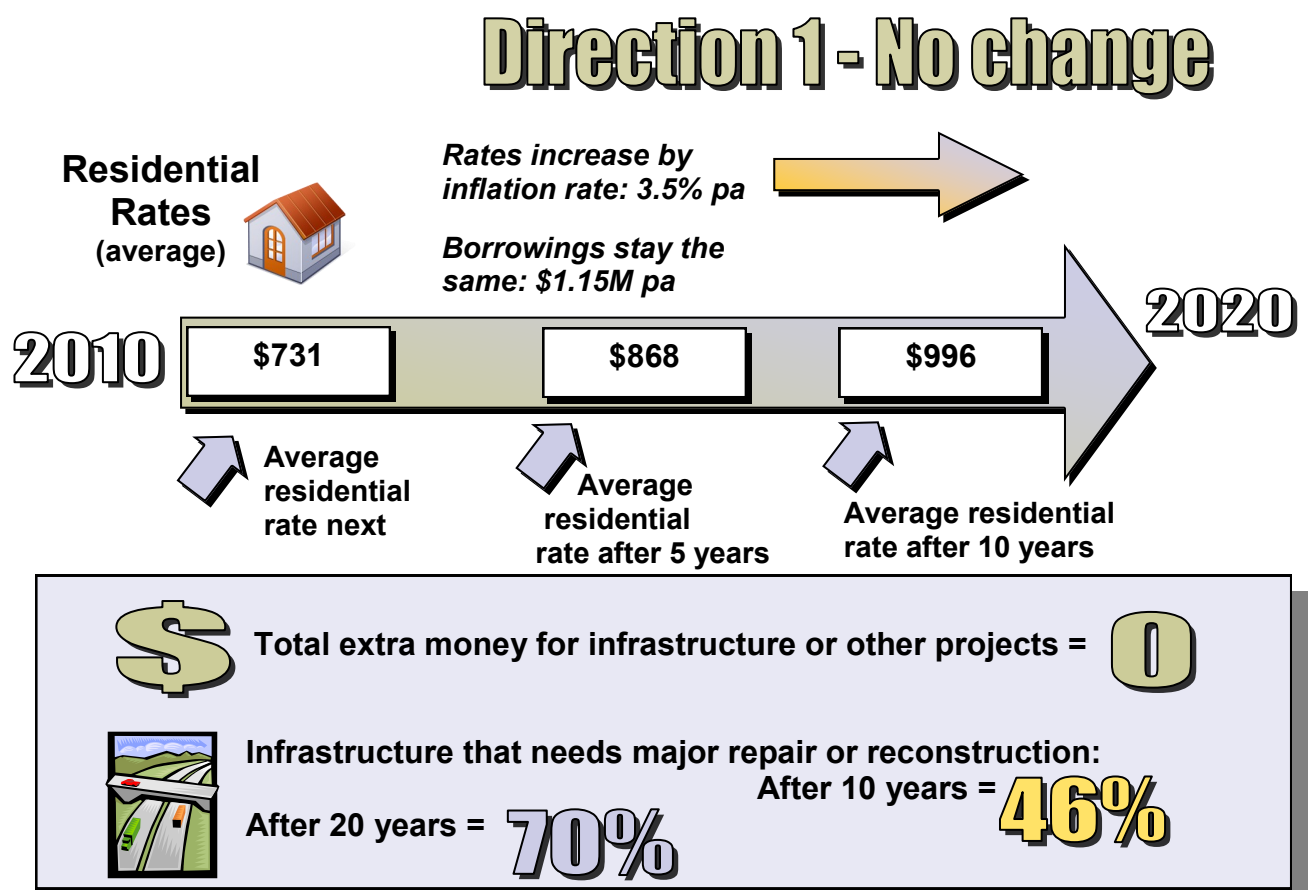
cultural activities or more cycleways.

By the end of the 10 years, the amount of infrastructure requiring major repairs or reconstruction would grow to 46%. By the end of 20 years, this figure will have grown to 70%.

Council could continue to lobby the state and federal governments for more funding for roads and bridges. It could also aim for efficiency savings and improvements to work practices and look at rationalising some of its assets - but this would have a limited effect on the infrastructure problem.

If we pursued this plan, council may have to reduce some community services to ensure it can stay afloat financially.

The diagram below shows what might happen if we take this direction.



How much are we prepared to invest?

Direction 2: Steady improvement

If the community took the direction of steady improvement, we could increase rates by a set amount each year - say 10 –15% including inflation. This level of increase might be required, given the size of our infrastructure problem. We could also increase our borrowing program to the maximum amount currently allowed by the government.

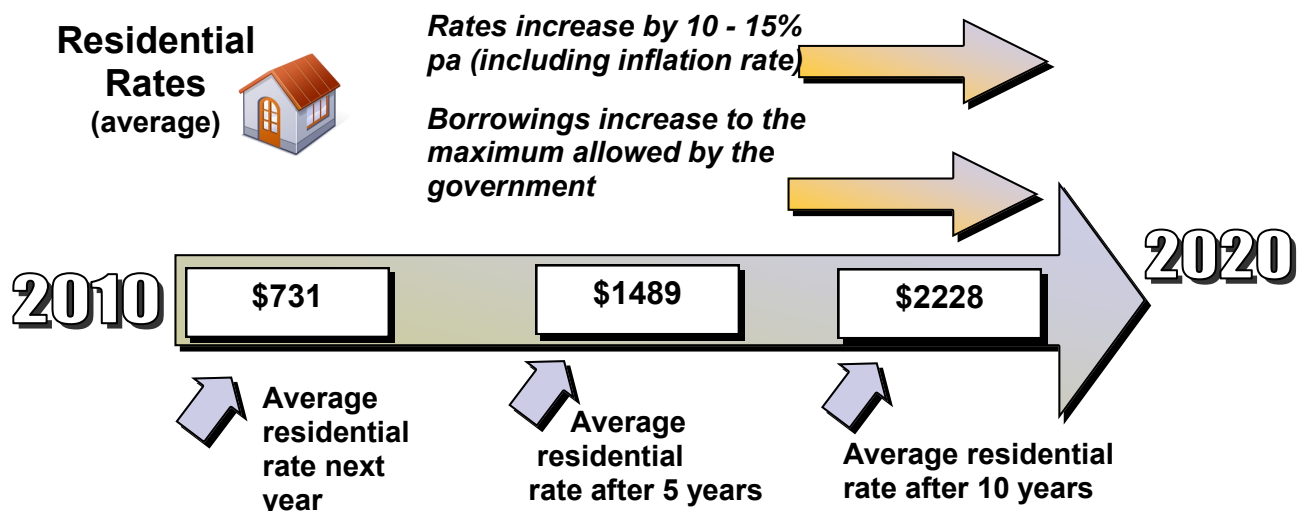
This could result in a total of \$153M extra funding over the 10 year period which could be used to fund our strategic priorities. The community could then decide whether it wanted to spend all this money on fixing infrastructure, or save a bit of it for other projects, such as environmental programs. The extra investment could help to create more jobs in the community and provide op-

portunities for local businesses involved in infrastructure repair. Council would work with the community to develop a suitable program of works for each year, addressing high priority assets.

Council could continue to lobby for more state and federal funding for infrastructure repair. It could also aim for efficiency savings and improvements to work practices and look at rationalising some of its assets.

If the community spent all of the extra money on infrastructure, we still wouldn't have fixed the problem by the end of the first 10 years, but we would be starting to gain some ground. Things would continue to improve over the next 20 years if we stuck to the same plan

Direction 2 - Steady improvement



Total extra money raised over the 10-year period would be approximately

\$153M



This would not fix all the infrastructure that needs major repair or reconstruction. The size of the infrastructure backlog at the end of the 10 years would depend on how much of the extra money was devoted to the repairs.

How much are we prepared to invest?

Direction 3: The quick fix

If the community wanted to, we could make a big dent in the infrastructure backlog by investing heavily for a period of five years, then winding back to around the inflation rate.

However, to do this, we would need to have rate increases in the range of 20-40% per annum for the first five years, which would impose a substantial cost on the community. We would also need to increase our borrowings to the maximum allowable by the government.

The result would be an extra \$314 million over the first 10 year period. This would cer-

tainly make a big difference to the Valley's roads and bridges and provide some money for our other strategic priorities. Council would work with the community to develop a suitable program of works for each year, addressing high priority assets.

The extra investment could help to create more jobs in the community. However, undertaking an infrastructure renewal program of this scale would be challenging with our current local resources.

The extra increase in rates over a relatively short period would also make it very difficult for people on a fixed income, such as pensioners.

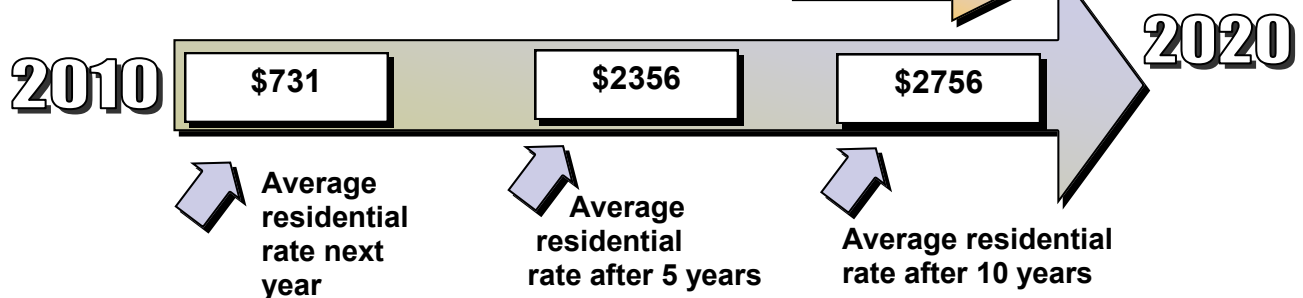
Residential Rates
(average)



Direction 3 - The quick fix

Big increase in rates for the first five years (20-40% pa including inflation). Then back to the inflation rate for the next five years and beyond

Borrowings increase to the maximum allowed by the government



Total extra money raised over the 10-year period would be approximately

\$314M



This could fix a lot of the infrastructure that needs major repair or reconstruction. However, the size of the backlog at the end of the 10 years would depend on how much of the extra money was actually devoted to the repairs.

Where to from here?

The previous pages outline some general directions that we as a community might follow in trying to address our Valley's infrastructure issues and plan for a better future.

During this round of community consultation, Council will be asking residents which of the three directions they would prefer:

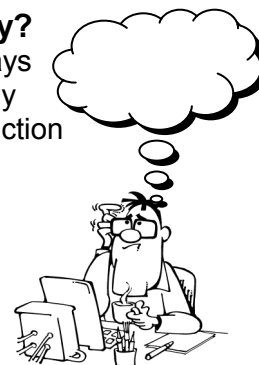
- 1) Do nothing and continue to decline?
- 2) Increase charges steadily and gradually improve? or
- 3) Go for the quick fix by investing heavily over a short period of time

All of the directions assume that Council will keep lobbying for more government funding, work on efficiency gains and rationalise any assets that the community no longer requires. On the following page, Council's General Manager Gerard José outlines his improvement program for Council. There are also some decisions to be made, as a community, about how much of the extra money we raise will be spent on the infrastructure problem.

Some residents will want to see all the extra funds spent on fixing roads, bridges and other infrastructure. Others may want to see a percentage of the extra money spent on other programs that are important for our future. Once Council has an idea of the community's preference, it can prepare detailed financial projections, based on the preferred model.

How can I have my say?

There are a number of ways that you can have your say on the issues raised in Section 3 off this paper.



- 1) Go to Council's website at: www.gtcc.nsw.gov.au and click on the Building a Better Future logo. You can participate in a number of ways, from leaving a short comment, "voting" for one of the directions, or spending more time to make a detailed submission.
- 2) Make a written submission to Council about some of the issues raised in this discussion paper. You may want to think about some of the "Ideas for Discussion" included in Section 3. Do you agree that these are the right directions for our future? Should we be doing more, or less, or different things? You may also want to comment on the three directions for investment: Which is the best path to strengthen our future? Perhaps you have an alternate model to suggest. Do you think we should spend all the extra money we could raise on infrastructure, or should be keep some for other priorities such as the environment? Details of where to send your submission are included on the inside cover of this discussion paper.



Council's commitment to moving forward

A message from the General Manager

At the beginning of this discussion paper, the Mayor outlined some of the challenges our community is currently facing and the commitment that he and his fellow Councillors share in building a better future for the Manning. I would like to add my own thoughts and commitments to Mayor Hogan's comments, now that you have had time to consider the key messages in this document.

As the leader of a large community organisation such as Council, I am naturally concerned about the Manning Valley's future and the problems we face with our infrastructure network.

As a parent, I am equally concerned. I don't want my children to grow up in a community that has no sense of hope for the future. My family and I are committed to this valley for the long term. I want my children to share in a safe and healthy environment, to have the prospect of local education and employment and to be part of a caring and inclusive community. That is why I am personally committed to working with our elected representatives to move our Council forward - to strengthen its community focus and improve its performance.

The Mayor and Councillors are responsible for setting the long-term direction and policies of the Council, but, as General Manager, I am responsible for the day to day business operations of the organisation and the performance of Council staff.

As I move through the community, I have been deeply disappointed, on occasions to hear some of the comments about Council's performance.

This is particularly so when I know, from my own experience, that there are many council staff members who give a great deal to our community and care about its future, just as you do.

It is my sincere hope that we can all move forward together, as one community.

Over the past few months, I have been working with the elected representatives to oversee a comprehensive restructure of Council. The new structure will help to improve the organisation's performance by strengthening the way that Council undertakes its planning, manages its contracts and work specifications and delivers its services. We will be moving forward with a new corporate culture, a stronger focus on our community and a commitment to measuring and improving our performance as an organisation. I want our staff to be proud of their Council and the important role that they play in delivering services to our community.

Over the next 12 months, I will be undertaking a full review of Council's services and work practices with a view to gaining further efficiencies. We will also focus on improving our customer service and the way that we communicate with and include the community in decision-making processes. As General Manager of Council, I make three commitments to the community on behalf of our organisation:

- We will plan better
- We will communicate better and
- We will perform better

I believe that, together, we can all move forward in confidence and invest in a brighter future for our community .



*Council's General Manager,
Gerard José*