



WORKING WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT TO RESEARCH STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT WITHIN REGIONAL VICTORIA

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ABSTRACT

Changes in population size and composition, forecasted for regional Victorian cities, have the potential to significantly impact upon their urban environments. The Built Environment Research Group (BERG) at Deakin University, in collaboration with The Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities at La Trobe University, is currently working with the City of Greater Bendigo and the City of Warrnambool to research this situation. The following paper introduces the work being undertaken to develop strategies for promoting an integrated approach to regional development, and addresses the administrative context supporting current decision-making processes within local government.

Keywords: population change, strategic planning, working relationship

INTRODUCTION

The research initiates a line of investigation that addresses two deficiencies in the current framework of regional policy and decision making:

- Consistent sets of criteria for correlating different types of infrastructure indicators
- Sequence of benchmarks which could facilitate both cross regional and cross discipline comparative analysis regarding built form, demographics and socio-economic indicators.

The project is being developed to encourage cross-discipline discourse by promoting dynamic scenario-mapping and exploration within a strategic planning framework. It is anticipated that the processes derived from the research will assist local governments in preparing the ground for cultivating sustainable policies that respond to forecasted needs of both private sector and community based stakeholders.

In order to promote a conceptual model for establishing possible scenario types and planning outcomes it is important to understand the landscape in which policy is formulated. This paper outlines the research being undertaken to address the administrative context supporting current decision making processes within local government.

BACKGROUND

Many areas of regional Victoria are currently experiencing a decline in their economy, while other areas are witnessing an increase in their population due to immigration from surrounding areas. As smaller towns may in future be forced to 'mothball' parts of their township, larger centres may need to consolidate existing infrastructure and expand their services to accommodate forecasted growth as their demographic profiles change.

The change in population composition forecast for regional Victoria is most pronounced when examining age structure. One age group that is likely to experience significant repercussions from this state of flux is the aged. The aged make up a large proportion of those in-migrating to regional centres; attracted by lifestyle, amenity and community (DOI, 2002). For regional Victoria, the number of people aged 80 years and over is projected to rise from the 1996 level of 40,000 to around 79,000 in 2021 (DOI, 2002). This increase is expected to occur before the “baby boomers” (those born between 1945 and 1960) reach these age groups (DOI, 2002). The decline in the younger populations of regional centres, (especially the 15-24 year old age groups who are drawn to professional careers in the capital cities), is exacerbating this proportional imbalance (DOI, 2002). While some centres are currently able to maintain a consistent level of assistance and hence retain a ‘quality of life’ for their senior citizens, many communities are experiencing a decline in services, support and recreational facilities. The thematic map (**Figure 1**) illustrates the current extent of this internal migration for the sixty-five year old and over age groups. The lighter shaded areas indicate a substantial decline in older rural populations while the darker areas point to a corresponding increase in the regional urban centres. When analysing the City of Greater Bendigo’s present situation with the projected demographic shift over the next twenty years (see **Figure 2**), the anticipated population growth for the sixty-five year old age group alone is almost double current census figures.

An important component of this research is the cross regional comparative analysis of the two case studies, the City of Greater Bendigo and the City of Warrnambool.

The City of Greater Bendigo, located in central Victoria, currently has a resident population estimated at 90,502 people (ABS, 2001). The local planning authority anticipates that this could increase to almost 112,000 by 2021. Under this projection the structure of the population would include an increase in the proportion of people over middle age, which indicates that there will be a significant change in the demand for accommodation, education, community services, shopping and employment. This shift also means that there may be a lower proportion of young to middle-aged

families and an increase in mature families, with implications for retail patterns and recreational requirements.

The City of Warrnambool is the largest centre in Victoria's south-west. Its main trade area contains a resident population estimated at 90,000 people: 29,000 in the City of Warrnambool and 61,000 in the balance of the catchment. While the population forecast prepared by the Department of Infrastructure indicates that the overall population level of the region will generally stay at around 90,000 people for 2010 and 2015, it is expected that Warrnambool will gain an additional net of between 3,000 and 4,000 residents at the expense of surrounding smaller towns and rural areas (WCC, 2002). In addition, Warrnambool is a significant tourist and holiday destination and undergoes significant population fluctuations on a cyclic basis. It is estimated that Warrnambool attracts a total of some 715,000 visitors on an annual basis, which is expected to exceed 1 million by 2015 (WCC, 2002).

While the project directly relates to the strategic municipal statements of both Warrnambool and Bendigo, the cross regional/cross disciplinary nature of the proposal has attracted interest and enthusiasm from the cities of Shepparton, Ballarat and Wangaratta.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE ADMINISTRATIVE LANDSCAPE

When developing models which are designed to assist local governments with the process of vision making and strategic planning, it is essential that the constructs have an underlying structure which can respond and adapt to the different organisational structures and operational procedures utilised by local governments. The following section will outline research into the administrative context which currently supports decision making.

The pressure on local governments to produce mid to long term framework documents such as 2010, 2020, and even 2030 vision statements requires resources

that can be directed to strategic thinking. How well this process operates is dependent on a range of criteria, in particular the framework adopted to direct discourse and development thinking, and the breadth and depth of the discipline base utilised in the process.

While many factors contribute to active and effectual policy and decision-making, it would appear that the management structure of local government, along with the building stock that accommodates the organisation, can have a direct impact on facilitating or hindering these processes. After profiling a number of local government bodies, it became evident that their administrative configuration varies considerably. This is often dependent upon the size and socio-economic profile of the municipality with respect to its rate-payer cohort. Hence, the larger the revenue base the greater becomes the capacity for local governments to diversify and develop specialist skills oriented units within the authority, and the greater becomes its capacity to devote resources to strategic planning. While smaller municipal bodies can be limited in their knowledge base, decision making is often more immediate and flexible. On the other hand, while larger authorities can often draw on a broader knowledge/skill base, the magnitude of the administrative process can at times complicate policy formation and hence limit flexibility in accommodating change.

An initial survey of local government publications revealed a growing emphasis on the issue of sustainability. An example of this can be seen with the recent release of the 'South West Sustainability Blueprint', which was designed to provide a starting point for the south-west region of Victoria in their adoption of sustainability as a guiding theme (SWSP, 1998). A significant aspect of the blueprint document involved the development of a model (**Figure 3**) based on three key themes, Environment, Economics and Society. Categorisations such as these now feature prominently in both academic and government literature and not only define the boundaries and levels on which sustainability is being discussed, but in some cases are significantly influencing the re-structuring of many local government organisations.

Probably the most recent of these reshuffles has occurred at the state government level, where the *Department of Sustainability and Environment* (DSE) was recently established in December 2002, amalgamating the environmental functions of the *Department of Natural Resources and Environment* (DNRE), the socially and culturally oriented departments of the *Department for Victorian Communities* (DVC) and the planning and design functions of the *Department of Infrastructure* (DoI), see **Figure 4**.

This process of integration and cross-fertilisation of different skill/knowledge bases is also reflected in the restructuring of other departmental groups and indicates an increasing awareness that the community and the urban fabric which supports it, is a complex entity and not a series of discreet elements which can be administered in a piece meal or autonomous framework. For example, The Victorian state government's *Department of Human Services* (DHS) structures its Municipal Public Health Planning Framework, '*Environments for Health*', around '*Social*', '*Economic*', '*Built/Physical*' and '*Natural*' categories. The model represented in **Figure 5** correlates closely with the directives of the World Health Organisation and indicates the department's belief in the need to consider the overall impact on health and wellbeing of factors originating across all four environmental dimensions, (DHS, 2001). Interaction and interdependence, among other aspects, were also depicted diagrammatically in the South West Sustainability Blueprint model through the overlapping of circles. Hence, cities and regions are now understood to behave as complex systems, which has led to the long overdue acknowledgement that social frameworks share an inherent cause and effect relationship with the quality of the built and natural environments.

For the purposes of this aspect of the analysis we are currently rationalising the classification system adopted by *Department of Human Services*, and the state government's initiative in creating the DSE, and evaluating the organisational structure of seven municipalities: One Melbourne metropolitan council (Port Phillip);

Two peripheral councils located on the greater metropolitan fringe (Wyndham, and Melton); and four Regional centres (Bendigo, Shepparton, Wangaratta, and Warrnambool). This is being achieved by categorising and aligning many of their sub-departments with four major discipline types, 'Environment', 'Economy', 'Society' and 'Culture', and will test for the type of communication pathways and level and spread of specialist skills areas offered by the different council structures.

Preliminary observations indicate that organisations range from between two and five tiered structures. These appear to reflect the variety of the services offered by a local government, the diversity of the professional group comprising their skill base, and the leadership models adopted by their executive. The presence of more than one discipline type within a department structure may indicate that a degree of interaction is taking place between different discipline/knowledge bases during policy formation. Analysis of the position of Planning and Strategic Planning within these structures points to varying degrees of interaction. As can be seen in **Figure 6**, Greater Bendigo and Warrnambool are seemingly located towards the extremes in this regard and offer a useful comparison. Both the cities operate on a four-tiered structure. This indicates a less autocratic framework and a more diverse discipline structure. Given the size of its population base relative to the area of jurisdiction, specific Planning and Strategic Planning sub-departments are found only within the City of Greater Bendigo. The Planning and Development department has within its structure nine separate sub departments that canvas the four discipline types listed above. Bringing economic development, health, strategic planning and cultural services in close proximity with each other suggests an ability to interactively consider and respond to implications and consequences of a planning issue from multiple view-points. On the other hand the City of Warrnambool, with a recurrent revenue base of $\frac{1}{3}$ and a resident population of $\frac{1}{4}$ the size of the City of Greater Bendigo, operates with fewer sub-departments, which are more uniform in their discipline types and more evenly distributed throughout the administrative structure. If we extend the comparison of these two cities, see **Figure 7**, similar differences can be seen across all organisational departments. While all four aspects of sustainability can be found

within each organisation, both councils offer common and customised specialist services that are unique to their municipalities.

CONCLUSION

While there is a growing awareness and adoption of sustainability principles at the local government level, distinct differences can be seen in the structure of the organisations operating within them. The seven local governments profiled in this paper vary in terms of: the number of departments; the number of sub-departments within departments; and the range of disciplines linked within the departmental and sub-departmental groups.

Whether the recent organisational changes to the DoI and the creation of the DSE at state government level will have a significant flow-on affect at the local level remains to be seen. However, what is evident is that the strategic planning model being advanced at the outset of the paper must be flexible enough in its base structure so that it can accommodate the different operational requirements of a variety of council structures.

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