

## **Surfing the Waves of Change with a Population Cap**

### **Introduction**

Noosa Shire Council (local government authority) have implemented a population cap in combination with traditional planning tools to ride the waves of change that have threatened the significant environmental values that make this coastal destination world renowned. It's hard to imagine such a place exists but the human population of Noosa has been consciously capped to 60,000 people (expected to be reached in 2016) based on the environmental values and capacity of the locality. Buildings are restricted to the height of trees and there are only 3 traffic lights within the Shire (865km<sup>2</sup>).

Noosa has been subjected to the same pressures seen by most coastal communities throughout the world including, population growth and tourism versus environmental protection. However, the approach taken in Noosa to cap the population is rare and takes significant courage to implement. The population cap in Noosa is a result of the collaboration between the Noosa Shire Council, the community and the private (development) sector. Many 'battles' have been fought, before and after the implementation of the population cap in combination with Council's planning document (known as a planning scheme) adopted in 1997.

This paper evaluates the use of a population cap in combination with traditional planning tools to realise planning outcomes for Noosa, a unique coastal destination in Australia. This case study will:-

- discuss the context of why and how a population cap has been used in combination with traditional planning tools to preserve the values of Noosa Shire;
- describe the environmental, social, economic and governmental implications of a population cap; and
- evaluate the factors that have contributed to the success or otherwise of the population cap in Noosa over the short and longer terms including the governments' commitment to implementation.

### **Context**

#### ***Background***

Noosa Shire is located in the southeastern corner of the State of Queensland, Australia approximately 136km north of Brisbane (Noosa Council 1, 2006). It has an area of approximately 865km<sup>2</sup> with 35 per cent of this being protected as Crown Land / National Park (Noosa Council 1, 2006). Noosa has high biodiversity and natural landscapes of great significance in a very confined physical area with many features being globally unique. Noosa Council has submitted a proposal to become a Biosphere Reserve to UNESCO under its Man and the Biosphere program. The word Noosa is a corruption of the Aboriginal term noothera or gnuthuru meaning shadow or shady place.



**Figure 1: Location Map of Noosa**

As outlined above, Noosa has been subjected to the same pressures seen by most coastal communities around the world including population growth and the threat of tourism versus environmental protection. Noosa experienced a series of pro-development Councils during the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Their philosophy of ‘the more coastal development the better’ saw development threaten the environmental and small-scale village character of the area (Gloster, 1997). For example canal development, which changed the Noosa River system, and the threat of high-rise development, which would have altered the character of the beachfront (Hastings Street) and Noosa Hill.

A community-based organization known as Noosa Parks Association (NPA), made up of lifestyle-conscious and conservation minded new residents fought the Council and the developers being attracted to the area. In 1988, the pro-development Council was replaced with one containing several prominent NPA members, including the chairman. The newly formed Council refocused on conservation, good town planning principles, quality design outcomes and lifestyle priorities to protect the environmental values of the area and shape the future of Noosa (Gloster, 1997).

### ***Traditional & Non-Traditional Tools***

Noosa is most well known, particularly in Australia, as it was one of the first and few local government areas to have a population cap (non-traditional tool), as well as utilising traditional planning tools (i.e. planning scheme). Council announced in 1996 that a population cap would be introduced in combination with the preparation of the new planning document of the time. The document nominated a population of about 60,000 people with visitor accommodation in peak periods swelling this to about 73,000 people (Noosa Council, 1997). Community consultation ensued confirming acceptance of the principle to limit development in the Shire. The planning document was approved for implementation in 1997. The current planning document (The Noosa Plan 2006) continues to assist in implementing

the population cap (Noosa Council 2, 2006). The current population of Noosa Shire is approximately 50,000 people and the population cap is expected to be reached by 2016 (Noosa Council 1, 2006). Population growth has slowed in recent years to less than 1 per cent in comparison to 7 per cent between 1989 and 2000 (Noosa Council 1, 2006).

Most local government authorities in Australia and throughout the world predict growth and then identify suitable land to cater for that growth. Noosa's population cap approach is different to most in that it is primarily based on the protection of the Shire's environmental values, with the unconstrained land being used to cater for a level of growth without impacting on these values (i.e. the environmental carrying capacity). The population cap has been calculated based on the land area that is environmentally suitable to cater for the growth and the anticipated development potential for these areas. Once the population is calculated the necessary infrastructure to cater for this population can then be recognised. Development densities (houses or units per lot) will remain unchanged.

The term population cap is a misnomer, as its implementation relates more to a development cap. People are not limited from entering the Shire at the borders but rather development in the Shire is restricted without specifically limiting the number of residents and tourists living in the Shire. Noosa's population cap is implemented through Council's planning document (known as a planning scheme), which defines a maximum level of development, based on the environmental carrying capacity of the land. Theoretically, every planning scheme has a population cap built into it, such that the zoning of land and the intended development potential for an area could be used to calculate the anticipated population of an area. The difference with the Noosa case study is that the Council has adopted the policy direction of capping the population and thus:-

- it is intended that the planning scheme will not be amended to alter development densities to cater for significant population growth in the future other than what has already been envisaged; and
- a strict adherence to the planning provisions are undertaken, where development proposals varying from the planning scheme are highly unlikely to be supported.

A population cap was implemented in Noosa for the following key reasons:-

- provide an overall community and political vision and focus for the Shire;
- ensure the environmental and character (small scale, village atmosphere) values of the Shire are protected;
- provide certainty for the provision of infrastructure (eg water, sewerage, roads, public transport and community services etc) and anticipated development;
- ensure Noosa is a sustainable community.

To demonstrate how the population cap (non-traditional planning instrument) has been used in conjunction with the planning scheme provisions (traditional planning tool) two examples relating to building height and road intersections are discussed below:-

- Buildings in Noosa have a height limit primarily of 2 storeys in most residential areas and a maximum of 3-4 storeys in Hastings Street, the primary tourist destination in the Shire. This height limit is based on the height of native trees in the area to ensure that development is consistent and integrated with the natural features and local topography. This limit not only serves to protect the natural character of the area but also helps to maintain the population cap so as to limit population densities within the Shire.
- The road network in Noosa has been designed for dispersal of traffic over alternative routes (i.e. not just a single main road but rather several smaller roads) to cater for a known extent of development as specified by the cap. The certainty provided by the population cap ensures that the Shire's intersections can be designed such that roundabouts will sufficiently cater for the maximum expected traffic and the need to

install traffic lights will generally not apply. The planning scheme also incorporates this approach in the zoning of land for suitable uses that will not increase traffic demand beyond this capacity.

## Implications

The implementation of a population cap, as seen by the Noosa case study, has many environmental, social, economic and governance implications as highlighted below.

### Environmental

- The population cap assists in the protection of the natural values of the Shire. For example, the Shire contains extensive areas protected for conservation and the water quality of the Noosa River continues to be the highest in the Sunshine Coast region.
- The population cap does not protect the environment from the major threats originating from outside of the Shire, including day trip tourists using the beaches, algal outbreaks affecting water quality of the beaches.



**Figure 2: The population cap assists in the protection of the natural values of the Shire which also support the tourist focus of the local economy.**

### Social

- The population cap has given the Council certainty about its infrastructure planning, particularly water supply, sewerage and its transport network (hence the extensive use of roundabouts and only 3 traffic lights in the Shire).
- Affordable housing has become more problematic as house prices continue to grow because of limited supply of new housing stock combined with an attraction to wealthy investors from out of town. In 1995, approximately 50 per cent of Noosa rate payers had an address outside the Shire.
- The demographics of Noosa Shire may drift towards extreme levels. The population growth has primarily come from ageing baby boomers retiring to the area with young families finding it more difficult to afford to live in Noosa.
- While a very safe and pleasant place to live, Noosa may lose some of its vibrancy due to the lack of demographic mix.



**Figure 3: Noosa Shire is dominated by roundabouts instead of traffic lights, based on the population cap which offers certainty when providing infrastructure.**

#### Economic

- The tourism industry focus of the Noosa economy is based on the environmental values of the Shire. The protection of these values is vital to future economic prosperity.
- Property prices have increased and the real estate industry has marketed land using the population cap as a means of encouraging people to buy land while it is available with the certainty that the natural beauty and village scale of the area will be retained.
- Visitor accommodation supporting the tourism industry is under pressure, because the highest and best use of properties financially is moving towards permanent residential use of these buildings.
- The development and construction industry is reducing in size. Most work within Noosa is now based on renovation and redevelopment with limited greenfield development sites remaining.
- Noosa is moving towards a steady state economy, where (internal) growth is not an element of our economic strategy.



**Figure 4: The population cap has reduced housing affordability, with the use of residential properties shifting from visitor accommodation to permanent use.**

## Governance

- The Council has faced many legal challenges. The rezoning of land for conservation purposes and/or reduced future development potential has incurred many legal battles for claims of compensation.
- Continuation of the population cap depends on the political will of the day. Generally, the concept of a population cap retains strong support within the community and the political agenda reflects this.
- Noosa's growth infrastructure has been managed appropriately and the focus will soon shift towards addressing the social issues.

It is important to highlight that there are also many implications of not having a population cap in Noosa including continued growth, loss of environmental values and compounding demands for infrastructure upgrades. Not having a population cap would see the local authority under significant financial and planning pressure to try to cater for increasing growth, which potentially threatens the environmental features of the Shire which form Noosa's branding.

There are also implications for surrounding local government authorities in that they will 'wear the brunt' of population growth being experienced in the Sunshine Coast region. The surrounding areas essentially are responsible for providing higher order retail facilities, more diverse employment opportunities and regional infrastructure such as airports. It is considered by some that whilst the population of Noosa maintains the environmental values of its own area they utilise the higher facilities in the neighbouring local authority areas whilst not contributing towards these facilities (Wilkie, 2005).

## Evaluation

Implementation of the population cap in combination with Council's planning documents has successfully maintained key environmental areas of the Shire and the village/small scale character of the area for the decade in which it has existed. There are several key factors that have contributed to the success of the population cap in Noosa, including:-

- Strong political will;
- Continual community engagement and support;
- Extensive background studies used to inform planning documents;
- Creation of a well drafted and clear plan;
- Strong commitment to implement the planning documents and face legal challenges;
- A commitment to infrastructure planning and resourcing;
- Implementation of economic and social planning initiatives to complement environmental focus of the population cap (eg affordable housing initiatives and diversification of the economy not just tourism/ development related); and
- Incorporation of the population cap philosophy into Council's corporate plan and everyday business of all sectors of the Council.

As discussed above, the conservation focused Council of the late 1980s and 1990s were the key drivers of the creation of the population cap and the planning documents. Both these non-traditional and traditional tools were used to effectively protect the environmental values of the area and to be responsive to community and developer expectations. Council and its planning staff have fought many battles in and out of court to maintain this policy direction. Although the court process is very costly, the planning documents which contain the population cap philosophy have primarily been upheld by the courts having positive outcomes for Council. A by-election to replace a Councillor, who resigned earlier this year, saw the potential candidates questioned about their commitment to the population cap

philosophy and implementation, particularly to ensure development is consistent with Council's current planning document (The Noosa Plan 2006).

The community acceptance of the population cap has continued. The creation of community sector boards has facilitated the exchange of information with the Council to ensure continued support. Noosa Parks Association still plays an active role in championing the population cap within the community.

The Noosa case study has highlighted that implementation requires a lot of homework including the preparation of numerous relevant background studies and clear and concise planning documents. A strict adherence to the planning document provisions is necessary, despite strong pressure from the development sector and legal challenges. Although the planning documents have changed over the past decade due to legislative requirements (now performance based rather than prescriptive), these amendments have maintained the population cap philosophy.

The population cap has a strong focus towards protecting the environmental values of the Shire and has the potential to compromise social and economic aspirations. Accordingly, the Council has undertaken several social and economic initiatives to achieve a sustainable community including, an affordable housing program and economic diversification strategies.

Noosa Council has effectively taken on the population cap as an overall philosophy that has been incorporated into its corporate plan and the everyday business of all sectors of the Council.

As the population cap draws near, time will tell as to whether or not its implementation in combination with Council's planning document achieves a sustainable future for the Noosa community.

## **Conclusion**

Noosa Shire Council, with the support of the community have implemented a population cap in combination with traditional planning tools (eg planning scheme) over the past decade to ride the waves of change that have threatened the significant environmental values that make this coastal destination world renowned. The population cap, in combination with Council's planning documents, aims to regulate and limit development based on the environmental carrying capacity of the area. As demonstrated, the population cap has many benefits and implications environmentally, socially, economically and with respect to governance. This approach has proven to be successful thus far primarily due to:-

- strong political will and community support;
- extensive background studies;
- the preparation and strict adherence to a precise planning document;
- infrastructure planning and resourcing; and
- implementation of complementary social and economic initiatives.

This case study highlights that:-

- Where traditional planning tools on their own are unable to deal with a changing society, a combination with non-traditional tools such as a population cap may also be helpful to provide policy direction and action on the ground;
- Implementation of planning initiatives must have the commitment of community leaders, politicians, the community and champions over the short and longer term;
- The tools must be able to ride the waves of change and be adaptive.

## References

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