



WHERE DO WE WANT TO BE?

**RESIDENT FOCUS GROUPS AND WORKSHOPS
WITH LOCAL ORGANISATION REPRESENTATIVES**

November 2001

OVERVIEW

COMPILED BY BLUE MOUNTAINS CITY COUNCIL

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OVERVIEW

Introduction

This paper presents a brief overview of key outcomes from a series of Resident Focus Groups and Workshops with Local Organisation Representatives held in November 2001 as part of the - Blue Mountains Our Future – project. Those attending the consultation processes were challenged to consider “**What kind of City the people of 2025 would be grateful we have passed on to them?**”. Ideas, hopes and dreams for the future of the Blue Mountains were shared.

In particular this paper provides:

- a comparative summary of the main ideas and themes emerging from both consultation processes;
- an overview of key high level ideas framing possible future directions for the Blue Mountains emerging from the Workshops with Local Organisations; and
- an overview of the key priorities for the future in a number of areas identified by Resident Focus Group participants.

Resident Focus Groups

Between the 2nd and 17th of November 2001 a total of 15 focus groups were conducted across the city with 140 randomly selected residents. To ensure fair representation of the whole community participants were recruited on the basis of their age, gender and location. Five of the focus groups were with young people 16-24

years, five with adults 25-49 years and five were with older people 50 plus years.

Workshops with Local Organisations

Between the 27th and 29th of November 2001, six workshops were conducted with 137 representatives of local Blue Mountains organisations at different locations throughout the city. These workshops brought a diverse mix of stakeholders together in order to create robust discussion on the desired future for the Blue Mountains.

PROCESS OVERVIEW

Blue Mountains Our FutureThe Next 25 Years



The Resident Focus Groups and Local Organisation Workshops provided a range of vision statements and desired future outcome statements. Along with detailed analysis of trends and issues - the outcomes from these workshops and focus groups will be used to develop a clear direction for the future of the Blue Mountains.

This direction for our future will be placed on public exhibition before going to Council for final endorsement. Once we have agreed on the future direction for the Blue Mountains – then we can work together again on developing the Action Plan that will make our vision a reality in the short medium and longer term!

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

It is clear from the community consultation process that the people of the Blue Mountains want a future where ***the natural environment is well protected and remains the number one priority within the community.***

Preserving the environment and living in an environmentally sustainable way were at the forefront of most focus group and workshop discussion. A very high proportion of vision statements (76% from the Resident Focus Groups and 80% from the Workshops with Local Organisations) made specific mention of the natural environment and its importance to the community of the future.

Another key idea for the future was the importance of ***preserving the distinctiveness and unique identity of our towns and villages.*** The focus group and workshop participants highlighted the need to preserve the character, green setting and sense of peace and tranquillity at the heart of life in the Blue Mountains. Having liveable and vibrant communities with a strong sense of place was a high priority.

In seeking to preserve both the natural and built environments, certain ideas appeared to gain consensus during the workshops. It was generally agreed that the Mountains should aim for moderate population growth, enforce strict urban development and design controls, and encourage sustainable lifestyles (particularly in relation to transport, industry, energy use and waste management).

The theme of ***a safe community that cares for its people*** also came through strongly. Over half the stakeholder's vision statements (54%) and 44% of the resident focus groups mentioned some idea linked to this theme. Having strong connected communities meeting diverse resident needs, particularly of young people, was emphasised.

The three themes mentioned above stood out as *the* most important ideas for the future. However, as the summary table of participant vision themes demonstrates, there were also several other common themes to emerge from the workshops.

VISION THEMES

| Vision theme | Proportion of vision statements mentioning theme | |
|---|--|-------------------------------|
| | Residents (N=171) | Workshop Participants (N=123) |
| A unique & valued natural environment | 76% | 80% |
| Maintain our own identity as a place to live & visit | 56% | 54% |
| A convenient, reliable & affordable public transport system | 46% | 28% |
| A community that cares for its people | 44% | 54% |
| Local employment opportunities | 31% | 43% |
| A variety of recreation opportunities that are widely available | 28% | 21% |
| A safe and effective road transport system | 21% | 33% |
| Quality educational opportunities | 20% | 26% |
| A safe community | 13% | 17% |
| Council consults and communicates | 12% | 11% |
| Quality health & welfare services | 12% | 12% |
| A balanced population | 12% | 10% |
| Celebrated as a centre for arts & culture | 11% | 11% |
| An affordable lifestyle | 10% | 11% |
| Increased access & services for less mobile people * | 7% | na |
| The Blue Mountains as a thriving ecotourism destination | 6% | 15% |

Table 1: Comparison of Stakeholder & Resident Vision Themes

Note – although there were 137 attendees, not all participants handed in a vision statement.

*Re-coded into “A community that cares for its people” in the stakeholder analysis.

The following table presents the content analysis of participants’ written statements (*“My Vision for Our Future”*) describing these visions and comparing the occurrences of the main themes between the resident focus group and the stakeholders group.

In comparing the visions of stakeholder and residents, there were many similarities and few differences of opinion. Stakeholder participant visions were more likely than resident visions to mention themes such as a caring community, local employment (particularly environmentally sensitive tourism), educational opportunities and an effective transport system. Yet, stakeholder participants were less likely to focus on public transport and recreational issues than residents.

CORE IDEAS – WORKSHOPS WITH LOCAL ORGANISATION REPRESENTATIVES

One of the main goals of the Workshops with Local Organisation representatives was to actively involve participants in developing a list of 'core ideas' for the future of the Blue Mountains that everyone (regardless of vested interests) could agree upon.

The Stakeholder groups were focussed around the idea of a sustainable city and as such the concepts promoted tended to be integrative in their theme, meaning that they cross the major areas of consensus around environment, preservation of villages and caring for the community. There was, however slight variances on the emphasis of the core ideas and to illustrate this, the themes have been ordered according to the emphasis that has been placed around the three major areas of consensus.

Core Ideas by Theme – From Workshops with Local Organisation Representatives

| Preserving our natural environment | Retaining Identity and Character | Caring for our community and cultural vitality |
|---|---|--|
| "Individuals Living Sustainably" | "Village Islands In The Park" | "People Caring For People And Place" |
| "Sustainable Lifestyles In The Blue Mountains" | "Wilderness, Lifestyle, Villages, Visitors" | "Plan To Care (For People And Place)" |
| "Blue Mountains - Living With The Bush" | "Villages Sharing World Heritage" | "Eco-City" |
| "Community In Harmony With Bushland" | | "Blue Mountains - Lifestyle Choices" |
| "Develop & Conserve The Living Showcase" | | "Ecologically Sustainable, Renewable, Spiritual, Safe, Culturally Diverse" |
| "Connected Cottage Communities in a World Heritage Environment" | | "Breaking Down Isolation - Through Effective Communication And Transportation" |
| "Community & Nature In Harmony" | | "Diverse Community" |
| "Committing To Environmental Sustainability Through Local Partnerships" | | "Healthy Society" |
| "A World Heritage Community" | | "Caring, Creative Culture" |
| "A Healthy Natural Environment" | | "A Unique Environment With A Culturally Diverse Community" |
| "Sustainable Commerce" | | "Open Governance" |

KEY PRIORITY AREAS – RESIDENT FOCUS GROUPS

In addition to discussing broad visions for the future, the resident focus groups were asked to IDENTIFY more specific outcomes-based descriptions of five key priority areas identified by Council in earlier research phase. The main interactive exercise of the focus groups was a brainstorming session where participants were asked to answer the following question in relation to the five key priority areas identified by Council:

“What will the people of 2025 appreciate about ... ?

1. (How we) Look after our natural environment?
2. (How we) Look after the people of the Blue Mountains?
3. Working in the Blue Mountains?
4. Moving around the Blue Mountains?
5. Living & playing in the Blue Mountains?"

The following provides a description of what were common to most focus groups for each key priority area.

Looking After our Natural Environment

The major area of consensus for the workshops - that above all else the environment must be protected - was unanimously reaffirmed in the group discussions. Protecting a unique and beautiful environment of world significance, living in harmony with that environment in a sustainable way, leading the way in environmentally friendly waste management practices and becoming renowned for environmental education and research were all hopes commonly shared by all groups in their respective discussions.

The generally agreed upon environmental themes to emerge from the focus group discussions were:

- **A City within a World Heritage National Park**
- **A model community for sustainable living**
- **A model community for waste management**
- **A centre for environmental education**

Looking After the People of the Blue Mountains

Discussions about looking after the people of the Mountains brought out one of the key areas of conflict. All groups put forward descriptions of a future community that enjoyed increased or improved facilities and services for key sections of the community (mainly youth and aged). However, there was at times confusion, debate and even despair when it came to the practical question of 'how' to provide all the things the community of 2025 should have.

Population growth provided a major source of debate in all the workshops. The 'knee jerk reaction' from many participants seemed to be that the current level of population was 'about right' and that population growth should be actively discouraged. However, as the inevitability of population growth (and the negative implications of no growth) dawned on participants during debate, it became apparent to many that the issue may not be about population growth as it is about sustainable living. Whilst there was still unanimous agreement that the Mountains must not become "overcrowded", participants warmed to the idea that maybe the Mountains can sustain moderate growth if other aspects of life changed so that the stresses placed on the natural environment and local infrastructure are significantly reduced.

Other areas of concern emerged in relation to specific groups within the community. One area of grave concern, particularly amongst the youth focus groups, was the lack of things to motivate young people to stay in the Mountains. When asked his vision for the future, a participant from the Lawson youth focus group summed up the stark outlook many young people in the Blue Mountains face today:

“I think of the Mountains as a place I leave... I leave to go to uni, I leave to go out at night, I leave to go shopping I'll have to leave to get a job and I will probably have to leave to buy a house. What I would hope for the young people of 2025 is a place they can stay in to do more things.”

The five youth groups tended to be more focused on employment and recreation opportunities than other groups, as these are areas where they feel major dissatisfaction at present. There was unanimous agreement amongst youth participants (also echoed by other life-stage groups) that the young people of 2025 will hopefully appreciate greater local opportunities in both employment and recreation. There was also virtually unanimous recognition that the community of 2025 must be able to support the needs of the aging population. There was a hope that the significant aging population of 2025 will have adequate aged care services and facilities (particularly medical), enough suitable housing and access to transport.

The main themes about looking after the people of the Mountains to emerge from the focus group discussions were:

- **We provide the services & facilities our people need**
- **A proud, inclusive & tolerant community**
- **An affordable lifestyle**
- **A safe community**

Working in the Blue Mountains

Participants hoped that the community of 2025 would have more local job opportunities than currently exist. Young participants were particularly pessimistic about employment and training opportunities. Youth were also more concerned about the lack of career opportunities in the Mountains, lamenting the fact that job opportunities for young people are generally restricted to casual and part-time unskilled service jobs. As one participant in a youth focus group put it, not everyone wants to be a checkout operator all their life.

Participants were also hopeful that the City would develop a broader economic base that does not rely as heavily on tourism and the public sector for local employment. Tourism was still seen as the cornerstone of the local economy, but other industries must also be actively encouraged to develop. There was a rejection of any industries that may have a serious negative impact on the natural environment or the village character of the Mountains (such as heavy industry manufacturing).

When describing the industries of the future, participants envisaged 'eco-friendly' and 'green' businesses. There was strong consensus that the tourism industry should work hard to evolve into an "ecotourism" industry. An environmental education and research sector was also seen as an area which could potentially provide jobs and education and training opportunities. One very popular idea under the environmental education theme was that of a University campus in the Mountains, which could become a centre of excellence in environmental education and research. There was also support for the idea of home based businesses and providing the telecommunications infrastructure to allow for telecommuting.

Accepting that commuting was likely to remain a part of life in the Mountains, many participants hoped that the commuters of 2025 would enjoy better support in the form of reliable and affordable public transport, car pooling and safe roads. The desired outcomes common to most groups is provided below.

- **Local jobs**
- **Ecologically sustainable industry**
- **Education & training opportunities**
- **Support for local businesses**
- **We support our commuting workforce**

Moving Around the Blue Mountains

Participants wanted to see a transport system that was safe to use and provided effective links between the different urban areas of the Mountains and beyond. The vast majority of participants wanted to see the City become less dependent on cars and use public transport to get around. This was seen as neatly fitting the clean, green image they wanted for the future. However, there was a perception that much had to change in relation to the provision public transport before such a trend could actually take hold. There was a widespread belief that public transport needs to be more frequent, reliable, affordable and safe before a majority of people will use it. A minority of participants then argued that the relatively low current usage of public transport in fact discourages improved services.

There was also a great deal of debate about the future of the Great Western Highway in most groups. Almost everybody agreed that there were already too many heavy trucks on the highway, and that the community of 2025 would appreciate our creative solutions for diverting this traffic in other ways. One

popular idea was to make greater use of rail to move freight through the Mountains. Another suggestion was that of an alternative route to the Great Western Highway for through traffic heading west. However, participants generally understood that debate on these matters will far outlast the City Strategy process itself.

Another theme to emerge from group discussions on 'moving around the Mountains' was that of environmentally sensitive transport. There was a great deal of support for the idea of increasing the provision of pedestrian walkways and cycleways in and around the urban areas of the City. Other common ideas to emerge under this theme included an extensive car-pooling network for commuters and reduced vehicle emissions (more environmentally friendly vehicles e.g. electric/solar powered). The desired outcomes common to most groups is provided below.

- **Safe and effective transport links**
- **More people using public transport**
- **Management of the Great Western Highway ; i.e:**
 - Fewer heavy trucks on the highway
 - Rail used for goods transport to and through the Mountains
 - It is safe to use for both locals and visitors
 - Better access for pedestrians across the highway in busy areas (bridges/tunnels/lights)
 - Double lanes all the way up the Mountains (&/OR)
 - An alternative route for through-trucks
- **Environmentally friendly transport**