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BETTER IDEAS

THE FUTURE OF REGIONAL QUEENSLAND

Better Ideas

THE FUTURE OF REGIONAL QUEENSLAND

THURSDAY 5 MARCH

7.30am – 9.00am

Customs House, 399 Queen St, Brisbane

MODERATOR:

Associate Professor Sarah Jane Kelly

Director of External Engagement

UQ Business School

PANELISTS:

Cr Anne Baker

Mayor

Isaac Regional Council

Cr Jenny Hill

Mayor

Townsville City Council

Cr Margaret Strelow

Mayor

Rockhampton Regional Council

Cr Bill Trevor

Deputy Mayor

Bundaberg Regional Council

Cr Karen Williams

Mayor

Redland City Council

Cr Fiona Gaske

Deputy Mayor

Balonne Shire Council

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A U S T R A L I A

Business School

KEY COMMENTS FROM

Panelists



MODERATOR:

Professor Sarah Jane Kelly

Director of External Engagement
UQ Business School

Welcome and introduction of panelists and invitation to share their headline views on the outlook for their regions including opportunities and challenges that may lie ahead.



Cr Anne Baker

Mayor
Isaac Regional Council

- + The broader region works collaboratively with a 'no borders' policy to ensure when one area succeeds the whole region benefits.
- + In response to the cyclic conditions of our national economic drivers, the broader region has developed a strong mantra of resilience, remaining open to innovation and diversity to drive future growth
- + In the year ahead we have a state election and we are all currently living through a national economy picture that is changing not by the hour but by the minute
- + We must be ready to respond and adapt to whatever is going to evolve and we have to do that together. Working in isolation does not deliver a positive outcome.
- + Our expectation for the pending Qld state election is a fair return on investment. The financial contribution that comes out of the broader Mackay, Isaac, Whitsunday region is astronomical to running of this state and country.
- + Our region should never be wanting for essential infrastructure on everybody's wants; water, infrastructure, transport, roads, education, skills and training.
- + The current strength in our region is the regional leadership which has been validated and endorsed by the Greater Whitsunday Council of Mayors all being re-elected unopposed. It is the key to sustainability, and working together for a positive outcome.
- + Mackay, Isaac, Whitsunday region are open for business and you are all very welcome.



Cr Fiona Gaske

Deputy Mayor
Balonne Shire Council

The main town in Balonne Shire is St George. The shire is 600km south-west of Brisbane. We are rural, quite isolated and western, and specialise in droughts and floods.

- + Infrastructure is the catalyst for growth, particularly in our region.
- + Population decline is a big issue. It's challenging to keep people in our community in order to invest and work and drive our economy.

- + We have formed some great partnerships in order to address this including with QTC, and our exclusion fencing project which has enabled our farmers to diversify.
- + Another example is the high value horticulture program, which resulted from the Murray Darling Basin Plan and buy-backs under that plan when our irrigators lost their water.
- + As a result of rethinking what to grow, we are now a huge horticultural bowl. We grow broccoli, carrots, blueberries and onions, now exported overseas.
- + Alongside diversification, connectivity is another big issue for us, including digital connectivity and also transport infrastructure.
- + The inland rail project is critically important for us and delays in that project would be catastrophic for our shire and cost millions.
- + Infrastructure is the key for us as a region in terms of growth, the ability to diversify, and recognising that food and fibre leadership is so important.
- + If 70% of our population is in the South-East, who is going to grow that food and where are your clothes going to come from? It really is that basic.



Cr Jenny Hill

Mayor

Townsville City Council

- + Townsville is the largest mixed port outside of Brisbane. Originally established to move cattle the port is now a big part of the growth of the Mt Isa, Townsville region. As an area of rock we include Palm Island, Hinchinbrook, Burdekin & Charters Towers. We also have strong links out to Mt Isa and Northern Territory.
- + The economy is a mixture of mining, as well as agricultural product.
- + Townsville is also the hub of science and technology, particularly through James Cook University and now Central Queensland University.
- + Our minerals processing did consist of Queensland Nickel, Korea Zinc & the Copper Refinery, but sadly Queensland Nickel closed about 4 years ago.
- + The economy in Townsville is quite mixed and like many other regions we find that working as a group of councils brings us strength and a voice for both state and federal governments.
- + Because of the closure of QNI, as a council we've diverted and shifted to bring new industries and new technologies.
- + With the support of the state government Townsville have invested in a water reuse scheme using new technology from Australia, which originally was only sold to the Japanese because Australians wouldn't take it up. It is now providing water for industry at a far cheaper rate than what would be traditionally available.
- + Korea Zinc has shown that by implementing our water reuse as well their own version of solar through their plant, they've changed their minerals refinery from being one of the most expensive in the world to now being one of the most price compatible. We see that as an advantage now in the north.
- + As a council 20 years ago we invested in a block of land that was deemed suitable by state development as an industrial precinct, and we are now moving forward with the development thanks to the help of the Queensland Government, hopefully with the first lithium ion battery plant in Australia.
- + That is the future for the north, it's not about turning our backs on our mineral or agricultural industry, it is about developing our area and ensuring we create jobs using the new technologies.
- + We don't do that enough in Australia and it's very difficult to do now in the capital cities. Townsville has a population of just under 200,000 people, it has the largest military base in Australia, and is about to embark on a relationship with the Singaporean military and probably the government.
- + Our biggest threat in regional Queensland is the lack of investment by Australians in industry in our region.
- + If you could turn that around, that would go a long way in helping us to develop the north.



Cr Margaret Strelow

Mayor
Rockhampton City Council

Rockhampton deliberately decided the cavalry was not coming and we needed to do things for ourselves. We are a city with great fundamentals.

- + The fundamental strengths of our community include an abundance of water, power stations nearby, and a diverse industry.
- + Rockhampton has a long standing association with the Singapore government similar to Townsville, with a 27year history of military exercises.
- + Like everyone else, we are struggling to get government funding to get things that are going to change our world in terms of new jobs, and keeping our youth in Rockhampton.
- + 20 years ago our youth would go to Brisbane to university and then come back home to get a job and raise their families. Now they don't come back, because the jobs they have don't have an equivalent in Rockhampton, or the internet is not fast enough. We are now finding the grandmas are heading down south as well.
- + 70% of Queensland's population lives within an hour and a half of the Brisbane CBD. State and federal government figures projecting new jobs growth; talk about 13% of new jobs in the next five years being outside that circle.
- + We need a big picture solution for this or Queensland will watch its regional cities continue to be in a beauty contest trying to attract attention.
- + Cities can die, and regional cities in Queensland are a lot further away than other states.
- + A fast train up the coast, which puts us two hours away from Brisbane CBD, would mean we could compete with all the things that urbanisation wants to do.

Meanwhile, compete we are...

- + We have a new housing incentive offering \$5,000 for building any new house, as a residence or investment.
- + We have a shortage of engineers, mechanics and highly paid jobs. Council is offering a \$2,500 incentive to relocate and take up those positions.
- + We have a stubbornly high unemployment rate of 7.8% of people who will never be engineers.



Cr Bill Trevor OAM

Deputy Mayor
Bundaberg Regional Council

Bundaberg Regional Council has some wonderful opportunities in the agricultural industry. We have seen massive expansion over the last 5-10 years in macadamias, avocados and sweet potatoes. We lead Australia in production of those three products in particular with another 20-30 products out there that grow in our rich red soils.

- + Water is the key to everything we do and we currently have a crisis with Paradise Dam and the plan to lower the dam by 5 metres as a result of the engineering difficulties.
- + 4-5 million people across the world will rise into middle class over the next 5-10 years. Food will become the new energy of the world. We are well positioned in our region and particularly Australia to capitalise on those opportunities.
- + If it's got a kangaroo on it, or the word Australia, then around the world people trust that as clean, green and safe food to feed their kids. We need to take up those opportunities and water is the key to allowing us to do that.
- + Bundaberg have opportunities to not only export fresh food to the world but to value-add it before it leaves our shores. There are a number of countries you can't send raw products to, including China for avocados.

- + Our sister city Nanning is looking at building manufacturing plants in Bundaberg to take advantage of manufacturing some of those products before they take them home.
- + The other thing we see around regional development in our area is partnerships between state and federal governments, local government and local companies. It's the partnerships between federal, state, local government and existing private businesses that drive regional opportunities.
- + A few projects reflecting the value in that are recently Ryan Metal in Maryborough

received \$28.9million towards their new shell factory, building shells for the Australian and American military. Bundaberg received \$18.9million for Bundaberg Ginger Beer Company to build a new factory. \$165million development supported by \$18.9million from the federal government, delivering 350 new jobs and anchoring them in Bundaberg forever. The flow-on effects from these state and federal government investments contribute significantly to the overall economic growth in the regions.



Cr Karen Williams

Mayor
Redland City Council

The Redlands Coast is uniquely different to many of the other regional council areas. Redlands is a city of islands, with 350kms of coastline, but because we sit in SEQ, the largest growth area in Queensland it is often forgotten that we have an interesting demographic with our island communities.

- + Some of our bay islands have double the unemployment rates, some of the highest aging population demographics and we don't qualify as a region, but Redlands certainly has some regional challenges.
- + The growth on the islands is exponential compared to the rest of the city. The bridge discussion comes up at least once a year, including who will fund it.
- + Being recognised as a region is important to Redlands as it attracts a lot more funding from other levels of government.
- + However, on a positive, we can be part of a big picture event for SEQ called the 2032 Olympics bid. This will allow us to find ways to build the infrastructure we've been asking for and where we've been forgotten as part of SEQ previously.
- + Other opportunities for Redlands include Ecotourism and Cultural Ecotourism. We are in a partnership with the Walker Corporation to build a \$1.3billion tourist attraction, as well as a port.
- + Redlands Coast and Gladstone are also two of the areas that are being looked at around Hydrogen as future energy opportunities. Redlands from an urban perspective and Gladstone from an export perspective.
- + Currently future uses of urban situations to generate green hydrogen are being investigated. We have a lot of water and a lot of sunshine, so watch this space, it's really exciting.
- + Being close to Brisbane allows us to have those sorts of partnerships, with a new partnership close to being announced to revitalise our Capalaba CBD.
- + Queensland is still a great state with plenty of opportunities, particularly looking forward to 2032, and Redlands Coast wants to be on that journey with the rest of the region.

Q & A Session

Q. With the election so soon, what is the one burning issue for your region?

Cr Gaske

Infrastructure – right now roads, digital, and lack of competition in power for our rural areas. Government policy needs to be driving long term sustainable outcomes.

Cr Williams: Infrastructure - Eastern Busway, duplication of rail, road programs mostly need to be delivered by state government, but the voting public always think it's the mayor's fault. So, educating people on where that money comes from and banging the drum.

Cr Trevor

Water – Paradise Dam has been the single largest driver of confidence in our region, so now they are planning to pull it down by 5 metres, we don't think it'll ever go up. It's become a political tool, there is an enquiry going on and confidence has withdrawn. People are stepping back. \$600million in investment in agriculture has now been paused as the two companies wait to see what happens with our water.

Cr Strelow

Population – and all the things that flow underneath that. We certainly need jobs, but give us the people and find a way to the push population out. We need government policy that makes it a no-brainer for businesses to set up in the regions and for people to move to the regions.

Cr Hil

We are pushing jobs and economic growth but the feeling is really about crime. High unemployment drives high crime.

Cr Baker

Our focus is the funding. Funding for infrastructure – be it roads, education, skills and training. And it is about retaining your permanent population. We have a very high population that comes in and out, but we know that given the opportunity of having a regional experience there is enough people that choose to make a living decision and choose to stay so we are looking to government and industry to enable that to happen. The other critical point we will be taking to the election in terms of advocacy is that while you encourage economic stimulus and everyone is talking about jobs which is what everybody wants and needs, but we must start to talk about the social stimulus that comes as a consequence of jobs growth. If you are in a region where your jobs are increasing that is a positive benefit, but what comes with jobs growth are social impacts. There is a ripple and a consequence, and it's a positive one, but we need to be talking about economic stimulus and social stimulus in the same sentence. We will be going to the election with an advocacy piece to both sides of government around what is your policy and how do you intend to enable the regions populations to grow and be sustainable in line with economic stimulus.

We can't talk about jobs in isolation, because it gives you what we've currently got in our region and the broader regions, there are issues. We've got a lot of positivity, it's a great place, but it's a policy setting that needs to be targeted for each individual region. It's not one size fits all. There needs to be resilience within policy setting.

Q. What can be done at the front line by you as leaders and councillors, and what are you doing in looking to the future on some of these problems?

Cr Strelow

Rockhampton has worked hard to drive improvement locally while still lobbying hard for government assistance. Six years ago we had a massive rate rise, which we need to fix a long term problem – a council that was not well enough resourced to take over where other levels of government had stepped out. Since then we've delivered 7 budgets in surplus and paid \$50million off the debt and a whole lot of good things since that time, but we've also invested in Advance Rockhampton funded to \$5million annually.

We have more people on the ground trying to

get things happening in Rockhampton than state government have ever done. We've got incentive programs, but we also haven't forgotten that we have to be a place that people want to live, so we are currently building an art gallery which will house a nationally recognised collection of Australian modern art. Council has funded a start-up incubator with currently 90 contributing businesses, including some more recent support from other levels of government, which has been running for 3 years now and provided a significant boost. We are enthusiastically willing to work closely to support any new businesses looking at coming to Rockhampton.

Q. In the wake of recent natural disasters including the bush fires and now coronavirus, how do you see your region positioning in the tourism and events areas to attract domestic and international tourists in the wake of the downturn?

Cr Hill

Townsville can't compete with Cairns and the Whitsundays, so we haven't tried to. We have been funded through the state government for a museum of underwater art, with the first stage to be completed by around May. For Townsville region it's really been about events. The Elton John Concert, the building of the new stadium. Council bought the land and put it up as our contribution plus approx. \$30million in infrastructure. For Townsville, tourism is very fickle, but we are focused on a mixed economy, which is why Townsville will survive. Whether in minerals processing, agriculture, or tourism it's all a small part.

Not all regional cities are aging. We are fortunate to have an average age of 34, with the army putting downward pressure on the age of our population. We exit about 500-800 servicemen a year, and more than half want to stay in the region. The biggest problem is training for us, so we are working with defence to try and get people into adult courses. We are working with Australian Cyber and hoping to be one of the cyber nodes. We are working with TAFE Queensland to bring their cyber course up and working not just with the veterans, but also with the high schools to run these programs.

If we are going to survive and retrain we need to start talking about training people in modules instead of 3-4year courses and slowly working them through the system. The youth demographic is very different to 20 years ago.

Cr Williams

Christmas last year we officially lost sand mining on North Stradbroke Island, a very fast tracked economic transition, and we are very focused on the opportunities to build eco-cultural sustainable tourism with the Quandamooka people. It's quite balanced at the moment. We have been very reliant on the domestic tourist market, but for the growth of that sector they do need to attract people from elsewhere and for that to happen we need to ensure there is a world class port. Partnerships with the Walker Corporation and state government to build a world class Toondah Harbour will not only generate jobs and opportunities at that spot, but hopefully encourage people to experience our beautiful Moreton Bay and all of our islands. I've also had a number of discussions with Minister Jones about starting to put Moreton Bay on the map from a tourism point of view. The Great Barrier Reef is beautiful, but we too have beautiful reefs and 3-4 airports not too far away, so we should be exploiting the opportunities of people coming to this country.

Redlands is a bit under the radar, but we also have Sirromet Winery, and they have a great corporate responsibility attitude and are looking at how we can partner in providing rehabilitation for Koalas that may not be relocated, so there are a lot of opportunities in the natural ecotourism space for Redlands.

It's all about partnerships with all levels of government and with private industry. With our two CBDs; we can't do it on our own. We only have 160,000 people, they are an aging population and if we don't find partners that want to invest it becomes very difficult to find the funds through a general rate scenario.

Q. What are the sectors for the future to build economic growth and positive social impacts in the regions?

Cr Trevor

Agriculture is leading from the front in lots of areas in mechanisation and robotics. We are even seeing the entry into the market of robotics that pick avocados and distinguish which ones are right and wrong. That opens up a massive opportunity for a step forward in reducing production costs. Technology in agriculture is leaping forward at an amazing rate. Recently at a factory we were seeing individual trees connected to a computer, where they could tell it when they

had had enough water to drink. The water requirements of each tree are different, and this technology has the capacity to deliver significant annual savings across a 150,000 tree orchard. There are some exciting opportunities coming through on the picking and packaging on the robotics sides as well. Not only in agriculture, but in medical fields there are great leaps and bounds, in robotic keyhole surgery etc. We need to embrace the changes that are coming and do all we can to hasten them.

Q. What are the major changes we need to stimulate in the state and federal arena to facilitate water infrastructure in the north?

Cr Baker

Water is liquid gold. We need to look at the big picture and get it into a workable piece of policy that's going to enable sustainability across all the regions moving forward. Nothing can be delivered without sustainable water and that can only come from policy. Conversation for decades have centred around delivering individual projects; we need to pause, get all the professionals and technical experts into a room and get an outcome that is going to deliver what is needed for sustainability in not only the regions but in this state around water and continuity.

Cr Gaske

Water policy is one of the most complex areas, but I agree that integrated policy is something that is required, because it is managed at all levels of government and that is where the confusion is. An example of a successful program was the Healthy Headwaters Program. Run by the state, our farmers were able to invest in water efficient infrastructure on farms,

and that has made a big difference in terms of our efficiency; and programs like that should be emulated and looked at as we move forward. Our farmers are great stewards, they need their land to be productive, and they want to play in this space and are very interested in managing their business in an efficient way. Integrated policy is essential because it is so confusing and at 20 years old the current system is outdated.

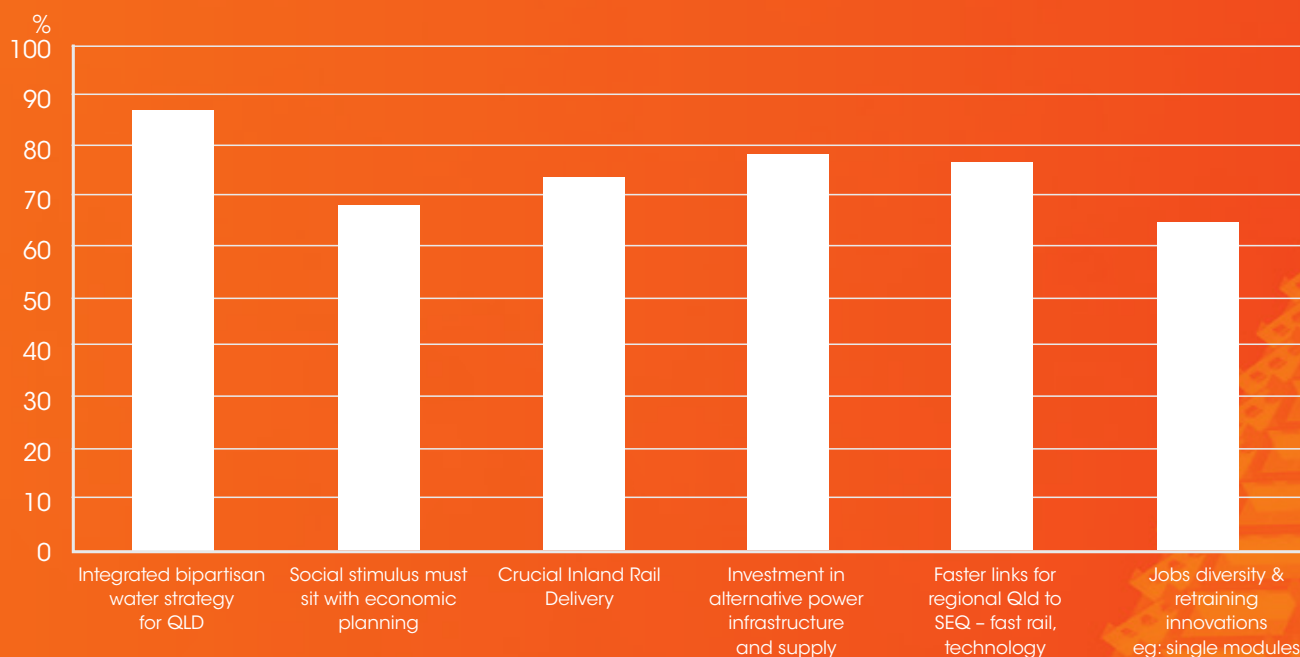
Cr Strelow

Our point of difference is that water is state government controlled, and Rockhampton City Council actually owns our own water. We own twice what we use as a city, and we own the infrastructure that holds it, we just need people to come and make use of it.

SUMMARY OF

Attendee Comments

TOP IDEAS/INITIATIVES



SUMMARY OF

Ideas

- + All councillors reinforced the value of collaboration and big picture thinking to support building sustainable, resilient regional economies for the future.
- + Infrastructure as a catalyst for growth still sits at the top of every regions agenda; including roads, digital, employment, water, energy and technology; with a new Queensland-wide bi-partisan water policy deemed critical.
- + Better connectivity; both physically through initiatives such as a fast rail link and virtually through improved services and access to new technologies; is seen as key to enable regional cities to reverse population decline and thrive, not just survive.
- + A new approach to delivery of training & upskilling of regional residents is needed with a strong push for progressive individual modules in place of 3-4 year university degrees. Each region must be able to further develop their unique advantages and market them effectively to attract both domestic and international visitors, as well as young, skilled workers as long term residents.
- + State and federal governments must increase support to the regions through infrastructure investment and effective policy reform, but also with more targeted incentives to encourage individuals and industry to relocate to regional areas.
- + Combination private/public investments are gaining momentum as a strong solution in accelerating localised opportunities to leverage regional natural advantages and increase manufacturing and jobs particularly in the areas of food production and renewables.



All councillors reinforced the value of collaboration and big picture thinking to support building sustainable, resilient regional economies for the future.

Members





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For further information

Steve Greenwood | Managing Director
steve.greenwood@qldfutures.com.au

www.qldfutures.com.au
Level 11, 111 Eagle Street Brisbane Q 4000