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Community reaction to establishing a greenbelt: An example South East Queensland, Australia

Dr Pamela Wardner

UNIVERSITY OF THE SUNSHINE COAST, QUEENSLAND, AUSTRALIA

ABSTRACT

One of the purposes of the concept of greenbelts is to contain urban sprawl from infringing onto rural areas. However, what if the adjoining suburb past the 'green' area is also a growing urban area? Without purposive action by the community, compromises may be created and urban encroachment occurs – slowly and marginally at first, until a seamless divide is the result.

The South-east Queensland planning scheme is under review in 2014. Two large parcels of undeveloped land totalling approximately 6,400 hectares are under consideration to be included in the long term plan for urban development between two peri-urban regions. The implications of this decision expand further to those parcels alone but extend to the future use of the neighbouring pine tree plantations.

Community inputs and consultations are important considerations for any public policy legislation without which can be criticised as being unduly influenced for economic gain by critics. Therefore this research investigates the level of awareness and knowledge about the geographical areas and whether there is an opportunity to consider a more permanent solution to urban sprawl such as a legislated greenbelt area.

A community awareness telephone survey gathered the responses of 400 individuals from a list of 4500 contacts located in the surrounding areas. The results of the survey show that the community appears to be in favour of an inter-urban break (greenbelt) and are willing to be involved in further investigations that define such an area, its management and use into the future. The findings of this research provide an evidence-base to the Australian policy cycle for urban planning.

Keywords: greenbelt, community reaction, South-east Queensland, Australia, inter-urban break

INTRODUCTION

Any major change in land use often stirs an emotional response from the community and most likely would be fuelled by simplified messages headlined in the media. The scale of the project is often not directly commensurate to the public response. Such was the case for two project sites in South East Queensland, Australia.

This paper reports on the community's reaction to the idea of establishing a greenbelt. The use of the term 'inter-urban break' in this paper instead of 'greenbelt' was deliberate as the land that creates the 'break' is currently used as a commercial pine tree plantation and as such, no legislated or designated greenbelt is in place. Thus, so as not to pre-empt legislation or mislead the public, the term inter-urban break is used in this research albeit the colloquial term used is the 'greenbelt'.

The preservation of the inter-urban break and the proposal to establish a greenbelt emerged because of another issue. The Queensland state government and the local government of the Sunshine Coast region are in debate over the inclusion of one of two project sites into a policy document that manages the urban growth in the South East Queensland region in Australia.

Public discussions prominently emerged in the local media, and concerned groups felt that there was confusion and misinformation circulating further creating uncertainty. Therefore, local university academics independently chose to assist in strengthening the logic in the debate. To this end, a decision to conduct a telephone survey was undertaken to understand the level of awareness of these issues.

The experiences documented in this paper provides a contribution for academics and policy makers when addressing contentious or potential controversial issues particularly when considering community inputs in long term urban growth policies.

This structure of this paper includes a background of the issues and then discusses the theory of framing, in capturing true community values. It then reports on the methodology of the research and after which discusses the results of the survey. It concludes with a summary of findings and the limitations and the directions for future research.

BACKGROUND OF THE ISSUES

In 2005, the Queensland State Government established an urban footprint around its fast growing metropolitan area called South East Queensland where close to 75 per cent of the state's 4.7 million population live (Queensland Government Statistician's Office 2014). This was incorporated in the South East Queensland Regional Plan (SEQRP) developed under the *Integrated Planning Act 2007* which was to be reflected in local planning instruments. Any inconsistency between the SEQRP and other plans, policies or codes under other Acts, the SEQRP would prevail. The purpose of the urban footprint was to limit development within existing developed and identified greenfield areas to where there is planned infrastructure provided and to regulate the spread of urban sprawl (Department of Infrastructure and Planning 2009). The urban footprint accounts for 13 per cent of the total land area of the region and not all of the lands included are developable – some are restricted to environmental sensitivity constraints such as flooding (Department of state Development Infrastructure and Planning 2014).

The SEQRP underwent a major review after its first four years to respond to growth management issues due to: a higher than expected population growth, housing affordability pressure, transportation congestion and the need to respond to climate change (Queensland Government 2009). Thus one of the key changes in the SEQRP 2009–2031 was 'establishing *Identified Growth Areas (IGA)* as additional future urban land supply that can be made ready for development subject to master planning and the provision of required infrastructure to address the housing affordability and choice issues (Department of Infrastructure and Planning 2009).

Under this clause, was one of the subject property areas named 'Halls Creek', a 1400-hectare property given IGA status. This property is located in the southern boundary of the urban footprint of a local government area called the Sunshine Coast – one of the fastest growing regions in South East Queensland. Halls Creek is owned by the largest property developer in Australia and is adjacent to their recently approved 50,000-population, master planned township called Caloundra South, scheduled to be developed over the next 30 years.

The Halls Creek property is adjacent to a 31-kilometer long inter-urban break between the regions of the Sunshine Coast and Moreton Bay currently providing a greenbelt gap between the two. Most of the land is used for pine forest plantation with a 99-year lease from the State Government which was entered into in 2011 by Hancock Plantations Queensland.

In 2014, the SEQRP is again under review particularly to address the capability of the regions land supply, both greenfield and infill, out to the next 30 years till 2041. Under the new SEQRP, the state government, guided by the proposed Queensland Plan, intends to empower local governments to deliver and manage effective planning for their communities through a new State Planning Policy (SPP) and will only be involved when issues arise that cannot be resolved by a single local government or their policy conflicts. As such, local governments are also encouraged to review their respective planning schemes to accommodate these new policy intentions. Figure 1 below shows the new Queensland planning framework hierarchy.

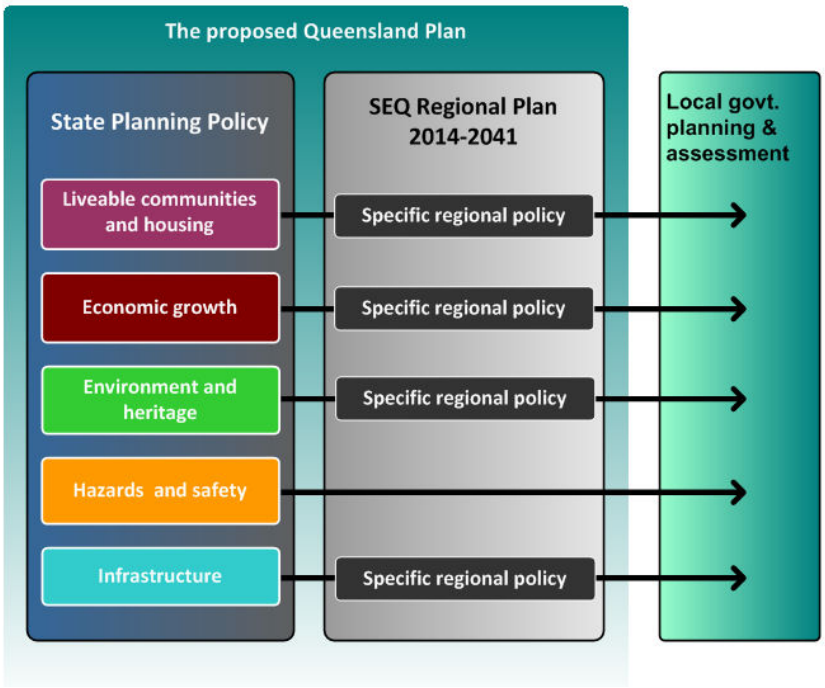

Figure 1 Queensland planning framework
Source: (Queensland Government 2014)

Under this review process which commenced in early 2014, the Sunshine Coast Council reiterated its proposal submitted in 2009 of the non-inclusion of the Halls Creek IGA arguing that the development of such land would adversely affect the environmentally sensitive waterways named Pumicestone Passage and diminishes the inter-urban break between the Sunshine Coast and Moreton Bay (Sunshine Coast Council 2009a, 2009b). The Sunshine Coast Council has conducted numerous studies supporting its opposition to the inclusion of Halls Creek over the past 15 years but has been ignored at State level (Sunshine Coast Environment Council 2014).

Instead, the local council proposes the inclusion of the predominantly state-owned 5032-hectare Beerwah East property to the west of the Bruce Highway (which separates them) located immediately adjacent across from the subject property of Halls Creek as an alternative IGA. See Figure 2 for property location.

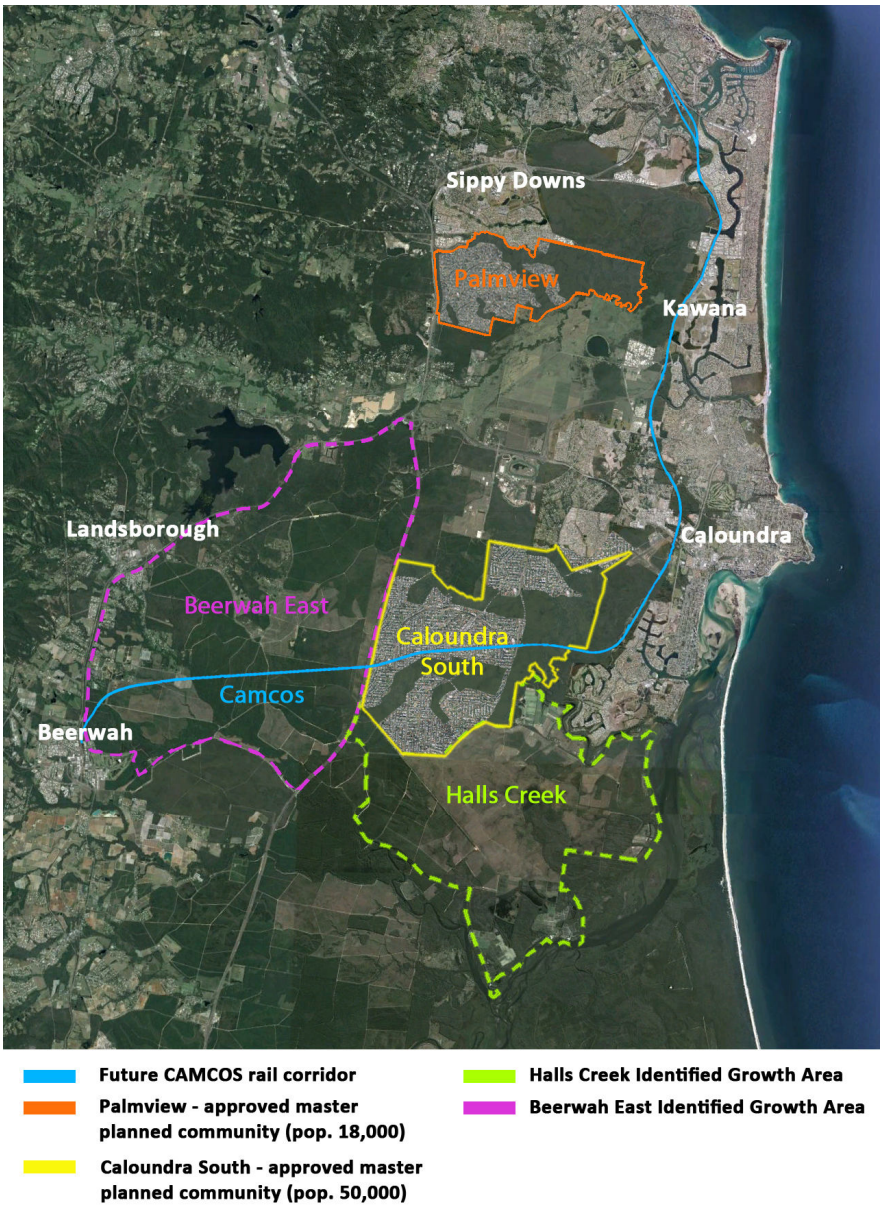

Figure 2 Sunshine Coast Identified Growth Areas (IGAs)
Source: (Sunshine Coast Environment Council 2014)

Beerwah, is a rural town with a population of about 5945 people as of the 2011 census (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011a). It is well serviced by two key transport infrastructures: the heavy rail line and the Bruce Highway – a Queensland major highway along the entire east coast. It is also well known for the tourist attraction, Australia Zoo.

The local council would prefer this IGA as it supports existing and planned investments in the upgrades of its transport infrastructure, supports the planned activity centres, and deems the area of having less environmental impacts in terms

of flooding and water quality (Sunshine Coast Daily 2014). The Beerwah East site also does not encroach on the identified inter-urban break between the Sunshine Coast and Moreton Bay regions.

It must be kept in mind that while the Sunshine Coast is one of the fastest growing regions, its current demand is met by the Palmview and Caloundra South master planned community developments identified in Figure 2. The issue of the approval of the two IGAs of Halls Creek and Beerwah East are long term planning issues.

Given the above background, and with new planning policy framework (Figure 1), the State Government, through the Deputy Premier and State Planning Minister, has deferred its decision to direct the local council to include the controversial Halls Creek into its local regional plan. The Minister wanted to ensure that the local council's decision to not include Halls Creek as an investigation area for possible future growth "was not a response to interest group pressures but to the response of the community's long term needs" (Atkinson 2014).

PUBLIC OPINION ON LAND USE PLANNING

Public commentary on land use planning is important to consider when incorporating community values and understanding societal judgements into the long term. Without such information, a higher degree of uncertainty (perceived or otherwise) will linger, fabricated information has opportunity to grow and spread, political in-fighting and blaming can occur – all resulting to an increased risk for all community stakeholders and the lost opportunity to achieve the best outcome.

Citizens are increasingly concerned with urban growth and conservation issues due to rapid growth and urbanisation and have caught the attention of state and local authorities. Spatial growth ambitions have caused tensions and a balance of public and private interests have to be incorporated into urban growth and climate change public policy (Bengston, Fletcher & Nelson 2004; Taylor et al. 2014).

It is important to frame these issues in a way that the audience will be motivated to engage and have a conscious deliberation of the issues. 'Framing' is encouraging readers or listeners to emphasise certain considerations above others and presenting public opinion is often a significant issue in a democratic society (Chong & Druckman 2007; Scheufele 1999). Frames can be strong or weak and can be delivered as one-sided or competitive. In a competitive mode, it can also be unequal delivery of messages or 'dual' where there is equal frequency of message delivery. Given the psychological impact of framing, care must be undertaken as the elites have the capacity to steer public opinion through their media machinations and arbitrarily manipulate outcomes (Chong & Druckman 2007; Druckman & Nelson 2003).

Chong and Druckman (2007) advises that the ideal effects of well framed issues (logical, offers both sides of the alternatives, designed to stimulate thinking) are those that can educate citizens and enable them to make more careful deliberations. They continue to point out that failure to frame issues property result in the failure of public opinion as being a reliable guide to policy and there would be no legitimate representation of public interest. Furthermore, it forgoes meaningful discussion of governments' responsiveness.

The conventional methods of gathering public commentary through participatory feedback include surveys, community workshop, public meetings and public commentary opportunities (Ananda & Herath 2005). The overall objective in using such tools is to assist stakeholder groups in articulating their aims, trade-offs, approaches towards possibilities, apprehensions and anxieties regarding any change that may affect their asset and lifestyle. Once the community groups have been consulted, then it would facilitate clarification and communicating issues, unbundling their concerns or misconceptions to reach a rationale decision. It also supports the advocacy of community values that can be incorporated into the planned policies (Ananda & Herath 2005).

Individuals have to, first and foremost, be sufficiently motivated to engage for them to reflect on competing considerations. Otherwise they will base their opinions on available and accessible considerations without conscious discussions or thought (Chong & Druckman 2007). Understanding their value priorities is a significant indicator to motivating citizens to think.

Important to all this is the credibility of the source of the information and the other features of the source of information for values to resonate (Chong & Druckman 2007). Hence, the participation of a neutral group in framing this debate is vital to provide trustworthiness to the topics on debate. As such, the local academics from the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) offered to provide an evidence-base to progressively move the argument forward.

METHODOLOGY

Given the debates that were played out in the local media, it was important to establish if such discussions were reflective of the community knowledge and ideals. Hence, the approach the university undertook was to first undertake an independent survey of the community that would be most affected by the changes in the plans.

The objectives of the survey were two-fold: First, was to understand the community's level of knowledge of the properties being deliberated and their level of concern in being informed about the issues. Second, was to gauge the interest of the community in maintaining an inter-urban break in their area and the level of concern to changes in current land use and the size of the forested area.

A telephone survey was the chosen method as the mode of delivery as against an online survey to provide a more personal approach (in case, issues were not understood) and because the locality had a higher than average senior demographic who may not be as adept at participating in online surveys. The project acquired ethics clearance prior to the commencement of data collection from USC Ethics Committee with approval number A/14/592 dated 6 June 2014.

The targeted participants were randomly chosen based on their postcodes. These postcodes were determined by their adjacent proximity to the proposed IGA sites. Four postcodes fitted the criteria and the purchase of a pre-qualified opt-in database from a nationally reputable supplier based on a pre-supplied postcode range.

For a 95% confidence level and a margin of error of 0.05, the sample size should at least be 384 completed surveys (Survey Monkey 2014). A total of 400 completed surveys were targeted by a team of telephone survey operators who were trained specifically for the conduct of this survey. They were provided with opening and closing scripts to ensure uniformity throughout the conduct of the survey and to control the framing effects of opinion can contaminate the outcomes of the survey responses (Morgan & Poppe 2014).

A total of eight operators rostered at different times of the day achieved the target number in five days. An experienced survey supervisor was in attendance all the time to ensure quality and to address any distress to either operator or respondent. The collection of data was conducted from 11 (Wednesday) −15 (Sunday) June 2014 from 9 am through to 7 pm inclusive of weekends and holidays. The Friday, 13 June 2014 was a local public holiday (Nambour Showday) which resulted in many residents being home.

The telephone survey on the average took four minutes to complete, a total of 12 questions including respondent demographics. The telephone operators used an online survey tool to minimise errors in input and tracking. A total of 4500 mobile and telephone numbers were called to achieve the targeted 400 completed surveys.

DISCUSSION OF SURVEY RESULTS

Respondent profile

While the last part of the survey were the demographic questions, it would be best to discuss these upfront to provide credibility of the responses from the survey.

Table 1 provides the distribution of the respondent profile in proportion to the census data. The results indicate that 69.3 per cent of respondents reside in the postcode 4551 area which also has the largest census count (74%). The survey results of respondents postcode closely following the 2011 census distribution.

Table 1 Respondent's postcode in proportion to census data

Respondents postcode (names of suburbs included)	Response Count	Percentage Responses	ABS pop count 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011b, 2011c, 2011d, 2011e)	% to total
4551 ◦Aroona ◦Battery Hill ◦Bells Creek ◦Caloundra ◦Caloundra Bc ◦Caloundra Dc ◦Caloundra West ◦Currimundi ◦Diamond Head ◦Dicky Beach ◦Golden Beach ◦Kings Beach ◦Little Mountain ◦Meridan Plains ◦Moffat Beach ◦Pelican Waters ◦Shelly Beach	277	69.3%	48,893	74%
4553 ◦Diamond Valley ◦Glenview ◦Mooloolah ◦Mooloolah Valley ◦Palmview	45	11.3%	5,308	8%
4519 ◦Beerwah ◦Coochin Creek ◦Crohamhurst ◦Peachester	50	12.5%	7,553	11%
4550 ◦Landsborough ◦Mount Mellum	16	4.0%	4,178	6%
Answered responses	400	100.0%	65,932	100%

The questionnaire contained questions to determine the respondent's length of residency in the area, home ownership status, their age and gender which is provided in Table 2. The results show that more than 67 per cent of those surveyed are long term residents (living in the area for 10 years or more). Furthermore, 80 per cent claimed that they owned their own homes and would therefore care for the future of the results of the resultant local land use plans. Hence, the responses collected are from residents who having a greater affinity, familiarity and closer connection to the area than those who would have lived in the area for less than five years.

A majority of the respondents were aged over 56 years representing 61 per cent of the total respondents and almost 60% per cent of the respondents were female. In part, this is reflective of the type of individuals who would partake and have time to respond to telephone survey.

Table 2 Respondent's demographic profile

Demographic profile	n	%
Length of residency		
<2 years	34	8.5%
3-5 years	21	5.3%
6-10 years	76	19.1%
11-15 years	74	18.6%
16-20 years	58	14.6%
21-29 years	52	13.1%
30-49 years	65	16.3%
50+ years	18	4.5%
Total	398	100.0%
Homeownership		
Owned	313	80.1%
Rented	78	19.9%
Total	391	100.0%
Age profile		
18-25 years	15	3.8%
26-35 years	15	3.8%
36-45 years	52	13.1%
46-55 years	72	18.1%
56-65 years	83	20.9%
66-75 years	91	22.9%
76-85 years	55	13.8%
86+ years	15	3.8%
Total	398	100.0%
Gender		
Male	162	40.6%
Female	237	59.4%
Total	399	100.0%

Note: The total responses = 400 but not all provided demographic details or answered all questions.

Survey results

The questionnaire had two sets of questions – both of which had a short preamble from the operator to provide some context to the respondent who may not be aware of the purpose of the survey. The operator also identified themselves upfront as working for the university to provide the independence of the conduct of the survey.

The first set of questions addressed the objective of understanding the community's level of knowledge of the properties being deliberated on and their level of concern in being informed about the issues. The respondents were asked to rate their level of knowledge from a scale of '1' to '5' with the description of the scale found in the second column of Table 3. The closer to the rating was to '1', the less knowledge is reported while a rating closer to '5' would represent a well-informed individual.

The mean (M) levels or the average ratings are reported together with the standard deviation (SD) or the clustering of responses is reported (the lower the value, the closer the clustering to the average). In Table 3 below, both Halls Creek (M=1.927, SD=1.148) and Beerwah East (M=2.037, SD=1.209) suffer a lack of knowledge about the issues being debated and only 5 per cent of the population knowing the issues in detail.

Table 3 Level of community knowledge of site areas

		Halls Creek		Beerwah East	
Scale	**Description**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**
1	Never heard/Do not know what you are talking about	201	50.9%	184	46.6%
2	Heard of it, but do not understand	82	20.8%	88	22.3%
3	Read what appears in the news/papers	66	16.7%	68	17.2%
4	Somewhat know the issues, but do not know in detail	32	8.1%	34	8.6%
5	Know in detail	14	3.5%	21	5.3%
	Total response count	395	100.0%	395	100.0%
	Mean (M)	1.927		2.037	
	Standard deviation (SD)	1.148		1.209	
	Median	1		2	
	Mode	1		1	

After establishing the level of knowledge of the subject sites, a follow-up question was asked to determine whether the respondent cared to know more by asking 'how important was knowing about the issues'. Again asking the respondents to rate from a scale of '1' to '5' with '1' as not being concerned while '5' being very important to know. Table 4 below shows that while on the average, there is little knowledge about the subject sites, the respondents found it 'important to know' about these issues as it would somehow affect the respondent's lifestyle (M=3.668, SD=1.371).

Table 4 Importance of knowing about the issues

Scale	**Description**	**n**	**%**
1	Not concerned	48	12.2%
2	Need to know, only if it affects my property	28	7.1%
3	Somewhat important	82	20.9%
4	Important to know if it affects my lifestyle	82	20.9%
5	Very important	152	38.8%
	Total response count	392	100.0%
	Mean (M)	3.668	
	Standard deviation (SD)	1.371	
	Median	4	
	Mode	5	

The second set of questions addressed the second objective of the survey which was to gauge the level of interest of the community in maintaining an inter-urban break between the Moreton Bay and Sunshine Coast regions. While the rating scale of '1' to '5' was maintained (where in 1=not important through to 5=very important), a level '0' was included for those who were not able to respond to the question due to lack of information or knowledge. Table 5 below shows a total of more than 80 per cent of the respondents finding it important to maintain an inter-urban break and a relatively high mean rating (M=4.236, SD=1.258) for interest.

Table 5 Level of community interest in maintaining an inter-urban break

Scale	**Description**	**n**	**%**
0	Can't answer - need to know more info	11	2.8%
1	Not important	17	4.3%
2	A bit important	7	1.8%
3	Somewhat important	42	10.7%
4	Important	72	18.3%
5	Very important	244	62.1%
	Response Count	393	100.0%
	Mean (M)	4.236	
	Standard deviation (SD)	1.258	
	Median	5	
	Mode	5	

The succeeding questions to maintaining an inter-urban break were to determine the level of concern to changes in the current land use (which is a commercial pine forest plantation) and to the change in its size. These are presented in separate tables because the description of the scales slightly varies. Table 6 below shows the community's level of concern to changes in land use was moderate (M=3.636, SD=1.242) unlike their expressed desire in maintaining an inter-urban break.

Table 6 Level of concern to changes to the land use

Scale	Description	n	%
1	Develop as needed	13	3.3%
2	Limited controlled development	86	21.9%
3	Not concerned either way	64	16.3%
4	Leave it and continue as is	98	24.9%
5	Revegetate to natural forest	132	33.6%
	Response Count	393	100.0%
	Mean (M)	3.636	
	Standard deviation (SD)	1.242	
	Median	4	
	Mode	5	

Similar to the level of concern to change in land use, there also was a moderate level of concern to changes in its current size (M=3.564, SD=1.273).

Table 7 Level of concern to changes in current size

Scale	Description	n	%
1	Happy for the decrease	37	9.5%
2	Decrease slightly	34	8.7%
3	Not concerned either way	113	29.0%
4	Increase slightly	84	21.5%
5	It should be increased	122	31.3%
	Response Count	390	100.0%
	Mean (M)	3.564	
	Standard deviation (SD)	1.273	
	Median	4	
	Mode	5	

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This study investigated the community's level of knowledge of two sites being debated by the State Government and Sunshine Coast Council. To our knowledge, this is the first time the community was consulted on the issue and on their level of interest and concern of the inter-urban break which is visibly seen by commuters along the Bruce Highway.

The results of the survey show that the community's level of knowledge of the two IGAs in consideration, Halls Creek and Beerwah East is relatively low. Governments need to undertake strategies to have an informed and representative decision by the community to consider their input about the desired growth areas. The provision of wider exposure and more opportunities to gain that information into the issues and supporting facts will assist. Although, it could be inferred from the data above that while the opportunity to be informed needs to be provided, an approximated 30 per cent may not be interested.

Of much wider interest is the desire to maintain an adequate inter-urban break between the Moreton Bay and the Sunshine Coast regions. It is not surprising though as discussion of 'open space' is often an issue close to the emotions of residential owners. However, the response in terms of openness to the size and land use shows a progressive outlook of the community. They appear to be both interested and willing to be involved in investigations that better define such an area, its appropriate uses and management into the future. This is a relatively good outcome when citizens are motivated to engage and seek additional information (Chong & Druckman 2007).

This research has been able to advance the debate as more community information activities were undertaken to inform the public.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are inherent limitations in the use of telephone surveys including non-response bias, prior knowledge, even the perceptions of the individual depending on their suburban, urban or rural setting. This research was primarily conducted to understand the level of awareness of the community on the current issues. As such, the questionnaire did not consider the economic costs of the choices involved, particularly in the desire to maintain an inter-urban break.

The survey questions of the inter-urban break also only gathered inputs from the Sunshine Coast residents and not the Moreton Bay residents who would be also affected by any decision pertaining that issue. If any research focusing on the inter-urban break is made, then the inputs of both Moreton Bay and Sunshine Coast residents should be equally considered.

Furthermore, the research only reports on the quantitative aspect of the questions. There are individual commentaries found on the internet blogs, newspaper articles, websites which were not included in this research. It is recommended that this research be extended to a qualitative analysis of those narratives found in the public domain as well as minutes, notes and feedback from community forums to truly flesh out the public concerns. The data collected could be analysed into themes from descriptions provided by the informants and can be reported back in the language they have used. The findings will allow better framing of the messages back to the community. As Chong and Druckman (2007) have found in their research, the expression of opinions by the citizens displays the individuals true preference.

Finally here, issues of wider regional importance (such as an inter-urban break) seem to be of greater community interest than dealings with individual parcels. While the inter-urban break is mostly used for commercial forest plantation today, a separate study is needed to address the future of the leased land. Such study can inform state and local governments, environmental advocates, industry groups and suppliers (e.g. forestry, recreational) on what works and what advantages and impediments any future legislative action can provide. Those strategic matters however need to be based on firm evidence with ideas drawn from successful case studies in Australia and overseas.

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Email: pwardner@usc.edu.au