

The Maleny Community Precinct has a bright future as an iconic, regional treasure drawing tourists from near and far for its superb environmental values.

The Precinct: Iconic Regional Treasure

Speech by Steven Lang, President, Maleny
and District Green Hills Fund, 8 October 2013
to Maleny Chamber of Commerce

Address by the President of Maleny District Green Hills Fund to the Maleny Chamber of Commerce, Oct 2013

Ladies and Gentleman, thank-you for this opportunity to address the Chamber of Commerce.

I'm here today wearing a couple of hats. I'm here, primarily, as the president of Green Hills, but also as a businessman. As many of you know my wife Chris and I started up Rosetta Books in Maleny in 2001 and ran it, very successfully, for 6 years. Chris is now the co-owner of Maleny Bookshop and I direct the extended writer's festival Outspoken. For the last twelve years we've had a very close association with the economy of the town and we'll continue to do so.

I'd like to begin with by giving a brief run-down on some of Green Hills's activities on the Precinct over the last few years.

The reason, though, that I say this about the hats is that it's my contention what we've been doing at Green Hills has not simply been directed towards improving the sustainability of our local environment, but is intrinsically linked to the prosperity of everyone in this room.

I would go even further, in fact, by saying that the obstacles Green Hills is presently encountering – you might have heard about some of these – are but an aspect of policy failures which will come back to haunt us all if we don't address them while we can.

I'm not sure how much you know about what we've been doing. Green Hills has an MoU with Council to, amongst other things, 'develop a participatory planning model for the development of the open space on the Maleny Community Precinct' and 'to revegetate the environmental areas along Obi Obi Creek.'

Three years ago we set about doing exactly that. In a very competitive funding market we managed to attract \$200k from the Federal Government's Biodiversity Fund and a further \$145k from other sources to plant approximately 2kms of rainforest on the north bank of the Obi Obi where it borders the Precinct, in a strip 40m wide.

We were able to attract the funding because we were able to show how we were both working with other organisations – Council, Lake Baroon, SEQ Water, UnityWater, Barung Landcare – and that our proposal provided connection with a raft of complementary projects; that revegetating this area of the Obi would, on fact, provide the missing link for wildlife connectivity in the Range.

The total area we're going to plant is about 7ha and so far, two years into a four year project, we've planted a bit over 2ha.

We've done this in association with the above-mentioned groups – Cr Jenny McKay was there a few weeks ago when we had 360 children from 28 schools planting 1500 trees along a site where, earlier this year, we removed some exotic pines.

One of the obstacles I mentioned earlier, however, is that Council is not allocating us the land we require to plant out a full 40m corridor.

Of the 2kms of creek bank we plan to revegetate, we have so far been given only one 200m stretch that is 40m wide. The rest is only 20m wide and at several critical places is in danger of being reduced to just 6m.

Since we received our funding Green Hills has been approached by the Federal Government to see if we want to apply for future rounds. On the basis of our record, we are front runners to be awarded money for even larger projects.

We could, in theory, apply for funds to regenerate the whole of the Southern Wetland. At a low estimate this would cost \$1.1m.

But unless we complete the project for which we have received funding, we have no hope of attracting further grants.

What's more, even if we did complete the current project we're not sure we're up for volunteering for more of the stress of dealing with a Council that acts in such an *ad hoc* manner, offering no written commitments, with gentlemen's agreements that come back to bite us, and with shifting boundary lines.

The puzzling thing is that Council's attitude about this project flies in the face of its own environmental credentials.

In 2010, Council produced a highly regarded Biodiversity Report which it is now implementing in partnership with private landholders to ensure the protection of creekside areas and the creation of viable wildlife corridors across the region.

The very outcomes it is busily ignoring on the Precinct.

One suggestion made at the public meeting held by Green Hills Saturday 28 September, is that Council *covenant* the riparian corridor on the Precinct, demonstrating the practice on public land of what Council is encouraging and enabling private landholders to do on theirs. We will be pursuing this vigorously.

Meantime, with my business hat on, the question I ask, and which I invite you to consider is: why is Council behaving this way? Why is it supporting projects on the Precinct which, as currently planned, will jeopardise the Obi Obi corridor? Why is it proposing to allow facilities to be built, if you can call them that, which, in some cases, run practically to the edge of the creek?

Questions which become even more pertinent when you realise that, in doing so, Council is ignoring a massive tourist opportunity in the making.

The Range receives approximately 1.5 million visitors each year. They come here for a variety of reasons, amongst which, close to the top of the list, is to have a rural experience in congenial surroundings. To go for a walk, see some rainforest, have a picnic, visit the local restaurants for good food and coffee, and to browse the local shops and galleries for something special to buy.

We know this because 400,000 visitors a year visit Mary Cairncross Park. Because, like Mary Cairncross Park, Gardner's Falls is groaning under the weight of all this attention.

We contend that the Precinct can be one of the major icons of the region. Once we've created a significant, sustainable, working, wildlife corridor that complements a pathway between town and Gardner's Falls (for which I have to say Green Hills was the major lobbyist) - and once UnityWater has completed planting their 17ha of rainforest and wetlands – once these things are established we will have, on our doorstep, an iconic regional treasure which people will come in their hundreds of thousands to see.

What I don't understand is why Council doesn't see the value of this.

I'm not sure how many of you are aware that Council launched its Regional Economic Development Strategy last week.

It's a blue-print for the economy of this region over the next twenty years, and, as such, is required reading. Especially if you operate a business up here on the Range.

Council wants to create what it calls a New Economy that will be based on five platforms, one of which is a redirected tourism industry with an emphasis on events – business conferences and conventions, sporting events and so on with the potential to attract major international investment in the sort of infrastructure one needs for these activities.

Now, I have nothing against events tourism but, like you, I would expect Council to recognise that this does not preclude and indeed integrates with the 'lifestyle' tourism important to Maleny, the Range and the region overall.

The Economic Strategy does not inspire hope.

Take this item: Last year, CSIRO produced a *Futures Report* – quoted in this new document – which identified a decline in biodiversity and the degradation of natural habitats as one of six 'global megatrends' over the next 20 years, affecting prospects for the ecotourism and habitat preservation industries.

Now, most people would surely see this as a major strategic *opportunity* for the Sunshine Coast Council i.e. by recognising environmental preservation as a high value industry, and by putting its weight behind potentially iconic environmental projects like the Precinct, the region will be in an enviable position both in Australia and globally in 20 years' time and beyond, when the opportunity elsewhere for people to experience the natural world, especially in accessible places like the Sunshine Coast, will be severely reduced.

Instead, the Regional Economic Strategy sees the trend as proving that environmentally inspired tourism on the Sunshine Coast is 'old economy'; that it needs to move aside for the 'new economy' that focuses on medium to large investors!

With respect, this raises questions about the strategic imagination and business acumen of the people who drove the economic strategy and who will oversee its implementation.

The tourism strategy also specifically ignores the day tourism industry which is so vital to the economy of Range towns such as Maleny and Montville, and on which so many our small businesses rely.

The Margaret River region in WA apparently served as a template for the tourism aspect of the Regional Economic Strategy – there are, of course, similarities – except Margaret River doesn't experience day tourism. It's a 3 hour drive from Perth. We, on the other hand, are only 75 minutes from Brisbane by car.

Day tourism in Queensland rose by 4% in the year to June 2013, even though it dropped almost everywhere else.

And these day tourism statistics exclude overnight holiday-makers who make day trips, like those along the coast from Caloundra to Noosa for whom a day trip to the Range is an important lifestyle experience.

Include these and the rise would have been higher than 4%.

But wait, that's not all: day visitors to the Sunshine Coast spent more than day visitors to any other tourism region in Australia during the year ending June 2013 (over half a billion dollars).

It seems to us that a report which ignores statistics like these and which will be so important to our area presents a significant challenge to all of us.

Our strengths are the natural environment, the individual nature of our town, the enterprise of our small business. These are the things we want to grow and be supported by our Council.

Just think what a strategic, focused, tourism strategy for Maleny and the Range could achieve if we set our minds to it.

This isn't without the realm of possibility. Tourism Queensland produced a major report on the Sunshine Coast only four years ago which emphasised Nature based tourism and its value, but it was put together before the Precinct Master Plan was in existence. It wasn't even considered as an attraction.

Things have changed, the visitors to this area are crying out for the kind of facilities that really only the Precinct can provide. The work that we are doing supports that, is, in fact, the very basis of it.

For too long up here on the Range people who lack the vision for what this region could be have been trying to create a wedge between those of us who favour protecting the natural environment and those who run businesses in the district. What I'm here to tell you today, in my two hats is that we are on the same page. We are, in fact, dependent upon each other.

What we need to do is to encourage Council to back us in doing what we're good at, which is working now and will work in the future, not try to impose someone else's model on us.

Green Hills is working to protect the banks of the Obi Obi. We've done the hard yards, we've raised the funds, now all we ask is to be allowed to follow through, for the sake of the environment, but also for the sake of the future of all of our businesses.

Thank-you.

Steven Lang.

An expanded referenced report on the matters raised in this speech will be available on the Green Hills website shortly.