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Conservation or development in Sydney's Blue Mountains?

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A \$50,000 report prepared for the Blue Mountains City Council by urban planners Urban Systems Corporation outlines the increasing strategic conflict between use of the area for recreation and conservation, and the pressures of Sydney's urban growth.

As Sydney sprawls further west, the pressure for residential development, particularly in the lower Blue Mountains area, has been steadily increasing.

Already there is environmental deterioration, and a threat to some of the amenities of the area which have made it a favourite tourist destination for Sydney people in particular.

In a series of five alternative futures, Urban Systems Corporation sets out the tripartite strategic choice which has to be made over development of the area.

Under alternative one, the eventual population could be held to 47,000 people, with environmental characteristics safeguarded and the tourist and recreation aspects of the area emphasised.

Alternatively, successively larger populations could be allowed, up to 275,000 or more under alternative five, which would mean a much more lively string of urban settlements, with a lot more in the way of town facilities and variety for the residents, at the expense of environmental considerations.

If this second choice is made, then a third choice must also be made between acquiescing in the development of largescale commuting to Sydney from the lower Blue Mountains in particular (the present commuting is but a harbinger of the prospective future) or whether more local employment is to be provided through intensive industrial development.

The Urban Systems Corporation findings make it clear that if the largescale development, with local industry, choices are made, then substantial upgrading of the main communications links running through the Blue Mountains will be necessary.

This will put pressure on the communications links between Sydney and the proposed growth centre of Bathurst-Orange, on the other side of the Blue Mountains. The Great Western Highway and the railway line to Bathurst both run through the area under consideration.

The Blue Mountains report is an opportunity to illustrate the classic arguments about linear development along corridors.

The area covered by the Blue Mountains City Council is basically a string of settlements along the highway through the mountains, in a winding corridor with often steep gradients climbing through the mountain wilderness areas, national park and water catchment reserves of the Blue Mountains.

Given that these communication links exist, there is an argument for encouraging planned development along them, to take advantage of the links with the metropolitan area of Sydney down on the coastal plain, and to provide a greater range of facilities and a more balanced population in the area itself.

Against this is the need for high speed access to Bathurst-Orange, by road and rail (although with sufficient expenditure and integrated planning, this potential conflict could be resolved).

Even without the Bathurst-Orange aspect, the special scenic qualities of the Blue Mountains, and the restricted topography of the ribbon of development — like beads on a string — make it possible to argue that here is one area where urban sprawl should be firmly dealt with.

Some of the alternatives outlined by Urban Systems Corporation have uncomfortable implications for some developers interested in the area.

In alternative one, the developed area would be existing urban settlements plus building permits issued and no further urban development would be permitted. Residential densities would be kept low and maximum areas would be devoted to leisure pursuits.

No flats would be permitted, only minor additions to transport and traffic systems would be needed, apart from developments aimed at through transit traffic and tourists.

Outside this confined area a maximum effort to conserve and restore the natural environment would involve large-scale acquisition of presently raw and privately owned land, and also subdivided but undeveloped land even if provided with some services and utilities.

sions, \$55 million if the less restrictive alternative two is adopted and \$5 million with alternative three.

The additional capital costs of urban services are negligible for the first two alternatives, but rise to \$25 million, \$51 million and \$99 million for the medium, fairly developed and highly developed alternatives three, four and five.

The environmental implications of a highly developed Blue Mountains are sobering, comments the Urban Systems Corporation report. There would be very high demands on wilderness areas, almost certain pollution of the Hawkesbury Basin unless there was massive up-grading and provisions of high capacity tertiary treatment works.

The contrast of differing natural areas would disappear in the lower mountains and the Mount Wilson-Megalong area. The "view from the points," an important tourist attraction, would be seriously impaired in the upper mountains area.

There would be increasing conflict between resident and visitor recreation, development outstripping local services in the North Springwood-Winnalee area, possible serious pollution on the edges of towns in the central mountains area, high bush fire danger (a continuing Blue Mountains problem).

The scenic view from the Great Western Highway would be blocked by urban development until motorists reached the upper mountains area, historic sites and buildings and Aboriginal sites would be endangered, local open space would be scarce or unavailable, and recreational facilities overtaxed.

In short, it would start to look like Sydney, down on the plain.

With this development, there could be 67,000 people commuting to the metropolitan area. With a train every three minutes in peak periods, up to 30,000 could come in by train in the peak hour, leaving another 37,000 to come in by car or by train outside the peak hour. To handle the load with cars, planners are talking about up to 12 lanes of road.

Such largescale commuting would entail a substantial increase in railway rolling stock, signalling and track quadruplication.

Economically exploitable water sources are unlikely to be available, and it would require technological advances, for example, in recycling of water to provide an economical supply.

Sewerage is dependent on an adequate water supply, and capital cost of water supply and sewerage works could be as high as \$100 million. Disposing of wastes will require large installations to cope with a population of 275,000.

Such intensive development would conflict with the present role of the Blue Mountains as a scenic resort area. A 1969 tourist survey of the Blue Mountains by the NSW Department of Tourism recorded a high proportion of day trippers, people who came only for the day to visit the look-outs.

A 1974 Easter survey by Urban Systems Corporation showed the same pattern, with 65 per cent of all visitors to the scenic points of the upper mountains coming only for the day, most of them Sydney residents (mainly from the western suburbs or the north shore).

The profile of the day tripper is low expenditure and high costs in pollution and litter, traffic congestion and noise. Some 64

Under alternative two, the urban area could include all serviced subdivisions, allowing the population to rise to 65,000 people. If subdivisions not yet serviced are added in, this produces alternative three with 112,000 people.

Alternative four, which broadly represents a draft planning scheme (as amended by appeal) now making its way through the town-planning sequence, would provide for 170,000 people.

With alternative five, urbanisation of all physically suitable land not already in parks and other open space areas, with increased densities, substantial expansion of retail, office and industrial development, and large additions to transport, utilities and communications systems would provide for 275,000 people or more.

With the minimal development alternative one, it would cost \$96 million at current market values to revoke the relevant subdivi-

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per cent stated no expenditure on scenic attractions.

The problems most recorded by these day trippers were insufficient road capacity and accessibility, high costs, and lack of public transport. They also identified deficiencies in facilities — facilities largely constructed and maintained through general rates.

Nonetheless, tourism accounted for 9.7 per cent of the upper mountains work force (23 per cent in Medlow Bath) and 3.6 per cent of the lower mountains work force.

"As urban Sydney expands westward, day-tripping will increase and the conflict between tourism and resident amenity in the upper mountains will increase," the report comments.

"Strong council policy on the role of the Blue Mountains for tourism is urgently required.

"The lack of clearly stated and fully committed strategic policies is the single most important issue determining the future of the Blue Mountains, not the embittered local battle between conservation and development."

The City of the Blue Mountains has a draft statutory planning scheme, recently placed on public exhibition and attracting over 2,500 objections. It may be two or three years before the draft statutory planning scheme can be prescribed (by no means an unusual length of time under the cumbersome NSW planning arrangements).

The Sydney Region Outline Plan some years ago suggested a population of 50,000 in the lower Blue Mountains, with most of the population expected to look to the County of Cumberland (that is, Sydney metropolitan area) for employment.

The State Planning Authority Technical Bulletin No 4, "Population Projections for New South Wales 1971-2000" suggested there could be 85,000 people in the Blue Mountains centres by the year 2000 — only half the population which would be attainable under the statutory planning scheme now being considered.

If this sort of population occurs, then there is the question of how much local employment should be provided. Between 1966 and 1971 there was an out-

migration of the 15 to 24 age group, reflecting the lack of educational, entertainment and employment facilities, and the difficulties in reaching Sydney.

The proportion of people over 65 is very high, almost double the NSW average, indicating the

attractions of the area, particularly the upper mountains area, for retired couples.

If the present patterns of inward migration continues — in the lower mountains there are a lot of incoming 25 to 34 year olds working in Sydney or Penrith — there will be an increasingly urgent need for youth-oriented social programs, vocational and tertiary education and adult education/retirement facilities.

In the meantime, there is the problem of commuting. In the lower mountains area there are 6,280 workers, more than 75 per cent of whom commute, and in the upper mountains there are 5,590 workers, 25 per cent of whom commute.

The physical isolation following from the long linear development pattern is reinforced by deficiencies in bus service levels and routes. A table in the report gives a picture of the travel times resident tolerate for the advantages of fresh mountain air.

A fortnightly ticket between Lapstone and Central Station costs \$12.85 for a one hour, 23 minute trip over 39.5 miles. (A European high speed train would do it in 30 minutes.)

From Springwood the time is one hour, 46 minutes over 49.5

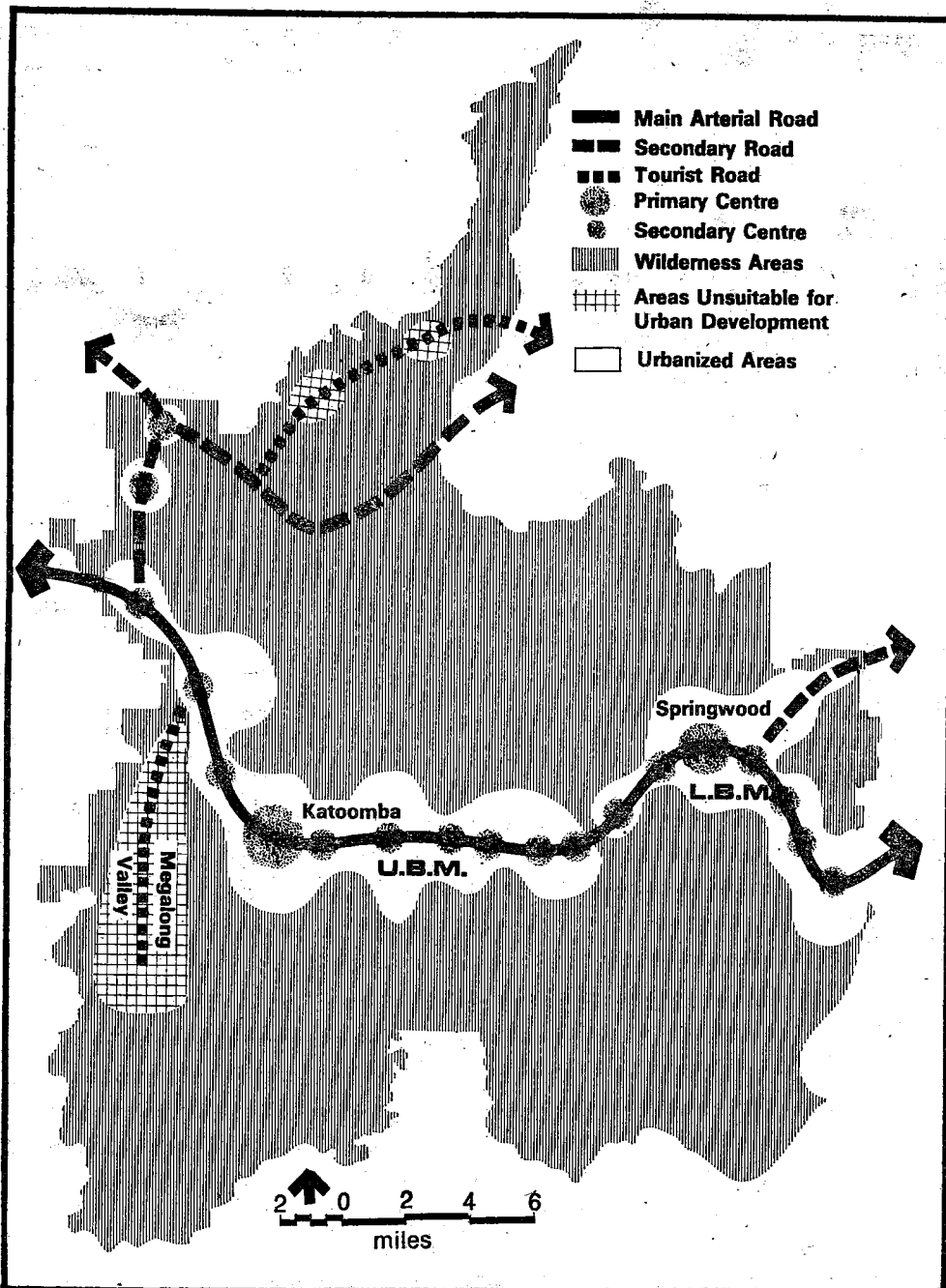
miles and from Katoomba two hours, 30 minutes over 68.5 miles.

With the intensive development alternative, provision of 130 hectares of additional industrial development would reduce the total number of commuters by about 20 per cent.

But it would also place severe demands on available land resources and cause considerable environmental damage. Another 200 hectares of manufacturing land in the lower Blue Mountains would reduce commuting by 20 per cent, but it is doubtful whether the land would be made available.

This still leaves another feasible development. This is to encourage strong expansion of industry in the area to the west of Penrith, and to speed up commuting trains by use of modern European rolling stock with high cornering and gradient climbing capacity.

What the report makes quite clear is that decisions need to be taken soon as to whether the string of development along the transport routes through the Blue Mountains is to be intensified, or whether the area should be preserved from the increasing pressures of population general in the Sydney area.



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