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Queensland Government's people's question time: The challenges and opportunities of population growth in Queensland

Reported by Dr Jon Bunker with some content from www.qld.gov.au

As AITPM National President, I was invited by Queensland's Premier, Hon. Anna Bligh MP, as an audience guest to People’s Question Time on Wednesday 24 March 2010, which focused on 'The Challenges and Opportunities of Population Growth in Queensland'. On the panel were: Premier and Minister for the Arts, Anna Bligh; Minister for Climate Change and Sustainability, Kate Jones; Minister for Infrastructure and Planning, Stirling Hinchliffe; Michael Rayner – Growth Management Summit Advisory Panel, Principal Director, Cox Rayner Architects; and Greg Hallam – Executive Director, Local Government Association of Queensland. The moderator for this session was Law Academic Erin O’Brien, of Queensland University of Technology.

When considering the challenges and opportunities of population growth, some important issues the audience was asked to take into account included:

- **Strong growth:** Queensland's population has almost doubled in the past 20 years to 4.4 million and is expected to reach between 5.7 and 7 million people by 2031. This growth is predicted to come from record levels of overseas migration and, to a lesser extent, higher fertility rates. Queensland is growing by around 115,000 people every year - the size of Darwin.

- **Providing places for people to live, work and play:** The way we live together is changing. We're rapidly seeing smaller one person and two person households. Our households are getting older and more culturally diverse. There are fewer people living in households yet houses are getting bigger. By 2031, Queensland will need an additional one million dwellings. There’s a challenge in providing a balance between housing and preserving our natural environment.

- **Providing infrastructure and services to support our growing community:** We need to have infrastructure and services to meet our increasing and changing demands. Affording this is especially challenging given recent financial market circumstances. The Government is investing record values in capital works, including new infrastructure to improve public transport and traffic congestion.

People's Question Time was delivered to an invited audience at QUT but streamed live on the internet. I found most questions were drawn live from viewers online. A very broad range of topics around growth management was covered, but here is my paraphrasing of responses to issues pertinent to transport. For brevity, I have not cited the questions’ respondent/s, but these can be found online:

- While South East Queensland is proudly developing as an international city, we must acknowledge growth pressures. While the State may limit growth by limiting services and planning approvals, consequences such as housing affordability issues would arise. We want our children to be able to afford to enter the housing market.

- We have great opportunities developing with larger regional centres such as Townsville, Mackay and Ipswich to take the pressure off Brisbane. These cities need good infrastructure and planning. These cities need to be made attractive and liveable, with the Cairns Esplanade project cited as an example project. The Government is working with industry through its Industrial Incentive Program with 2/3 of the value quarantined for regional Queensland.

- The Government intends to continue working in partnership with the development industry to yield land to
market for development, particularly land affordable to middle-level earners.

• Some of the population has a fear of growth, density and population, however it was pointed out that Brisbane is less dense than many other Australian capitals, and about 1/8 as dense as some European cities.

• It was pointed out that some macro-economic policy in Australia has a market distorting effect, which works against intents for affordable, managed housing delivery. It was further noted that the State’s First Home Owner’s Grant not only benefitted the ultimate consumer, but also the development industry.

• Many people are concerned about growth and sprawl, yet we are seeing more, larger homes with lower household sizes. People still seek the detached home lifestyle. A more compact form can ironically improve sustainability through more efficient infrastructure and services delivery.

• The Government is seeking to retrofit higher densities in, for instance, older light industrial areas of Brisbane - especially with enhanced transit nodes. South Bank is an excellent example. Apparently Brisbane is in alignment with Sydney and Melbourne, with approximately 50% infill and 50% greenfield development.

• In response to a question regarding capping rental costs to make housing affordable, it was noted that this could potentially constrain small suppliers, i.e. investors with the second house as their nest egg, from bothering with that investment market area.

• In response to a comment from the community that it seems that SEQ is very road-building orientated at present, it was noted that each month one new three-car passenger train was being delivered. A great deal of development of the passenger rail network is underway in the region at present.

• Finally, of particular note, on the day of this People’s Question Time, the Premier had announced a new cross river rail project, being a tunnel connecting a new station under Woolloongabba, under the river to a new station serving QUT and the Riverside financial district in the CBD, onwards to Bowen Hills.