

Destinations Rockdale

Report on Community Consultation



8 March 2006

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Précis

Rockdale City Council has endeavoured to reverse perceived past planning stasis by undertaking a fundamental review of its central commercial and community corridor – Bay Street and its end points, Brighton-le-Sands and Rockdale Town Centre. This was a strategic *visioning* exercise which was designed to be free of vested interest constraints so that the community and Council could see how Rockdale could become a quality, major centre of commercial and retail activity while remaining true to its historical and cultural roots.

There are no community consultation and related planning legislative requirements applying to “visioning” exercises of the Destinations Rockdale style; although the Department of Planning has included visioning in its standard Memorandum of Understanding for funding of whole-of-LGA LEP reviews (reflecting the appropriateness of the approach). The process was designed to meet State Government contracting and related legislation regarding the engagement of architects, economists and other consultants.

The Destinations Rockdale scheme was released upon completion for staff and community consultation over more than four months and this report summarises the results.

Broadly speaking, there was **strong support for the need for and nature of the fundamental review and for almost all of the individual projects**, with **strong opposition to one specific element** (the western alignment of the By Pass Road) and minor doubts about others. There was little opposition to the majority of elements in the package; while opposition to the route of the By Pass Road revealed strong support for a road within the long-standing F6 corridor. A fair general judgement based on feedback is that **the scheme has broad support and should be pursued by the Council through the levels of government over time with the required public consultation at each stage**; but all feedback is revealed here in a spirit of credibility, accountability and transparency.

In that same spirit it is suggested that Council observe the bounds of the advertised scheme even though that is not a statutory requirement, but with reasonable adjustments resulting from the consultation phase. (A separate report covers the recommended principles for future planning.)

The staff who developed and conducted the community consultation phase achieved very high standards of performance and are acknowledged with gratitude. This consultation phase and the parallel community and business surveys conducted for Council (summarised herein) revealed scope to improve awareness. Community engagement models adopted outside local government have potential to raise staff and community awareness and involvement.

As this Report was being finalised one letter appeared in the *St George Leader* (March 7) stating that 9.6% of people surveyed were supportive of Destinations Rockdale. Another writer said that 68% disagreed *versus* the 32% who were said to agree. There is no substance to these claims as shown later. The truth is the reverse.

Recommendation

It is recommended that Council note this report and place it on the Destinations Rockdale website as well as promote it through the Council Column and newsletters; while noting that the principles to be adopted for future planning are the subject of Council's consideration of a parallel submission.

Background

The Destinations Rockdale planning process commenced in March-April 2005 through the engagement of expert mainstreet and retail, architectural and other consultants, managed by Council's Project Manager. The Mayoral Task Group instructed the consultants to undertake a fundamental review of the highest standards of architectural imagination, commercial and financial practicability and community benefit. The results were released by Mayor Flowers at the Council meeting on 21 September.

A bulk mailout was conducted when the booklets and DVDs were available, to over 23,000 properties; and a second distribution was completed (direct requests, libraries, Customer Service Centre etc) soon after. Some key areas (especially the Moorefield estate) were omitted during the first distribution phase and the General Manager wrote directly to affected residents.

The specific actions were:

- advertisements in local newspaper and within the Council
- advice to neighbourhood and community agencies and to people registered on Council's mail-out groups
- website – complete guide, illustrations and short version of the DVD for downloading. Supplementary notes were provided including on the Neo-consumer analyses. (The site had trouble with some non-Microsoft software.)
- Customer Service display and messages – posters, later replaced by banners, plus DVD playing on a PC (as in Libraries)
- feedback from the website and from other emails (from the advertisements etc)
- letterbox drop of the brochure and DVD to over 23,000 residential, business and other properties
- mailout to non-resident business owners in Brighton and Rockdale town centres
- mailout to Ministers, departmental and business CEOs and other known stakeholders
- posters and brochures in shops, all libraries, railway stations and bus stops city-wide
- advertisements in Ethnic Radio, Ethnic Newspapers, and local newspaper through the Council Column
- posters etc in the Council depot and administration building and stories etc in the staff newsletter
- mailout to affected properties in the Kogarah component to the east of the Highway
- postcard invitations to the Community Expo to all residents, also these invitations were on counters in local shops and Council offices and the Libraries
- written responses to e-mails and letters also included information on the Community Expo, and where possible the postcard invitations were inserted.

Three staff briefing sessions were held in September then a Staff Expo was held on 23 November 2005 in the Town Hall, as a genuine exercise as well as as a trial for the Community Expo which staff were planning to make a showpiece of community involvement. The staff views were taken into account when the later Expo was planned and also when community feedback was evaluated. (There are samples of staff views in the attachments.)

The Rockdale and Brighton Chambers of Commerce held a briefing session at Brighton on 3 November, replacing the Council's proposed landowners' expo with Council's agreement, to which the Minister for Planning and the local MP, Planning Minister Frank Sartor was an acceptee but did not attend. The Minister was briefed on the scheme at other times by the Mayor and others, including in the presence of senior officers of the Department of Planning. The large gathering there was strongly in agreement with

Destinations and the executives of the Chambers signed a statement of support at the meeting (attached). There were questions about the Council's ability to show signs of commencement and ongoing commitment. Several speakers said that "it's about time something was done".

Community Expo

The Community expo was held on 8 December 2005 and was attended by almost 290 people of whom 244 registered. The latter included 203 residents, 6 visitors, 5 local business people, 20 affected property owners and 4 "other" (not exclusive categories). Where stated, the attendees heard about the expo via:

Web	31 people
Council Column	109 people
2NBC	1 person
Chinese Radio	2 people
Arabic 2ME	2 people
Chinese Newspaper	3 people
Greek Newspaper	3 people
Arabic Newspaper	nil
Italian Newspaper	4 people
Letter Box drops	98 people
Poster	20 people
Word of mouth	49 people

A disclaimer notice was posted at the entrance of the Expo as follows (in line with the notice in the brochure and website) – and the gist was conveyed by all staff and consultants present:

This presentation has been prepared for the purpose of explaining Rockdale Council's vision for the urban renewal of parts of the Council's local government area. The information provided is general only and its purpose is to promote informed public discussion about the vision that is Destinations Rockdale. The proposals suggested in this presentation have no legal status, are subject to change and should not be relied on in any way. Rockdale City Council's disclaims all liability and responsibility, including for negligence, for any direct or indirect loss or damage suffered by any person arising out of any use of the general information contained in this exhibition, DVD or any associated documentation.

The first response to all questions at all stations was that Destinations Rockdale is a visions document and feedback needed to be provided through the notice boards distributed around the floor. Staff and consultants tried to avoid engaging in debate; but there were cases where an involvement was required. Everyone was assured that their comments would not be lost if they recorded them on the boards.

The Expo was organised into "stations" at which a staff member or the Project Manager remained to answer questions and help people to record their comments so they could be permanently recorded. In addition one staff member roamed, several qualified staffers helped to interpret and respond, and several assisted with exit questions and recording scores and comments. The General Manager also roamed for several hours in the afternoon. The individual stations were:

- History – information
- Vision – key points
- Facilities – sporting fields, work/live/play etc
- Development - residential and commercial including Bay works
- Traffic – especially the By-Pass road
- general comments and scoring on overall questions.

The development station dealt with a broad range of development issues and the overall concepts relating to Destinations Rockdale. With such a dramatic change as envisaged by Destinations, comments were mixed as would be expected. Many comments were supportive of reform generally and in planning terms (below). Fear was expressed by affected property owners relating to the loss of homes and compensation. Some comments related to individual preferences, for example criticism of the Crystal at the end of the pier and the glass Dome over the railway station. Others were more philosophical and focused their criticism on what they believed was over-development leading to a "Gold Coast" appearance and problems with services, congestion, parking and traffic. A number also questioned the overall benefit to residents.

However, there was an equal amount of support with people recognising that this level of change was positive, urging Council to proceed and for Rockdale to be leaders. Numerous general suggestions were also made for Council to consider during the formulation of the more detailed planning in the next phase. These included undergrounding of power lines; ensuring high environmental standards were achieved in design and provision of adequate private open space; heritage considerations; lowering the height of buildings on the foreshore and extending the boundaries of Destinations to also include the Princes Highway.

The roving rapporteur commented thus:

I was with a lovely lady who could not hold back her tears as her home is where a tennis court appears in the vision. Another bloke was surprised (and laughing) that a soccer goal shows where his house is. Two mature aged ladies wanted the footpaths in Sans Souci repaired. The PCYC were keen to have a future at the Ador Ave site. The Brighton Athletics Club hoped to be accommodated along the beachfront (where they have been for a really long time). People seemed happier when I explained it was a vision, and that further planning and the details would occur in the next stage. A few people were concerned about the sensitive wetlands and also the changes to sensitive habitat in Botany Bay (marina/jetty). A few people were concerned about the development along the waterfront, and the loss of water glimpses. Some people said we could never deliver or fund such a plan. Some people said it was a really good idea for businesses in Rockdale and Brighton, but what about the rest of the City. One person was really keen to see the dome much bigger, to extend over the Princes Highway and over the new park, and to bring back the markets on the exiting Admin Building site. Residents of Bryant Street were concerned that Bryant Street might become a bit like a highway due to the new ring road. Most people I spoke with were both uneasy and a little excited by the vision, and they saw merit in doing something like this one day. It was hot in the Town Hall that day (the water and ice was a great idea), and the toilets really need refurbishing. In nearly every case, I got the person to outline their issue / concern on a card, or I helped them. This vision came out being very exciting and innovative, something most people don't believe will ever happen.

At the Roads station, there was strong representation from the residents affected by the By-Pass Road, notably from the Moorefield Estate (especially the Civic Street end), but also from the northern end around Cooks River and the southern end on Sandringham Street. The principal points of concern were:

- moving the road corridor to the west in the middle section (through Scarborough Park)
- taking homes in the Moorefield estate
- surprising the community with an option that was inconsistent to the scheme laid down decades ago, and to
- not building the F6 in its right corridor.

There were two suggestions to build a tunnel under Botany Bay; a few people (less than five) suggesting no road be built; and two arguing for public transport instead of a road.

It was apparent that genuine distress has been caused by the release of the By-Pass Road graphic. There was some pacification when it was explained that the apparent direct impact on homes in the Moorefield Estate was unintended and a drafting error. One female landowner was distressed that the northern tunnel connection appeared to be above the house she is building and she had done all necessary searches before buying. Her case was different as that proposal had come from Council at about the time when Minister Scully asked for public transport alternatives to the F6. She was informed of Just Terms protections and encouraged to convey her concerns to the General Manager so that proper attention could be given to her situation.

There were questions about the relevance of "neo-consumer" logic and enquirers were pointed to the website's section. (More detail appears in the planning background report.)

There were several accusations that the Council's motives were corrupt and/or incompetent; and that Council's real agenda had been shown through the acquisition of properties on the eastern side of Scarborough Park.¹

¹ Responses were sought from officers on the spot and from the General Manager and provided to questioners; except for several people who were asked to write to the General Manager so that formal advice could be supplied. In this case, the properties adjoining Scarborough Park were acquired by Council from time to time for park purposes, with no relevance to the road issue.

Attached to this report are digital photographs taken of the comment boards and of the scoring board at the end. The balance of comments and views was strongly supportive of Destinations generally. Most supported were the refashioning of the Grand Parade, the Bay works (marina, pier and swimming enclosure), the Canal, the new civic centre, the new civic park, and the cinema. Supported noticeably were the Masonic and Bryant commercial sites (the architectural impressions generated praise), the new traffic loop near 7 Ways, the Dome, the beach cafes, the Crystal and open air cinema, and the “Norton Street” style of Bay Street. Not so strongly supported was the residential development on the southern side of Bay Street on the Canal; and not supported was the alignment of the By-Pass Road (there was strong support for a new road in the existing reservation but with undergrounding).

Staff noticed a “demonstration” effect, that some early people put strong comments on and others copied or reflected that view. This may not be right but the By-Pass road was the only really contentious project, a degree of cynicism was consistent, and the Expo was a positive experience.

Direct contact with stakeholders including Ministers over time revealed that the mailout of brochures and DVDs had not hit that target group effectively. The awareness of some staff and community attendees at the seminars and expos indicated also scope for a more complete engagement methodology, which is what is planned for subsequent visioning exercises.

Other feedback

On 7 December 2005 Mayor Moselmane held an official launch of Destinations Rockdale at the Novotel at Brighton. A range of external business stakeholders attended.

The e-mail feedback in the attachment includes all content, typos or errors, except that one “onion” was corrected to “opinion”, and personal details were cut. All respondents received an individual reply. One person went to a great deal of trouble to check traffic counts and was thanked, with a note as to corrections and difficulties experienced by the consultants in getting reliable data.

The total pattern of responses was:

Phone and counter	221
E-mail	74
Letters	62
Letter to editor etc	13
Customer engagement	409
Website hits	1,182
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Total	1,961

The number of website hits was regarded by the Mayoral Task Group as outstanding.

These contacts were logged and filed. The pattern of opinion was consistent with the views expressed at the Expo.

Community and Business Surveys

In November 2005 two surveys were conducted for RCC as part of a series of regular surveys designed to measure Council’s performance and community perceptions. The first was of 500 community stakeholders and was done by the Hunter Valley Research Foundation. The second was of 155 businesses, done by Sutherland Shire Council. The previous surveys were conducted in 2003 which is a normal interval between surveys.

The survey data suggests that awareness of the Destinations Rockdale strategic plan was relatively low among the community respondents, at least in terms of the way it was presented to the interview respondents. 45 per cent were not aware at all of the vision, and a further 16 per cent were only somewhat aware. Nevertheless, 30 per cent said they were either quite aware or very aware. The mean awareness score was 2.4 out of 5.

On balance, those who were at least somewhat aware of the plan supported it. Close to 60 per cent either agreed (32 per cent) or strongly agreed (27 per cent) with the plan's concepts, while 18 per cent either disagreed (10 per cent) or strongly disagreed (8 per cent). The mean agreement rating was 3.7 out of 5.

Close to two-thirds of all respondents said they either support (41 per cent) or strongly support (25 per cent) the proposal to divert heavy traffic off the Grand Parade and onto the F6/M6 corridor. The mean support rating was 3.8 out of 5.

The most frequently cited reasons for support for the plan (among respondents who were at least somewhat aware of it and agreed with its concepts) were:

- The city needs a facelift and new amenities (37 per cent)
- Very excited about the future (28 per cent)
- Will bring in people/money - improve economic prosperity (18 per cent).

Reasons for not supporting the plan (among those who were at least somewhat aware of it and disagreed with its concepts) were:

- A waste of money/ money should be spent on other things (40 per cent)
- Concern about loss of open space (28 per cent)
- No need for further development (20 per cent)
- Concern about high-rise development (19 per cent).

More generally, prior to 2005 aspects of concern about traffic and transport in the area were last assessed in the 2001 survey. There had been a significant change over the period in the rank ordering of concerns and in 2005 there was a more even distribution of concern over the four aspects canvassed. In 2005 main roads displaced public parking as the item of most concern and there was a reduction in the proportion of residents who were most concerned about each of these aspects. Public transport has become a relatively greater concern than local streets, with an increase in the proportion troubled by each. Approximately 25 per cent of residents were most concerned about each of roads, parking and public transport, and 19 per cent were most concerned about local streets.

In the business survey, the comparable results were:

- 32% of respondents stated that they had seen the *Destinations Rockdale 2005+20* report, with 35% saying that they knew more than a little bit about it.
- Of those who knew about the vision, 70% agreed, either somewhat or strongly, with the concept. Only 9% of respondents reported disagreeing with the vision, with 15% being neutral, and 1.5% saying they agreed with some parts but not others.
- Respondents were asked what it was they like about the vision. Many answers were about upgrading and improving the aesthetics, and doing something new in the area.
- Only 6 respondents answered the question of what they did not like about the vision, with the most common response being a lack of consultation, and a lack of money to implement it.
- There was strong agreement with the proposal to divert heavy traffic onto the proposed F6 corridor, with 70% of respondents stating that they supported the proposal, and only 12% saying they were opposed.

The survey team reported all of the pro and contrary comments:

- We are finally doing something with Botany Bay. The M5 has taken the trucks away, and I like the way the plan is going to make Rockdale more people and residential friendly.
- The merging of common interests, but I think that the fact that there is a strategy or vision helps
- Paints a big picture
- The consolidation of everything in the area - making it touristier near the water and Rockdale itself more consumer friendly.
- Looks impressive
- Improve the image of the area to attract more visitors/shoppers
- Opportunity to dress up an area that has run down to attract more visitors
- Doing everything new
- Bits and pieces, anything new is nice I think
- The decrease in traffic flow along the Grand Parade, and also the building around the station and plaza areas being improved. I thought it was quite well presented overall.
- The diversion of traffic and the modernisation is great
- It's moving towards the future and it's good to see things happening in the area, particularly down in Brighton
- Its future looking approach was good
- More space for car parks and rest areas, safer street crossings etc

- Everything, bring more people to the area
- The tourist feel it would have to it
- Seemed like it was going to make it a pleasant place to be
- The appearance of the outlay
- Looks good for the future and for our children
- More modern, more in keeping with the life style I like - casual
- Water front development - wharf needed. Attracts tourists
- Everything
- Not far from the beach, keeping a focus on the beach
- The atmosphere
- It looks good
- Makes the area more relaxed to live in
- The cleaning up of the area, making it more appealing to tourists
- It will bring a lot more business to the community
- Improves the area and brings some population, which will hopefully increase local small businesses who turn up everyday to make a few dollars. Improve the facades on Grand Parade.
- Good use of the facilities and the space available and the beachfront.
- I like the F6 and Bay St
- It looks good but is it possible, it looks a bit unrealistic
- Library, swimming pool and the business aspect, cinemas
- Anything to lift it up, because Rockdale has been dead for a while. Other councils (eg Hurstville) have spent a lot of money, we need less junk shops.
- Rockdale rents are so expensive, Hurstville, Ramsgate and Sans Souci are less expensive.
- It will be nice to clean up Rockdale and make it more elegant and modern.
- It will improve things greatly.
- As a business person the idea of attracting more business to Rockdale.
- Modernise Rockdale
- Overall tourism aspect of it and will look good.
- Everything. Upgrades
- Green areas, leisure activates, buildings different heights, people friendly
- Appearance of the area. Cutting down the busy streets with the F6
- They are trying to improve the general area and help the residents
- It looks as though it is more people friendly, better access
- Looks good
- Getting it into the 21st century
- Innovative, well thought out, extremely user friendly both to community and businesses, and to give the community the best opportunity to enjoy the facilities that the council are putting into place

On the other side:

- It's over the top. We were not notified of the change in the F6 corridor and we have just had a DA approval for a new home which it will be affected.
- The way Council has gone about this is wrong - even Councillors were not aware of it. I can't understand how Council can spend so much of rate money to put these proposals out.
- Because I would like to know first of all where the money is coming from to do all this extraneous stuff, and what is going to happen to all the traffic that uses that area. It will make it harder for everybody else. The concept is not bad - but how is it being funded, that is my biggest concern.
- I don't want to answer
- There is no money there, so how are they going to do it?
- More important things existing at present in the local neighbourhood – such as roads and traffic.
- Not doing anything in Bexley.
- Rockdale needs a lot of improvements, but I do not have a lot of faith in the proposal. It is a bit ambitious

This report covers a comprehensive cycle of consultation over one of Sydney's most sophisticated local planning reviews. To repeat, my conclusion is that community and business opinion is generally in favour of implementation of the Destinations Rockdale package.

Robert Gibbons

Attachments

1. Community Expo comments boards
2. Community Expo scoring board
3. Brighton and Rockdale Chambers of Commerce's letter of support
4. Emails