



Speech by  
**Curtis Pitt**

**MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE**

Hansard Thursday, 17 September 2009

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**MOTION: FAR NORTH QUEENSLAND REGIONAL PLAN**

**Mr PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (4.04 pm): The natural beauty of the landscape, relaxed outdoor living and availability of open space and recreation are what makes Far North Queensland so liveable and the envy of the rest of Australia. Not only are these vital components of the character and lifestyle of the region, but nature based tourism and agriculture rely heavily upon these natural areas remaining in pristine condition. I am pleased to speak today in support of the state planning regulatory provisions that will protect the Far North's natural environment that underpins the regional economy.

The region includes outstanding terrestrial and aquatic natural assets. The Wet Tropics World Heritage area is a recognised centre of outstanding biological diversity that is unparalleled on the Australian continent. The Great Barrier Reef World Heritage area is the largest and most diverse coral reef system on the planet and features biodiversity of international significance. Rapid urban growth and climate change can pose immediate and significant threats to the region's natural assets. The Great Barrier Reef, coastal plain, upland ecosystems and rainforest species are particularly vulnerable to climate change.

The state planning regulatory provisions for the Far North Queensland Regional Plan are a decisive step in retaining these valuable natural resources. The provisions enhance the connectivity of native vegetation and wetlands, reduce threatening processes and reverse the decline in water quality, biodiversity and the natural values of the coast. The resilience of the ecosystem will be critical in mitigating and adapting to climate change and the region's subsequent ecological sustainability.

This is a plan for the future. It is a plan to manage growth and maintain strong, sustainable and liveable communities. The designation of an urban footprint—which makes up 0.5 per cent of the region—will provide a 20-year land supply, ensuring housing affordability in the region. However, the bulk of the region—more than 99 per cent—is designated as a regional landscape and rural production area, protecting areas of significant environmental value, such as the World Heritage areas, natural resources for primary production, extraction and mining, and tourism through a minimum subdivision size.

The regional landscape and rural production area includes lands that have regional landscape values such as endangered and of concern regional ecosystems, Wet Tropics World Heritage area and protected area tenures, and the essential wildlife habitat of the southern cassowary and mahogany glider. The state planning regulatory provisions restrict encroachment into the regional landscape and rural production area by inappropriate development, particularly urban or rural residential development.

Subdivision of rural properties has been limited to ensure the survival of agriculture and pastoral activities and to avoid out of sync growth with its attendant demand on public infrastructure. I support the urban density levels that provide for residential growth close to existing services. Case-by-case negotiation with affected landholders will bring about a win-win result. Vegetation near watercourses must be maintained and, in some cases, re-established. Besides reducing erosion as a benefit to the farmer, this process also preserves valuable wildlife corridors.

Good planning is also about striking a balance in order to not only sustain the environment but also foster economic development. Striking the balance is something that the Bligh government has done well

and continues to do well. It is important to note that restriction of development is balanced with the need to support diversification of the regional economy by allowing a range of developments, including small- to medium-scale tourist activities, small scale industry, business and community activities, and sport and recreational facilities.

I want to be clear that I do not support development at any cost. By focusing urban development inside the urban footprint, it will foster the growth of future communities that continue to be in balance with the environment. By ensuring that proper planning occurs in the identified corridors, such as the southern growth corridor, the balance between economic growth and the protection of the environment can be achieved.

It has been recognised for some time that a new district level service centre in the Edmonton area is needed to meet the demands of an increasing population south of Cairns. I would like to acknowledge the good work by the Cairns Regional Council and the state government in finalising the Edmonton Town Centre as a key subregional centre for south of Cairns. The Minister for Infrastructure and Planning, Stirling Hinchliffe, recently signed off on planning scheme amendments for the Edmonton Town Centre that complement the objectives of the structure planning process for nearby Mount Peter currently being undertaken by the council.

The Edmonton Town Centre will be on the western side of the highway in the area known as Mann's Farm. Commercial space and major retail shopping will form the core of the town centre, which will be complemented by other entertainment, cultural and leisure activities. Over time, it will grow into a transit oriented community, and the town centre core, the town centre frame and the residential precincts will provide for a balanced, integrated urban design.

A wider variety of housing densities around the centre means the land is being put to best use and housing can remain affordable for locals. Residential living opportunities will be enhanced through innovative design and we will see a greater number of upper floor apartments and other multi-unit developments. Construction will reflect local character and architecture that meets the needs of our tropical climate and will be adaptable in order to meet future requirements. All in all, the mixed use development will contribute to creating a vibrant and sustainable town centre which balances key planning and community goals.

The town centre also sees Edmonton beginning to shift from being a dormitory suburb, still reliant on the rest of Cairns for employment. It will become a focal point for new jobs and housing on the south side of Cairns. Local employment self-sufficiency must be encouraged to maximise local containment of the workforce. This means people live and work in the same general area, rather than spend long periods of time commuting between their home and place of employment. This is one of the fundamentals of the plan.

Besides generating employment, development in the southern corridor will also help to reduce traffic congestion by removing the need for many people to travel daily into Cairns. Achieving higher levels of self-containment results in reduced travel distances and expenses, reduced congestion on the overall road network, and reduced greenhouse gas emissions. It also retains greater levels of expenditure in the local economy and fosters a stronger sense of community.

The Far North Queensland Regional Plan and other strategic planning processes underway, like the Mount Peter master plan, are important, and we would all agree that a lack of planning has caused some problems in the past. But we should be wary of waiting until the Mount Peter structure plan is developed before acting. Putting the brakes on development in the southern corridor will deprive the local economy of the stimulus it desperately needs now to survive the impacts of the global economic downturn.

The Far North is already facing an unemployment level well above the state average. We need to generate employment opportunities to help the local economy, which has been heavily impacted by the collapse of the Hedley Group, the loss of the AIMTEK warship destroyer contract and the construction company CMC going into liquidation. I stand behind the government's \$18 billion job-protecting building program—our very own stimulus package that has seen our state avoid a recession while building the infrastructure we need for tomorrow. This year in Far North Queensland alone we are investing more than \$1.28 billion. That is around \$4,802 for every man, woman and child in the region compared to just \$2,761 nationally.

But government cannot be the only show in town. The Sustainable Planning Bill 2009, passed in this parliament yesterday, will give priority status to job-creating tourism projects, which will mean faster planning decisions. This means we will be able to cut through red tape for projects of the kind that create and retain jobs during these difficult economic times. But it is vital that this priority status is given to large-scale projects, not only those in tourism but in any sustainable industry that has the potential to provide a massive boost to employment in the regional economy.

I mentioned earlier that the minister recently signed off on planning scheme amendments for Edmonton Town Centre, which means we are a step closer to this project commencing. However, I have concerns about the time taken for some of the planning studies and the sometimes disjointed efforts of government agencies which has not helped in other cases. Take, for example, the proposed Edmonton Business and Industry Park—a 212-hectare industrial and commercial development which was refused by Cairns Regional Council in April based on advice from Queensland government agencies. It is my view that the Queensland government must support—not hinder—private sector investment projects in the southern corridor of Cairns that will generate employment opportunities today.

I raise this project as an example for two reasons. Firstly, I have followed the progress of this project with interest, and the master planning undertaken by the proponents of this development has resulted in nominations for two Planning Institute of Australia awards including one in relation to the environmental work undertaken to date and the proposed rehabilitation strategy for the Blackfellow Creek corridor. Secondly, I do not agree with claims that this development would compromise planning outcomes in the southern corridor or that it is too early to consider it without a structure plan being first established. On the contrary, a project of this scale would complement the Edmonton Town Centre development and reportedly has the potential to create up to 4,000 jobs during the construction phase, plus a similar number ongoing.

To get back to my point about supporting projects that can generate employment opportunities, I am told that the first sod on this development could be turned within months of an approval, which is the kind of shovel-ready project we need in the current economic climate. Those who are willing to press ahead in a responsible manner—those who are willing to press ahead despite the tough economic times—deserve this government's full attention. It is my belief that the Edmonton Town Centre and the Edmonton Business and Industry Park can together provide the catalyst for local employment and economic growth the region so desperately needs. My No. 1 priority at the last election was the protection and creation of jobs in Mulgrave, and I will continue to do all that I can to fulfil this commitment.

I will conclude by saying that I support the state planning regulatory provisions as they will protect the Far North's natural environment that underpins the regional economy. This is yet another fine example of this government's commitment to Far North Queensland. Moreover, I support the Far North Queensland Regional Plan because I believe it reflects the combined efforts of government and the community to provide a stronger future for existing and new communities in the region.