
SMALL TOWN COMMUNITIES AND REGIONAL PLANNING

Regional Australia from a Small "Wheatbelt" Town Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past four or so decades, the "Wheatbelt" region of Western Australia,¹ like most of rural Australia, has had to accommodate forces of change, often to its detriment. Both natural and anthropogenic factors have contributed to such forces. These include extended droughts, a changing climate, and deteriorating environmental conditions as well as unintended consequences of human action such as land clearing, fluctuations in commodity prices in an increasingly globalizing economy, and government's policy responses to the consequences of globalization and environmental degradation. Small town communities thus find themselves confronted with pressures brought about by a range of forces that they must overcome to ensure their town's viability and their survival as a community.

This article discusses the conditions in small towns set within the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia referring to the case of a controversial development proposal for a piece of land within the small township of Goomalling. While there are many cases of small towns dying in the wheatbelt, Goomalling represents a community that looks forward to a viable future and holds a generally positive outlook. The Shire Council of Goomalling wishes to develop, subdivide, and sell the Throssell Street site to ensure the town's economic viability. However, it is guided by its commitment to environmental protection and community support.

The author led a team of planning students through a collaborative teaching and learning exercise with the local community, at the invitation of the Goomalling Shire Council, to investigate the controversy over the site's development. This exercise exposed the range of pressures that act upon small towns such as Goomalling, as well as the capacity and limitations of the local community and its leadership, which is reported in this article.

The article consists of five sections. Following this introductory section, the second section describes the main features of the wheatbelt that provides the regional context. The third section describes conditions within the shire of Goomalling, followed by the fourth section that briefly discusses the controversy over the Throssell Street site, reporting on the findings of a collaborative teaching/learning exercise that highlights the difficulties that small town communities face in their struggle to survive in the wheatbelt. In the last section, the article draws conclusions for small towns in rural regions.

REGIONAL PLANNING IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Regional Policies Based on a Commitment to Sustainable Development

The Western Australia State Government has a stated commitment to implementing the principles of sustainability along with regional development. The state Premier chairs the Cabinet Standing Committee for Regional Policy which promotes sustainable development and stresses the reporting of progress in a triple bottom line (TBL) format. The Sustainability Policy Unit, established within the Department of Premier and Cabinet, released "Focus on the Future: The Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy" in 2003 that provides the basis for long-term local plans for regional Western Australia by setting economic, social, and environmental targets. Nine regional development commissions (RDCs) headed by ministers were established under the *Regional Development Commissions Act 1993*. RDCs facilitate networks and partnerships across various government agencies operating in the regions. The Wheatbelt Development Commission is thus charged with the implementation of the State Regional Development Policy. Its stated mission is to maximize "community well-being through self-sustaining regional development," and it pursues the outcome where "the positive benefits from development that is economically, socially and environmentally sustainable, and consistent with the expectations of the regional community, flow to the people of the wheatbelt".^{2/}

While RDCs generally aim to promote economic and social development within the region, the Act specifies their responsibility to "ensure that the general standard of government services and access to those services in the region is comparable to that which applies in the metropolitan area".

THE WHEATBELT

The Wheatbelt region of Western Australia spreads to the north and east of Perth, covering an area of over 154,862 km² with a population of around 72,000 people.^{3/} The region comprises forty-four local government areas and over 125 towns.^{4/} The wheatbelt has remained one of Australia's main broad acre agricultural areas for over 170 years and constitutes Western Australia's preeminent agricultural region.^{5/} It contributes almost 46 per cent of the State's total agricultural production, amounting to \$2.36 billion dollars.^{6/}

During 2003/04, wheat accounted for over half of the wheatbelt's agricultural production while the rest was made up of commodities such as wool and livestock production.^{7/} According to the Wheatbelt Development Commission web site, producers are also increasingly diversifying into non-traditional industries including turkeys, marron, yabbies, emus and ostriches, snails, worms, deer, and alpacas.^{8/} Despite considerable economic diversification within the wheatbelt in recent years,^{9/} agriculture, forestry, and fishery remain the largest source of employment in the region. A slight reduction in their proportion over the years could be partially explained by the requirement of fewer workers on farms due to farm automation. As McKenzie and Stehlik^{10/} suggest, the region is highly reliant on farming and farm-related regional enterprises, with limited industrial diversity.

Over the years there has been “a pattern of demographic decline and spatially and socially uneven development in the Wheatbelt”.^{14/} This can be attributed to the fact that for the past four or so decades, government policies have focused more on competition rather than equity.^{12/} The region is also exposed to rural decline due to severe environmental problems resulting from land degradation, particularly salinity. The impacts of extensive land clearing to make way for broad acre farms, and subsequent unsustainable agricultural practices, have also manifested themselves during the past few decades in terms of losses to both economic productivity as well as biological diversity.^{13/}

There is also an increasing trend of small towns within the wheatbelt being bypassed. Goods and services are being redistributed directly to the larger, more significant regional centres causing significant social changes as residents are forced to travel to the larger centres to receive the necessary goods.^{14/} Residents and local farming families increasingly tend to bypass local small towns “in order to access even quite basic services, in health, banking, finance and retailing”.^{15/} Such services, of appropriate quality, are only found in larger centres with populations over 10,000, leading to the situation where the “main movement of population from small towns has been and will continue to be to larger, ‘sponge’ regional centres”.^{16/}

Land Clearing for Agriculture

Forth^{17/} describes the present situation within rural towns in Australia from a historical perspective, referring to the farming practices of early European settlers that were unsuited to the mostly marginal land, such as overstocking on grazing land and wholesale clearing of native vegetation. During the early European settlement, there also emerged a tradition of granting large holdings of Crown land to individuals who were committed to clearing the land to make way for agriculture. With the mechanization of farms over time, the scale of the clearing operations multiplied.

Despite the fact that the land in Australia could best be described as marginal farming land, the practice of rewarding land clearing for agriculture remained in place till quite recently. Government taxation policies in many parts of Australia tended to reward land clearing right up to the 1970s.^{18/} During the post-war years between 1950 and 1980, clearing of land is reported to have accelerated in Western Australia, with the area of cleared land increasing from 6.8 million to 15 million ha, and by the year 2000, 4.5 million ha were planted with wheat.^{19/} Currently, the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) estimates that only 13 per cent of native vegetation remains in the Avon Wheatbelt region.^{20/} Most of the remnant native vegetation within the wheatbelt is scattered as isolated islands mainly confined to nature reserves and national parks. Large-scale land clearing for agriculture was eventually halted by means of legislation in the 1980s, largely in response to a significant rise in problems such as salinity and soil erosion witnessed in the 1970s. This has led to a situation where, according to Forth,^{21/} the “environmental degradation of marginal farming land has impacted on the viability of many small towns that basically depend on local agriculture for their survival”.

Environmental Challenges

Some of the most serious environmental challenges faced by the Wheatbelt region include land salinization, soil acidification as well as the loss, degradation, and fragmentation of native vegetation and biodiversity.^{22/} Due to these challenges, “South West Wheatbelt is

the highest stress area for biodiversity in WA".^{23/} The Avon Wheatbelt region has a very small percentage of its native vegetation remaining, while the problem of dryland salinization continues to worsen in many areas. According to the EPA,^{24/} clearing of native vegetation has been carried out beyond safe ecological limits. It has thus recommended that clearing be prohibited in local government areas with less than 15 per cent of native vegetation remaining.

Environmental policymakers in Australia, today, seem to view native vegetation as an indigenous natural resource that can yield many benefits and environmental services. The often-cited benefits include "biodiversity, improved wildlife habitat, improved water quality, reduced salinity and control of land degradation".^{25/} State governments are moving to ban the clearing of native vegetation. For example, the New South Wales and Queensland Parliaments enacted legislation in 2003 and 2004 that ban the clearing of remnant vegetation, subject to certain exemptions.^{26/} Similar legislation is being introduced in Western Australia. "In recent years, strengthened regulatory controls over existing native vegetation stocks have been introduced in an attempt to maintain or increase the level of environmental services derived from those stocks."^{27/}

In the specific context of the Wheatbelt region, recent policy direction seems to suggest there is a growing commitment and recognition of the need to protect native vegetation. The EPA states that "(i)n the agricultural areas the removal of biodiversity has already been too much and agricultural practices have not been able to mimic the ecological function performed by the former native plant communities".^{28/} The EPA maintains that "it is unreasonable to expect to be able to continue to clear native vegetation from land within the agricultural area...other than relatively small areas and where alternative mechanisms for protecting biodiversity are addressed".^{29/}

In the current situation, any new development on land involving clearance of natural vegetation is likely to trigger off an environmental impact assessment process which would need to identify provisions for alternative mechanisms for biodiversity protection, and provide assurances against any further increase in land degradation (both on and off site) and against the loss of any threatened species.^{30/} Meanwhile, the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) has changed its approach from the protection of individual plant and animal species to the conservation of 'threatened ecological communities' (TEC), focusing on the biological assemblage or group of plants and/or animals occurring in a particular habitat.^{31/} TECs are defined as communities that are "being subjected to processes that threaten to destroy or significantly modify it across much of its range".^{32/} The concept of TEC is still very new both for the community as well as government departments, and currently government agencies are focusing on dissemination of relevant information regarding the concept and the processes involved in its application. While not enjoying legal status yet, TECs can be listed under the Commonwealth Government's *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Act 1999*, and the State government can provide funding assistance for conservation of TECs.^{33/} To some conservationists, the involvement of Commonwealth, i.e., federal-level legislation has only served to complicate matters and dilute the regulations that could be enforced directly at the state government level.

There are numerous layers of environmental protection legislation and schemes that are constantly being introduced and amended. The legal status and strength of enforceability of various regulations that are prevalent also often remain undefined. In this ever-evolving policy-making milieu, many farmers and local governments find themselves unsure of

how to build in environmental and legal considerations into their decisions about farm practices, businesses, or even residential developments in the townships.

Neoliberal Policies and Economic Rationalization

Like in many parts of the world, government policy response to rapid changes to the global economy since the 1970s and 1980s has focused on improving international competitiveness from a neoliberal or economically rationalist perspective. The aims of state and federal government policies in Australia have shifted towards promoting economic efficiency over social equity. This policy shift has led to the rationalization of essential services such as schools, health facilities, and welfare services.^{34/} Government policies during the 1990s have, on the one hand, led to economic and population decline of small towns, prompting even private-sector businesses such as banks to also fold up and withdraw their services. On the other hand, it has promoted “a process of farm amalgamation, as smaller less economically efficient family farms make way for larger and more flexible operations”.^{35/}

An increasing number of commentators, however, believe “these policies have failed to improve the viability of farming, and have simply removed many of the institutions which tempered instability in the agricultural economy”.^{36/} Many country towns that have traditionally serviced the farming industry now experience “population losses associated with agricultural restructuring that have reduced the demand for services, eroded local employment opportunities and undermined the viability of many local social institutions”.^{37/} This situation persists today in much of the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia.

Tonts^{38/} reports that while some authors believe economic rationalism got rid of rural policies that led to inefficiencies in agriculture, unsustainable patterns of settlement, and service provision, others argue that it has prompted governments to reduce their commitment to regional economic development strategies. Forth^{39/} concurs stating that while, until recently, there used to be significant state intervention to assist the economic development of rural Australia, funding for interventionist regional development policies has been reduced because of recent economic reform.

While there is a growing feeling that state and federal governments are withdrawing from the small towns, the recent electoral reforms proposed by Western Australia’s state government to adopt the principle of “one vote-one value” further adds to this feeling. The reform expands rural electorates to become at par with metropolitan seats in terms of population, effectively taking away the extra weight rural voters have traditionally enjoyed in electing lower house representatives. This has caused concern among local governments who feel their fighting power is being diminished.^{40/}

Tonts^{41/} maintains that local initiatives by rural communities to reverse the economic decline and population loss of small towns tend to be constrained by the economic rationalist policies of the government developed in response to economic restructuring. Many small towns feel the need to pool resources with neighbouring towns and seem to be receptive to the idea of working together collectively in order to maximize the value of their often limited resources.^{42/} For such collaborative efforts to be successful, input from state and federal governments in the form of a regional development framework is vital.^{43/}

The “Dying Town Syndrome”

Current situation. Many commentators suggest that while some of the larger regional towns in the wheatbelt will grow in size, more and more small towns will eventually die

out. In recent years, Australian agricultural producers and processors “have invested heavily in labour-saving capital infrastructure” to remain competitive in world markets.^{44/} Perhaps as an outcome of the economic rationalist policies, and at the cost of social equity, “most of the farm businesses in Western Australia remain profitable, with rates of return comparable with non-farming sectors”. The farm amalgamation process is likely to continue into the future.^{45/} On the one hand, successful farmers continue to buy out neighbouring properties to ensure they have sufficiently large scales of profit, flexibility and diversification of products, and higher productivity by using the same labour force to run larger operations with technological advancement. The less enterprising or less resourced farmers are thus under pressure to sell off their farms and move out to larger towns in search of employment.

Forth^{46/} argues that there are no quick fixes and small towns in rural Australia will continue to face the “dying town syndrome”. He argues that even significantly higher commodity prices for wool and wheat may not help small country towns to remain viable, while a couple of bad years with poor commodity prices, increased machinery costs, and droughts can indeed have detrimental effects on the town’s economy. “In 2001, real estate agents report more farms than ever have been placed on the market. Many small businesses are also selling.”^{47/}

The situation serves to rearrange the settlement pattern within the Wheatbelt region. The regional centres and communities located within close proximity to regional centres are experiencing positive growth rates as residents of the smaller local centres are finding it more convenient to reposition themselves closer to regional centres, where the availability of goods and services are more convenient.^{48/} Barr *et al.* relate depopulation of hinterlands to the ‘de-coupling’ of the farm sector from the small town economies, as farmers bypass the small towns that have “in the past provided the social networks of the cropping communities”.^{49/}

Small towns — Relying on social capital. Communities faced with numerous economic and environmental problems, shrinking social infrastructure and services, and a perception of reduced government policy support have increasingly realized the strength of their social capital built up over the years.

Social Capital has emerged as a key concept in the re-engagement and revitalisation of communities. Putnam (1993), who is credited with coining the term, defined social capital as the trust, norms and networks needed to facilitate cooperation. It is about the quality of relationships that enhance the capacity of people to collectively resolve problems (Stone and Hughes, 2002) and re-organise their assets into new outcomes for mutual benefit (Lochner *et al.*, 1999). According to Stone and Hughes (2002), social capital can be understood as a “resource to collective action” — enabling individuals’ access to reciprocal, trusting connections that help the process of “getting by or getting ahead”.^{50/}

Byrne *et al.* suggest that in order to create a sustainable future, communities must first focus on re-building their social cohesion so as to be able to come up with creative and innovative solutions. They observe that rural communities are very well aware as to how critical human relationships are to effectively mobilize local skills and resources.

While bearing the brunt of government policies that promote economic efficiency rather than social equity, the small town communities have increasingly felt the distancing of federal and state governments in meeting their needs. They seem to have realized the

need to self-evaluate their town's viability and become largely self-reliant. According to Batt *et al.*, there is also a sense that the community and Council will get behind those who want to make a positive change and can work towards shared visions to increase the area's prosperity.^{51/}

Once a community takes up an endeavour and successfully completes it, the experience adds to the collective capacity of the community to achieve results. Such positive experiences contribute to the building up of social capital, which is an asset that could define the ability of small towns to survive.

THE CASE OF THE SMALL TOWN OF GOOMALLING, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

This section presents a brief description of Goomalling, a typical small town in the wheatbelt. It reports on information collected from recently concluded studies commissioned by the local shire council, complemented by observations obtained from the author's engagement and fieldwork in Goomalling spread over the first half of 2007, as part of a collaborative teaching and learning exercise. A specific purpose of the collaboration was to help the shire council overcome a local planning dilemma it faced over the use of a site within the township. In order to acquire insight into the local problem, extensive interaction with both the shire council staff and the local community was sought. This involved a group of about thirty-six students and two academics visiting the area and holding extensive meetings and workshops with the community, including a community visioning exercise and follow-up meetings.

Information contained in this section, therefore, presents a more intimate view of a typical small town in the region. This section aims to provide a firsthand view of how regional policies and developments in the wider Wheatbelt region affect small towns and, more importantly, the issues that small town communities face as they try to respond to these pressures.

A Typical Small Town in the Wheatbelt

Goomalling is situated within the Avon Valley district of Western Australia's Wheatbelt region. It was inhabited by the Balardong Aboriginal people prior to European settlement which commenced in the 1830s. Goomalling really began to emerge in 1902 when the Eastern Railway was extended to the area and, in 1903, Goomalling was declared a town.^{52/} The area experienced extensive agricultural expansion and significant prosperity between 1902 and 1918 that saw a substantial population increase and the coming up of many civic buildings.^{53/}

Today, Goomalling has the appearance of a typical small town in the wheatbelt about a two-hour drive away from the State capital, Perth. It is laid out on a grid-iron street network with wide streets, with a population of 600 within the township and another 600 inhabiting the rest of the shire. The shire's retail and community infrastructure, including bank, tavern, post office, and other retail facilities, are located on the main street along the railway line that defines the north edge of the township. The bulk (around 94 per cent) of the housing stock of the 300 to 400 dwelling units comprises single-storey, detached units, with statistics recording a slight decline in numbers between 2001 to 2006.^{54/}

While Goomalling has the sporting facilities and clubs common to most wheatbelt towns, the quality and range of facilities are generally superior despite its small population. It also boasts facilities such as the swimming pool and go-kart track, not typically found in the rural towns of comparable size. The location and grouping of the community facilities allow for all community facilities to be located within ten-minutes' walking distance, which enables the community to maintain strong links between community facilities and their dwellings.

Economic Prospects for Goomalling

The Goomalling Shire Council commissioned an economic development strategy for Goomalling in 2006. Findings from the associated survey of local businesses found that the business community within Goomalling has a fairly upbeat assessment of its economic viability into the future.

Owners of the twenty-five local businesses operating from the Goomalling town centre believe they are fully capitalized for the market,^{55/} suggesting that while the businesses are running at full potential, the investment required to step up operations to the next level or to diversify could only be inspired by increases in population in the town and its hinterland. The survey also reported that finding skilled workers locally was the most frequently quoted problem the businesses encountered.^{56/} Population growth is thus viewed as necessary to provide the required incentive for the growth and diversification of the economy.

While Batt *et al.*^{57/} observed that Goomalling has shown a keen interest in diversifying its business opportunities rather than relying solely on agriculture, the surveys revealed that the major sectors of employment in the Shire of Goomalling are consistent with those found in the Wheatbelt region in general: agriculture, forestry, and fishery (45.7 per cent); retail (7.6 per cent); and government or administration (6.7 per cent).^{58/}

Recently, Goomalling assessed its potential to reinvent itself as a tourist destination. A study undertaken by students from a Perth-based university concluded, however, that while there was some prospect of developing tourism, Goomalling did not measure up to becoming a tourist destination on its own. The study found a strong case, nevertheless, for Goomalling to develop an integrated tourism development strategy with neighbouring small towns. Through community initiative and drive and a strong sense of volunteerism, Goomalling is a regular entrant in the "Tidy Towns" competition each year, boasting some successes in recent years. It has also successfully applied for funds for the restoration of a historic building in the township.

Social Aspects of Goomalling

The demographics of Goomalling reflect that of a typical wheatbelt town with an aging population and decreasing young adult population. The population is predominantly represented by retired couples with no children. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data^{59/} show that the largest age cohort of the population reported in 1996 was "35 to 39 years" and the smallest cohort was "15 to 19 years". In comparison to other wheatbelt towns, Goomalling population had a lower percentage of persons aged between "45 and 64 years" and a higher percentage of persons aged "65 and above". In 2001, the largest age cohort was "45 to 49 years" and an aging population in 2006 continued expanding into the "45 to 59 years" age cohort.

The predominant family structure represented within Goomalling is “couples with no children” (51.1 per cent) while “couples with children” comprises 38.2 per cent.^{60/} Couples with no children include empty nesters whose children are no longer dependents. Lack of education and employment opportunities within the town tend to prompt the youth to move to regional centres, such as Northam and Perth. Many do not return to their hometown upon completion of education acquired elsewhere. The absence of any form of youth groups in Goomalling further contributes to young people’s frustration and despair.^{61/}

Among the issues that were gleaned from the author’s community engagement activities in Goomalling, the mounting concern about the impacts of a decline in the town’s population figured prominently. This issue was seen in terms of the difficulty of finding both skilled tradespersons and unskilled labour locally. While labour shortages occurred throughout the entire wheatbelt, community perceptions suggest that the shortage has had a significantly adverse effect on the town of Goomalling. A widely accepted reason for failure to attract outsiders into the area for employment is the severe shortage of accommodation, especially the difficulty to find rental properties.

Social Capital within the Goomalling Community

There is a high degree of community interaction within Goomalling and the social capital built over the years has resulted in a strong “can-do” attitude, which community members strongly identify with and are proud of. There is a high degree of voluntarism and community participation within sporting groups, community groups, events organizations, and working groups/committees. There are strong connections with the local farming industry, businesses, and service providers. These connections are reinforced by an “approachable” council which provides strong leadership, and guides many projects to benefit the community, while empowering townspeople to positively contribute to the town.^{62/} The close-knit nature of the community and ability to take on big challenges could be reflective of the values that enabled the town’s early development and would therefore hold a special place in the local community’s psyche. This community capacity is also believed to give Goomalling a comparative advantage over many other wheatbelt towns, which has played a role in its ability to attract facilities, external support, and economic activity into the area.^{63/}

The above claims are verified by the fact that when the last private commercial bank packed up its operation and left the town, the council and the community rallied together and pooled in capital to set up the Bendigo (community cooperative) bank, being only the second town in the region to do so. This bank is still functioning successfully. Another significant achievement is their ability to manage to secure the services of a 24-hour medical facility within the town. This not only involved lobbying the government agencies to allow the medical facility to stay, but also finding and retaining the required medical staff.

Goomalling is one of the more proactive shires in the Avon Valley in terms of encouraging the growth of tourism in the area.^{64/} As reported earlier in the article, the council recently organized an assessment of the tourism potential of Goomalling by a group of university students. The collaborative teaching/learning exercise involving the author and Curtin University students has also come about from an initiative taken by the council’s chief executive officer (CEO) who requested Curtin University to help resolve the council’s dilemma about the development of its Throssell Street site.

THE THROSSSELL STREET SITE CONTROVERSY

Goomalling Shire Council is faced with a dilemma about the Throssell Street site, a parcel of land it owns on the edge of the township. The land, zoned low-density residential, was demarcated into thirty-five lots in 1972 and a sewerage connection was subsequently extended to the site in 1978. Due to the absence of any development pressure because of a gradual population decline since then, the site has been left undisturbed. Only since 2005, as the population stabilized, has the council considered developing and selling off the lots. This decision may well also have been triggered by the generally positive growth prospect of surrounding areas as they catch the spillover from Perth's recent rapid population growth and phenomenal rise in property values. The council recognizes the strongly felt need within the community for increased housing stock within the township. Additional housing is considered a prerequisite for moving towards an increase in population which would facilitate economic expansion and ensure the retention and expansion of social services within Goomalling.

Development or Conservation?

As the council initiated its move to bring the thirty-five new residential lots into the market last year, it became aware of the sharp division within the community over the issue. One group supports the sale of the lots for development to ensure the town's economic viability, and thereby its survival. They see the town's economic viability as a prerequisite to preserving their way of life and continuing the farming community tradition into the future. A sufficient population base is seen as a prerequisite to the town's economic progress and to make a case for government support to maintain essential community facilities and services. This necessitates increasing the housing capacity to facilitate the retention of local youth once they seek independent lives as well as to attract new residents into the area. This pro-development group is convinced that failure to capitalize on the chance to expand housing capacity would eventually force their children out of the area and out of their current lifestyle. The fear of the town dying out and the consequent loss of local traditions and heritage is an overriding concern.

On the other hand, another section of the community is concerned about protecting the environmental values of the site. They do not see themselves as being against development per se, but cannot support development at the cost of environmental degradation. They believe that the long-term costs of development must be taken into account. While generally supportive of residential development within the township, they maintain that the particular Throssell Street site should not be considered for development. Based on the Woodland Watch 2005 survey,^{65/} they claim that the stand of Red Morrel and Salmon Gum trees on the site are rare to the area, and contend that all vegetation on the site must be protected, notwithstanding the abundant native vegetation found in adjacent areas.

The council has since applied to the Department of Land Information to acquire a number of reserves to convert into freehold title to allow alternative options for residential development. Because these are vested reserves, a significant time lag probably measuring in years is expected before the required processes can be completed to bring the land to market.^{66/} As such, the council feels compelled to expedite bringing the Throssell Street lots into the market to meet the demands and needs of the community.

Resolving the Controversy

In view of the opposition to the development of the site, the Goomalling Shire Council carried out an opinion survey within the community which elicited a mixed response from the community, with more in opposition to the proposal to develop the site than those in favour. However, the survey's rate of return was low and there were complaints that the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis^{62/} sent along with the survey questionnaire as background information was rather heavily biased towards the option of not developing the site. The Goomalling Shire Council thereby declared the result of the survey as being inconclusive. Subsequently, in 2007, the council's CEO decided to approach Curtin University and entered into a collaborative exercise to get a fresh look at the problem for an independent assessment and recommendation regarding whether or not to develop the site.

The preferred development option for the site. By way of offering a compromise, the council offered to develop only twenty-five rather than the total thirty-five lots originally demarcated for residential development on the Throssell Street site. It argued that by sparing one end of the site from development the town would lose ten potential lots, but would be able to spare the bulk of the Red Morrel trees on the site. A tree count carried out earlier on the site by the planning students confirmed that by giving up the ten lots, about 65 per cent of the Red Morrels found in one compact cluster could be saved.

There was a mixed response to the council's compromise proposal. Those concerned about the environment saw the council's offer as futile because the removal of a third of the site's vegetation would still destroy the ecological integrity of the habitat. Others, mainly those supporting development, saw it as a good political compromise which had great merit as a gesture to recognize the concerns raised within the community. They also saw the benefit of saving the cluster of trees as it could serve to salvage the aesthetic impact even if it did not have ecological significance.

Planning students worked with the community to choose whether to accept the council's compromise offer or to oppose any development on the site. Supporters of the development option saw this as a small window of opportunity for the town to capitalize on the favourable economic climate and attract new families into the area as well as to allow their youth to stay in the area. Additional housing was also seen as being helpful to the council to expand its rate base and for the economy to expand and diversify. They feared that a failure to do so would lead to the economic decline of Goomalling and a further withdrawal of social and community services from the area, threatening the very survival of the town.

Those opposing the development were concerned about the loss of the Red Morrel trees which has come to symbolize the environmental vulnerability of the place. They are concerned that only 5.4 per cent of the native woodland remains in the entire wheatbelt due to extensive land clearing for agricultural production. Loss of biodiversity and changes to hydrology due to development would result if the surviving remnants of native vegetation are interfered with. Already, the effects are manifest in the form of water logging and salinity in the surrounding areas.

The conclusion that the overwhelming majority of student groups arrived at was not to support the development. They contend that the development was originally approved in the 1970s when environmental concerns were either not known or not considered as significant, thus the currently available information cannot be ignored. They also empha-

sized the need to err on the side of caution. Even though neither specific potential threats to the environment emanating from the development nor the TEC status of the Red Morrells found on the site could be proven, this was seen as a result of lack of information and prevalent confusion over the issues. The precautionary principle suggests that lack of clarity of issues cannot be justified to carry out the development.

Findings from the Study of the Site

Environmental legislation. The research highlighted the confusion that exists about environmental legislation and their application within the community and the local council, especially with reference to the actual status of the stand of Red Morrell trees found on the site and related planning implications. The complication stems from a number of issues. For example, most legislation is directed at preventing land clearing for agriculture but remains quiet on clearing for urban development, and the retrospective application of some of the recent regulations is not established. There are other schemes that seem to support development within small towns. In an effort to stimulate the economy in certain surrounding townships in years just prior to the current economic boom in the state, a few councils offered lots at very cheap rates to anyone who would commit to develop the lots and construct on them right away.

Patchy information on environmental issues. Another source of confusion stems from the fact that neither the degree of rarity of finding a clump of Red Morrell trees in the surroundings nor the degree of any threat to their extinction seem to have been established, mainly due to lack of sufficiently detailed studies. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) proposes this species to be sufficiently rare for consideration as a TEC. While it has documented the disappearance of Red Morrells and Salmon Gums within the wheatbelt through its woodland watch survey,^{68f} it does not present much specific information about the Goomalling situation. The classification of TEC requires site-specific information about the whole biological assemblage of the habitat that is represented in a particular locality. For TEC regulation to be implemented, a case will need to be made to acquire funding for a detailed study to be carried out by a scientific committee organized by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC). The process could be time-consuming and confusing for the council, which may be the cause for reluctance on its part to pursue that option.

Suggestions by experts (such as the representative from WWF) that the site could qualify for TEC classification was based on casual observation rather than in-depth investigation. Even a "tree count" to assess the state of the site had not been initiated by conservation lobbyists. This is understandable in view of the costs associated with surveying the numerous individual sites to determine their TEC classification potential. With such a vacuum of basic information, proponents and opponents of the development both tend to draw conclusions about the significance of the existing vegetation based on emotions rather than facts.

Changing values and changing realities. The Throssell Street site's development was approved when specific environmental aspects of the site were either not known or not considered significant. With the gradual change in the mindset taking place since in the region and the plethora of changes to environmental and land-use planning legislation and regulations, the reality and perceptions have both changed. The situation is often further complicated by individual interests, the wide interpretation of the concept of sustainable

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development, and the unwieldy process of the TBL analysis. Ensuing planning dilemmas such as the one relating to this site often result in communities being divided over decisions as to whether it should prioritize development or environmental protection.

Reliance on techniques. The council's reference to the TBL approach in its correspondence relating to its 2006 community survey about the development of the site reflected faith in planning techniques to find solutions to problems, while perhaps underplaying both the difficulty and the necessity of community involvement. It was stated that the aim of the exercise was to decide on the best option for the site by using the TBL analysis. The accompanying text that was sent along with the questionnaire comprised a document titled "SWOT analysis" which attempted to explain the two options, i.e., "development" or "no development" rather than elaborate on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with the development of the site. Also, as pointed out by some members of the community, the "no development" option was more articulate and provided more in-depth explanations than the other side (presumably having been authored by different parties).

While reference to the TBL analysis and the three aspects of sustainable development are abundant in the state's regional policies, its application at the local level is not a simple affair. However, this may have led the council to adopt some vague ideas of TBL and other planning techniques and technical jargon. At the same time due to its small size, the shire council has limited staffing and does not employ qualified technical staff. In one of the community engagement sessions following the community visioning exercise, a group of locals pointed to the need to employ a qualified planner to develop a strategic plan for the township.

Limited human resources. The community and the council staff have a "can do" attitude that they have successfully applied in the past, but that may not be sufficient to handle more complex problems where the alternatives are not so clear. Perhaps self-reliance in the community is an asset when faced with imperatives in a do-or-die situation, like when the community took up the initiative to set up a community bank as the last commercial bank had packed up and moved out. However, when the options to choose from do not present themselves in very clear terms, differences in opinions may make decision making more problematic.

Perhaps this would explain the shire council's reaching out to two universities at least twice in recent years — first to assess the town's potential as a tourist destination, and then this time to resolve the controversy and divided views over the site. While the initiatives may or may not have helped resolve the issues, clearly such one-off arrangements are not likely to be sustainable.

While the population numbers do not justify the appointment of professional staff by the council, the case for technical input into policy-making can be made on a number of grounds. It would help to draw up, manage, and implement strategic planning for the township that would be in line with the overall regional plan but would reflect the local community aspirations. The number of development opportunities and other funding possibilities for local and joint projects in partnership with the Wheatbelt Development Commission could be systematically explored and applied for. It could also help in the monitoring of various aspects related to the environment such as the state of remnant native vegetation and the extent of salinization and waterlogging in the area and its surroundings. While the list could go on, the fact still remains that the population of the town could not

justify the position. The perceived diminishing of political clout of regional Australia, especially from the perspective of small towns, adds another dilemma. While it is obvious that it will become increasingly difficult to justify the funding for such a position, the lack of such technical help could make it difficult for the town to compete for other grants for community development or related initiatives.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Goomalling represents a typical small town set within Western Australia's Wheatbelt region. It may be seen as representative of rural towns in Australia that are exposed to various forces of change which threaten their survival. The Throssell Street site controversy serves to highlight how small town communities within the wheatbelt are affected by the policy milieu created by various government agencies' policy responses to environmental degradation and the demands of a globalized economy.

The small town of Goomalling represents a community that has suffered a period of depopulation, but is currently poised for economic growth. It is being confronted with the need to initiate development to ensure the town's economic viability, while at the same time is faced with environmental considerations. As the community finds itself divided over which direction to take, the local leadership finds itself lacking the technical capacity to cope with the issues. Now, as in the past, the small town community relies on its social capital which consists of its closely knit community, community pride, and a trusted and respected local leadership to overcome the crisis.

Goomalling's past achievements gives it the confidence to be progressive in its outlook. Past successful undertakings have equipped the community with the collective capacity to undertake sizeable ventures, shared experience, and a strong sense of association with their town. These qualities provide them with the confidence to overcome emerging problems, even when the feeling of being neglected by state and federal governments prevails.

As it moves forward, however, the Goomalling community finds itself in a situation where the links within the closely knit community are beginning to show signs of strain. The community sees the need to accommodate development in terms of ensuring sufficient and appropriate housing provision, while it is also concerned about the need to protect the environment. The community may be in turmoil as some may regard environmental protection as a hurdle to development in a situation where the stakes are high as the economic survival of small towns within the wheatbelt is not to be taken for granted.

The local councilors and council staff, meanwhile, are being forced to assume roles for which they have no training. The complexity of various environmental legislations, their amendments, and the creation of various new roles for government agencies make decision making, while conforming to various legislative regulations, difficult. The expectation for local councils to employ the TBL analysis in decision making without suitably qualified staff, for example, subjects them to unreasonable pressure. Meanwhile, limited understanding of issues and policy concerns due to lack of information and/or expertise, tends to allow emotions or politics to rule the technical decision-making processes.

In the case of Goomalling, the resourcefulness of the council's CEO allowed the town to employ the services of planning students to apply the TBL analysis to try to resolve the Throssell Street site controversy. However, this was a one-off arrangement while other problems of similar or greater complexity are bound to appear.

In a situation where confusion prevails due to vagueness of policies and lack of technical capacity among the leaders, managers, and community in general, there is a real danger for the trust and respect for the leadership to erode rapidly. Tensions emerging within the community over the issue of favouring environmental protection and development, for example, combined with an ill-equipped leadership and technical staff, could cause the social capital built over the years to dissipate.

In light of the findings of the Goomalling town study, the following recommendations can be drawn that are applicable not only to the wheatbelt but also to most of rural Australia. These recommendations also have general relevance to parts of Asia with declining populations such as Japan and the Republic of Korea. They have direct relevance to situations where economic rationalization and neoliberal policies are affecting broad acre agricultural regions, exposing them to the effects of environmental degradation and the emergence of environmental legislation in response.

Recommendations

Preparation of strategic local plans. Small towns with growth prospects need state support to undertake the preparation of strategic local development plans. These plans should conform to the regional development strategy at the state level and should be based on an audit of land-use and environmental conditions within the township and its surroundings. These plans should also identify and assess environmentally sensitive areas such as potential TEC locations. The strategic plan would allow the community to take stock of its assets as well as identify the environmental protection measures and development initiatives needed to be undertaken. It would provide the basis for informed decision making regarding the physical planning of the shire considering short- as well as long-term priorities.

Enhancing technical capacity of council staff. In order to undertake strategic planning, the technical capacity of the shire councils will need to be enhanced significantly. While it may not be feasible for small towns such as Goomalling to appoint a planning officer on its staff, a number of alternatives could be considered. The collaborative teaching/learning experience between Curtin University and Goomalling could be used to develop a model for a network between small towns and planning programmes at universities in the surroundings.

Alternatively, the state government could arrange for professionals employed by its relevant agencies located at regional towns or the state capital to be loaned to small towns on short-term assignments. Yet another option that could be explored would be to out-source relevant tasks to government agencies with the required professional staff.

NOTES

- 1/ The Wheatbelt region of Western Australia represents an area of over 154,000 km² of broad acre farmland spread to the north and east of Perth.

- 2/ Wheatbelt Development Commission (WDC), *Annual Report 2006/07* (Available from <http://www.wheatbelt.wa.gov.au>; accessed 2 October 2007).
- 3/ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 4/ L. Gray, "Sustainability and Survival in the Western Australian Wheatbelt," *Historic Environment* 15 (1-2:2001):20-5; and D. Singe, "A Practitioner's View on the Future of Australia's Declining Country Towns," *Regional Policy and Practice* 9 (2:2000):17-20.
- 5/ F. McKenzie and D. Stehlik, "Future for the Wheatbelt — Is 2030 Already Here?" *Regional Policy and Practice* 9 (2:2005):17-20.
- 6/ Department of Local Government and Regional Development, *Wheatbelt Economic Perspective* (Perth: Government of Western Australia, 2003).
- 7/ WDC, Homepage (Available from <http://www.wheatbelt.wa.gov.au>; accessed 20 September 2007).
- 8/ *Ibid.*
- 9/ For example, the Wheatbelt Area Consultative Committee's web site quotes Western Australia's Department of Training and Education as reporting economic diversification over the years (Available from <http://wheatbeltacc.com.au>; accessed 7 November 2007).
- 10/ McKenzie and Stehlik, "Future for the Wheatbelt".
- 11/ *Ibid.*
- 12/ C. Watson, "The Wheatbelt: Progress or Inevitable Decline" (Master's thesis, Curtin University of Technology, Perth, 1999).
- 13/ *Ibid.*
- 14/ McKenzie and Stehlik, "Future for the Wheatbelt".
- 15/ G. Forth, "What is the Future for Australia's Declining Country Towns?" (Edited extract from speech presented at the First National Conference on the Future of Australia's Country Towns, Bendigo, Australia, 28-30 June 2000) (Available from <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=935>; accessed November 2007).
- 16/ *Ibid.*
- 17/ Forth, "What is the Future for Australia's Declining Country Towns?"
- 18/ K. D. Cocks, *Use with Care: Managing Australia's Natural Resources in the Twenty-first Century* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1992).
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- 22/ EPA, *State of the Environment Report: Western Australia 2007* (Available from <http://www.soe.wa.gov.au/report/biodiversity.html>; accessed 2007).
- 23/ *Ibid.*
- 24/ *Ibid.*
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- 26/ World Wildlife Fund (WWF)-Australia, "Native Vegetation Regulation: Financial Impact and Policy Issues," WWF Briefing, 31 October 2005 (Available from <http://www.wwf.org.au/publications/NativeVegetationRegulation.pdf>; accessed 7 November 2007).
- 27/ Davidson *et al.*, *Native Vegetation*.
- 28/ EPA, *Environmental Protection of Native Vegetation in Western Australia*.
- 29/ *Ibid.*
- 30/ *Ibid.*
- 31/ Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC), *Conserving Threatened Ecological Communities* (Perth: DEC, 2007).
- 32/ *Ibid.*

- 33/ *Ibid.*
- 34/ M. Tonts, "Some Recent Trends in Australian Regional Economic Development Policy," *The Journal of the Regional Studies Association* 33 (6:1999):581-6.
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- 36/ Tonts, "Some Recent Trends".
- 37/ *Ibid.*
- 38/ M. Tonts, "Rural Restructuring, Policy Change and Uneven Development in the Central Wheatbelt of Western Australia" (Doctoral diss., Curtin University of Technology, Perth, 1998).
- 39/ Forth, "What is the Future for Australia's Declining Country Towns?"
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- 55/ Shire of Goomalling, "Goomalling Economic Development Strategy 2006".
- 56/ *Ibid.*
- 57/ Batt *et al.*, "Shire of Goomalling".
- 58/ Shire of Goomalling, "Goomalling Economic Development Strategy 2006".
- 59/ ABS, *Census Data 2006*.
- 60/ *Ibid.*
- 61/ Shire of Goomalling, "Goomalling Economic Development Strategy 2006".
- 62/ *Ibid.*
- 63/ *Ibid.*
- 64/ Batt *et al.*, "Shire of Goomalling".
- 65/ Western Australian Herbarium, Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM)/WWF, *Woodland Watch 2005 Survey of Wheatbelt Woodlands* (DEC, 2006).
- 66/ The reserves are Crown land, i.e., land owned by the Commonwealth (federal government). There are provisions for local councils to apply to be transferred to them and brought under its town planning scheme, but this usually requires various clearances and, consequently, lengthy processes.
- 67/ A document titled "SWOT Analysis" was prepared that discussed the development/no development options. Apparently, different groups had authored the explanation of the two options and one option presented a much deeper analysis than the other.
- 68/ CALM/WWF, *Woodland Watch 2005 Survey*.