

## Sustainable land management through local government: Improving integration of NRM into land use planning - the SEAVROC PLUM case

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Key learnings. 1. In the South East Avon region of Western Australia, the formation of a group dedicated to planning for land use management (PLUM) has enabled local government planning processes to become more integrative of sustainable land management issues. The PLUM group model could be used to enable better interaction between local government, planning and natural resource management stakeholders at a sub-regional level, enabling different agency goals to be achieved. 2. The group has enabled sustained and continuous interaction between stakeholders concerned with sustainable land management, and local governments in the region. 3. The group was guided by a few key people to drive, facilitate and provide overarching vision, to ensure issues were addressed in a focused manner. 4. It was important to develop a collective vision to maintain focus, and have clear, realistic and actionable tasks to work towards.

### Overview

The South East Avon Voluntary Regional Organisation of Councils (SEAVROC) in collaboration with various government and industry partners has approached sustainable land use planning in their region through the establishment of the 'Planning for Land Use Management' (PLUM) group. This is the story of how this approach has evolved over a period of two years, as observed by the authors. The key learnings from this experience are not profound in terms of new discoveries, rather, it is hoped that the following few pages describe how the deliberative and purposeful creation of a group of collectively concerned stakeholders has led to an improved integration of sustainable land management principles into the planning processes of local government.

The ultimate intended outcome of the PLUM is to coordinate sustainable land use management through local government.

### The problematic situation

The South East Avon region in Western Australia is facing changes to its natural, social and economic landscape as a result of the long-term impacts of climate change, water resource availability and peak oil, and the short to medium-term impacts of land use intensification with an increasing demand for rural residential or lifestyle lots. Land use planning can afford an intervention to such prevailing market forces to ensure the most appropriate use of land addresses social, environmental and economic needs of a region. The South East Avon regions proximity to Perth and its desirable lifestyle characteristics make it attractive for residential and commercial development, highlighting its potential as an area of high land use conflict.

Decision making for appropriate land use that meets the triple bottom line is challenging to any organisation, particularly those organisations with limited resources and capacity to do. Existing planning practices were not considered adequate by SEAVROC and the Department of Agriculture and Food WA (DAFWA) to enable informed decision making by local authorities with regard to sustainable use of land. A lack of proactive and coordinated process for providing input into local planning strategies by government and non government agencies, as well as the observation of poor horizontal and vertical integration of government agencies involved in planning, enhanced this problematic situation.

What is the best way to achieve land use planning that achieves sustainable development? Who would be involved, and how will it happen? This paper explores the approach to land use planning in the SEAVROC through the establishment of the PLUM group.

From input into local planning strategies to an improved process to incorporate sustainability into planning

### *Lack of sustainable land management integration in local government planning*

An initial meeting to discuss DAFWA input into the Shire of York's local planning strategy resulted in a much broader outcome; that in the South East Avon, there was potential for developing a better approach to planning that incorporated sustainable land management. To

move forward, it was agreed that the key players should be brought together to find out who was doing what, discuss issues each were having and identify common objectives to work together.

#### *A meeting to bring together the relevant players and developing a shared vision*

A desire to more adequately incorporate sustainable land management into planning motivated a group of local and state government, non-government and industry personnel into meeting to discuss key issues related to land use management and land use planning and to explore ways to work together in a more proactive fashion to enable the vision of 'coordinated sustainable land use management through local government' to be realised (Roe 2007a). This meeting concluded that the best way forward was for local government to work together at a sub-regional level with relevant planning stakeholders to tackle major land use planning issues. This approach was helped by the history of collaboration among the local governments involved, and the realisation that individual organisation and agency goals could be achieved through collaborative efforts. The vision developed by the initial group was embraced and endorsed by a wider South East Avon audience in a formal regional organisation of councils meeting.

#### *Priorities identified*

A plethora of issues were identified in this initial meeting, though were prioritised according to how realistic they were to overcome. The priorities were as follows:

1. Dealing with cross shire boundary planning
2. The need for a sub regional planning strategy
3. SEAVROC needs a way to understand and interpret different scenarios and impacts on the landscape to help make good decisions
4. How do we inform/educate landholders (especially small landholders) about shire requirements, sustainable land use management and the range of opportunities for their land?
5. What information is available? How do we access it? How do we interpret it and how do we use it to make improved decisions?
6. When developing a local planning strategy, we need to encourage interaction during its development.
7. There is an opportunity to apply for funds to address issues.
8. Where does this meeting go from here? (Roe 2007b)

#### *Priorities actioned and results to date*

Some of the priority issues were fairly straight forward to action. Number eight was immediately actioned, with the formation of a Sustainable Land Use Management (SLUM) group, facilitated by Ms Roe and Mr Hooper. The formation of this group provided a number of benefits to all concerned, and has been the key vehicle in which the other seven priority issues have been addressed to varying extents. The development of a cross-boundary local planning policy on 'Tree Cropping' was a major success, and it is believed the policy will assist in maximising the economic, social and environmental benefits associated with the development of the tree crop industry in the region, while having some control over potentially negative impacts (Western Australian Local Government Association 2009). Since June 2007, the SLUM group (now PLUM - Planning for Land Use Management) has celebrated what the group perceives to be a number of small 'wins', including (not in any order):

1. A regular regional forum for cross agency, industry and local government to meet and discuss common planning and land use management issues.
2. Facilitation of a 'carbon forum' in the region to highlight the opportunities and potential impacts of carbon emissions trading schemes and carbon tree plantings in the region. This provided a framework for a similar forum in the north-east Wheatbelt region.
3. Success in obtaining funding for the development of a 'low rainfall tree cropping local planning policy', which has resulted in adoption of the policy across all shires in the SEAVROC in early 2009 (Western Australian Local Government Association 2009).
4. Application for a project to develop a spatial information system to enable better presentation, interpretation and integration of various sources of information for local government planning and decision making (in progress).
5. Small landholder workshops held and information packages developed for local governments in the area.
6. Training in the use of the online natural resource interface 'NRM Info', delivered to local government front-line staff.
7. A technical advisory group process underway for two of the shires to enable more proactive input from natural resource based agencies into local planning strategies.

8. Facilitated better access to spatial information services provided by government.
9. Evaluation of progress and performance, with the decision made to move forward.

Some observations

#### *Drivers*

A key driver in the process was Shire of York chief executive officer Ray Hooper, whose discussion paper highlighted many of the concerns of local governments in the region with regard to poor planning processes, and that of numerous other stakeholders (Hooper 2007). DAFWA development officer Juana Roe was also a driver and facilitated the PLUM group from its inception. DAFWA had a particular interest in supporting this process, as it was anticipated that DAFWA's goals of sustainable land management could be achieved through improved land use planning processes through local government.

#### *Space for the network to work*

The PLUM group is an example of an approach that engages numerous stakeholders, facilitates better access to government and industry information and allows open discussion and debate on issues identified as important in the region. The sustained interaction has resulted in strengthened networks in the land use planning and natural resource management field within the region. Importantly, there has been the creation of a meeting 'space' dedicated to this interaction. This space enables issues to be identified by stakeholders living and working in the region, who then engage with the relevant expertise (external or internal) to help in addressing those issues.

#### *To be continued...?*

The PLUM group was facilitated through an evaluation session where the group decided the way forward. A number of successes were celebrated and areas for improvement were noted. The author has observed that despite the temporary departure of Ms Roe at the end of 2008, a key driver of the PLUM group, the group appears to have maintained its momentum, with another PLUM group member taking responsibility for setting meeting times and agendas.

There is no doubt that the group will change in terms of its dynamics and perhaps its function and role, particularly in response to policies that influence sustainable land management and planning, though it has provided a platform previously non-existent in the South East Avon region (and perhaps the wider Wheatbelt area) for sustained and purposeful interaction to address problems in an integrated manner.

#### References

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#### *Acknowledgements*

The authors acknowledge Ray Hooper, CEO of the Shire of York, in providing the drive for the development of the PLUM group. This paper draws on the documentation of the PLUM group process collated by Ms Roe over the past 18 months. The support and encouragement of Rod Safstrom is also greatly appreciated.