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COMMENT

"IT'S TIME"

POTENTIAL LESSONS FROM THE PAST – 'PUTTING MONEY WHERE YOUR MOUTH IS'

At last, the region is recognising the strategic economic importance of upgrading the road crossing between Cairns and Mareeba/ Tablelands and the need to look at new solutions.

The situation has its parallel with that facing the region in the late 1970s/early1980s when there was a critical need to upgrade Cairns Airport, especially to take the new generation of large wide-bodied jets on long distance flights to and from distant Australian and overseas airports. Vigorous representations were being made to the then owners of the airport, the Commonwealth Government, only to be told that 'you are on the list but there is about 20 ahead of you and Sydney is first'.

But we got there in the end. But it was only through the region metaphorically 'putting its money where its mouth was'. The region, in a major expression of self confidence in its future, commenced a process of negotiating 'local ownership' of the airport. Initially, the region's local authorities came together to fund the necessary feasibility studies – studies that indicated that if the Commonwealth Government met $20m of the estimated cost of $25m to take large wide-bodied jets on long distance flights, a small passenger charge of about $5 a head would cover running costs and pay back over time the capital costs to the local operator.

As it turned out, after a furious internal community debate, where some elements in the community argued that the community local authorities should not have to face the risk of the airport paying its way and becoming a burden on ratepayers, the State Government of the day accepted a proposal that the then Cairns Harbour Board, to be renamed the Cairns Port Authority, expand its role to also own and operate the airport – something that was common practice in many cities around the world including New York.

Significantly, in relation to the Commonwealth's contribution, no economic/ cost benefit study seems to have been carried out but as it turned out, the airport succeeded 'beyond our wildest dreams' as following the floating of the Australian dollar, hotel/motel nights in Cairns doubled in three years in the late 1980s and new routes from elsewhere in Australia and overseas multiplied.

So how would a change in approach to one of the region 'putting our money where our mouth is' work out in relation to the range crossing?

The first thing to recognise is that to achieve a quick and satisfactory outcome, the region needs to drive the process itself. The first thing to do would be for the region's local government leaders to form a high-level special group to drive a resolution including key regional organisations and interests such, as in this case, the heavy transport operators in addition to local government.

The second would be for the region's local governments to put up the money for full analysis of options to be undertaken from a regional perspective including:

- Separate identification of costs of avoiding short-term environmental effects;
- The beneficial impacts of throwing the city's urban development off a constrained coastal plain;
- The fact that the road is not paralleled by a State Government subsidised rail freight route to the west as is the case for Brisbane, Rockhampton and Townsville;
- Full separate quantification of prospective economic development consequences on top of the usual narrow economic efficiency analysis of savings in travel time vehicle operating and accident costs.

But the other aspect that comes out of the resolution of the airport question in the late 70s/ early 80s that indicates the region should 'put its money where its mouth is' relates to paying for the upgrading.

Taking on local ownership arrangements for the airport meant that locals were accepting a passenger charge and the tourist industry accepting that visitors would pay a fee for using the airport. It was argued by some that this was unfair with other regions at the time not facing this cost. But the region's willingness to pay this charge was a major expression of confidence that allowed a deal to be done to get the project done.

In the current Range Road situation, this would mean possibly accepting that part of the cost be met by a toll. In the past, it has been ruled out on the basis that there was no alternative. But there are alternatives for most of the traffic via the Gillies, the Palmerston or the Rex Range Road and if an alternative route was developed, via the existing Kuranda Range route.

LET'S LOOK AT IT.

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From 1973 to 1982, Bill Cummings was manager of the Far North Qld Development Bureau and its Sub Board for Tourism & Travel, subsequently the Far North Qld Promotion Bureau. In recent years, he has carried out a great deal of cost benefit and economic impact analysis on roads across the region and across the north and centre of Australia.