



Regional Development Programs

Greater Taree City success story – how 'backward thinking' is making an area go forward

The backward thinking approach

The Economic Development Unit in Greater Taree City Council uses a creative thinking technique they call 'backward thinking'. It's a process where one thinks about a project or an objective, considers the most logical and conventional way of doing it, then tips it all on its head by doing the exact opposite.

This technique has opened many opportunities in the Greater Taree area and resulted in many successes.

Taree's backward approach to planning

Text books say in relation to planning – it's 'ready, aim, fire'. The Economic Development Unit (EDU) at Taree has taken a backward approach to this way of thinking and instead, used the 'fire, ready, aim' approach, claiming that a lot of time can be wasted trying to reach consensus when developing strategic plans and going through the consultation process. In Taree, promises are made, projects are agreed on, work commences and as all of this is happening, someone documents the progress into a plan.

In the two months or so it took to write up the Taree business plan, nearly a million dollars worth of Council-owned industrial land was sold to relocating and expanding businesses. It would have been easy to say 'let's create the plan first', but creating jobs is more important than planning to create jobs.

Initially, it was felt that the business plan couldn't be written up until the EDU knew how much money the Council was prepared to allocate to economic development but instead, the group felt it more important to work out what they wanted to do, then find creative ways of achieving it.

To illustrate, the Council agreed to a request for \$20,000 for the Economic Development Unit to undertake a river-front development project. In the ensuing months, a range of other existing projects were bundled together to create a larger project. The Council secured a government grant of more than \$200,000 and expects to secure another \$100,000. This has grown from a \$20,000 project to a half million-dollar project. Two major developers are now collectively proposing a \$10 million project in the vicinity.

Taree's backward approach to youth

While most communities say, 'we've got to do something to keep the young people in the area', the position at Taree is to encourage young people to leave. The theory is that they don't leave the area because they can't get a job – there are plenty of jobs! They leave because they want to fly on their own and enjoy things like the Sydney nightlife. While doing this, they gain worldly experience and job skills so by the time they're 25 or so, they are ready to settle down. That's when they try to get them back.

The Economic Development Unit was instrumental in attracting one of the Australian Technical Colleges to train young people which was initially only planned for Port Macquarie but a split-campus has now been secured in Taree and will open in 2006.

The EDU also put together a vocational education training program, which is the only one of its kind in Australia. Known as Career-Link, it allows school students to participate in a paid work / training environment and career pathway in the dynamic marine and composites industry – an important part of Taree's economy. Local boat builders have grown exponentially in recent years and require more staff to cope with the demand but have been suffering with skills shortages and lack of interest from young people to enter the industry.

This project has been coordinated in partnership with Council, the Department of State and Regional Development (DSRD), the local marine and composites industry, the NSW Department of Education and Training and the North Coast Institute of TAFE. A similar arrangement is also being planned to encourage more nursing training in the area in partnership with the Manning Base Hospital.

Taree's backward approach to promotion and attracting people

While most communities conduct their advertising and promotional activities outside their local government area to attract people to relocate, Taree has done the complete opposite. Most of our promotion is done locally during school holidays and long week-ends. People visiting the area as tourists most closely fit the profile of the people we are trying to attract. Local research found that skilled people that have already moved to the Manning Valley had some sort of link with the area such as having family nearby or they may

have visited the area at some stage as a tourist and enjoyed their experience.

Greater Taree City Council has taken on a brand position as one of being a helper or carer. This extends to helping people find jobs, a home, a school for their children or help with relocating their business.

To support this brand position the EDU in conjunction the Taree Community College developed and delivered a range of customer service training courses and used the money raised from that exercise to fund more promotional activity.

A range of promotional material was produced to reflect this brand position detailing the ways the community could help people relocate their families and businesses to the area.

As well as the usual glossy brochures and a DVD info pack, the development of a website was seen as a key promotional tool to attract new people and new investment to the area. This included a major investment in a web-based demographic and economic profiling product as well as a forecasting and growth projection tool to attract investment.

Taree's backward approach to attracting skilled labour

The EDU considered ways of helping people that relocate to the area find jobs. Initially, they thought about developing a web-based product designed to show actual job vacancies but thought it would be too onerous to manage so instead, they developed a website where people looking for work input their skills and qualifications and are linked with the appropriate businesses through an automated email system. The site is called: www.tellusyourskills.com.au.

This is a new and innovative product that was developed in house to address a skills shortage that many local businesses are suffering as identified in a recent skills audit co-funded by DSRD.



The EDU believes it now has a marketable product that can be sold to other communities suffering skills shortages. A similar product has been developed to help people find a home. People can visit the Manning Valley website and fill in a form describing the sort of home they want and the price range. From there, emails are sent to every real estate agent in the area.

How DSRD's regional programs have helped

The Department has financially partnered Greater Taree City Council in a number of initiatives primarily through the Developing Regional Resources Program and Main Street / Small Towns Program. The Council's Community Economic Development Coordinator is currently part funded under the Main Street Small Towns Program for three years. The Council is also supporting a number of small communities such as Hallidays Point in the LGA that have received assistance through the Towns and Villages Futures Program.

Looking to the future

The Economic Development Unit of Greater Taree City Council has implemented numerous projects which have created a lot of interest in the area and resulted in job creation. Through the efforts of 'backward thinking', the future is looking pretty bright. For further information on Taree go to www.gtcc.nsw.gov.au

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LGA name:

Greater Taree City

Area:

3,728km²

Location:

3 hours by road north of Sydney

Region:

Mid North Coast

Population:

47,000

Main industries:

manufacturing, marine and composites, retail, medical, community services, agriculture (dairy and forestry), business support services, tourism