

7-13-2008

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Recommended Citation

Daniel O'Hare. (2008) "Missing the Gold Coast train? The interaction between private development and three levels of government planning in attempting to co-locate a new railway station and a major new town centre". Jul. 2008.

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Missing the Gold Coast train? The interaction between private development and three levels of government planning in attempting to co-locate a new railway station and a major new town centre

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Introduction

Robina is a developing regional centre on Australia's Gold Coast, in the expanding South East Queensland city region centred on the state capital, Brisbane. Robina has been gradually developing, over the period from the 1980s to the present, as an 1850 hectare masterplanned community for approximately 25,000 people. Currently, the major component of Robina's town centre is a large shopping centre, which opened in 1996 and is currently being expanded. 700 metres straight-line distance to the north-west is the Robina Railway Station, which was designed and developed simultaneously, and which opened in 1997. The pattern of streets and pathways established at the time, makes the walk from Station to town centre a 900 metre walk – a considerable distance in a subtropical climate, and perceptually daunting while the land between the two remains largely undeveloped.

The railway station is surrounded by 600 commuter car parking spaces, and the Town Centre has over 3000 parking spaces for shoppers. The current emphasis on the car, together with the present separation of Station and Centre, appear at odds with contemporary ideas of Transit Oriented Development (TOD)¹ and with longstanding planning ideals of integration of transport and land use. The separation of Station and Centre has attracted much anecdotal criticism over the decade since their development, but there has been little or no analysis of how and why this separation occurred, and little available analysis of whether Robina may in fact ultimately develop into an example of TOD as its development continues. One barrier to understanding has been that the major shopping centre known as "Robina Town Centre" is in fact only one element of what is intended to be a major regional centre. This perceptual issue is important, as Robina Town Centre has always been intended to be much more than the current major shopping centre.

Aim of this paper

The main aim of this paper is to show how a major regional centre in a masterplanned community has been driven by private sector development initiative, and how this private planning has been both supported and frustrated by public sector planning by local, state and federal government. The particular focus is on efforts to create an integrated Urban Transit Oriented Development (TOD) centre. In this focus, the integration between a publicly planned new Railway Station and the new privately developed centre is critical.

Research methods

The methods for this research have involved triangulation between key informant interviews, documentary research and literature review. Limitations of the research include the limited number of key informants for the in-depth conversational interviews, and the inability to contact Queensland Rail (QR) informants who were involved in the planning but have either retired or moved on to new positions outside QR. A consultant who evaluated proposals for both QR and the private development company unfortunately was deceased in 2006. These limitations are offset by the fact that the four interviewees were intimately involved in the planning and development of Robina at critical periods. An additional limitation is that some key documents were unexpectedly unavailable in public repositories, and there was insufficient time to retrieve them from government and private archives.

Robina overview

Robina was planned as a master planned community in the 1970s and '80s, a time when cars were thought of as the main transport consideration. Its earlier developed areas manifest the planned sprawl characteristics of mid-twentieth century suburbia,² such as separation of land uses, large areas of mainly low density detached residential dwellings on large lots, road hierarchies, streets designed more for individual cars rather than for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport, and local centres and a major shopping centre designed primarily for access by car, with other modes of transport being secondary. The developers looked to the USA for models of urban development. They engaged Moshe Safdie as design consultant, and made 70-80 trips to new and established American cities to view exemplars for the type of town they sought to create.³

One long term Robina resident tells of how his son attends a high school located just one kilometer straight-line distance from his home, but has to walk 4.5 kilometres to get to school due to the disconnected street pattern of crescents and culs-de-sac.⁴

Robina's place in time is most visible when contrasted with the adjacent 1990s master planned area known as Varsity Lakes, which incorporates mixed use, mixed densities, employment close to homes, and connected street patterns.

Robina town centre has been envisaged as a major regional centre since the earliest planning for Robina by the Robina Land Corporation in conjunction with the then local government, Albert Shire,⁵ and later recognised as such by Federal Government initiatives, State Government regional planning, and current local government planning.⁶ The long development time frame of such a centre has been beneficial, as those planning the regional centre have benefited from changes in planning ideas from the mid-twentieth century to the turn of the 21st century.

The rise and fall and rise of Gold Coast railways

Queensland's Gold Coast developed as a collection of coastal tourist resorts by the late 19th century. The early seaside resorts on the coast south of Brisbane, at Southport, Burleigh Heads and Coolangatta, were initially accessed primarily by boat. A coastal horse-drawn coach service, using the hard sand on the shoreline as a road, was established by a hotelier in 1888.⁷

Private development was later stimulated in the conventional way, by State government provision of transport infrastructure. The main resort areas flourished due to easy public access via a railway line from the State capital Brisbane. The first South Coast rail line, from Brisbane to Southport, was opened in 1889, providing convenient access for weekend beachgoers.⁸ The line, primarily to support the farming industry, was gradually extended further south, reaching West Burleigh in 1901, and the twin towns of Tweed Heads and Coolangatta, at the southern end of today's Gold Coast, in 1903.⁹ These rail lines were closed in the 1960s, with the last train service to Southport occurring in 1964.¹⁰

During the 20th century a much larger network of Gold Coast holiday resorts and retirement suburbs was created due to the greater mobility allowed by increasing car ownership. Major public investments were made in roads and bridges, assisting Surfers Paradise to assume primacy as Australia's most fashionable coastal resort for most of the 20th century. After the original Gold Coast railway line was closed in the 1960s, its corridor was gradually redeveloped for a mix of private development and publicly funded motorways. By the 1990s, the Gold Coast was well advanced in its transformation into a largely car-dependent city region, as a major part of the rapidly urbanizing South East Queensland region.

Less than twenty years after closing the original South Coast railway line, the Queensland Government commenced feasibility studies for a new Gold Coast rail link in 1983.¹¹ The government's commitment to the project was announced in State Parliament by the Premier in 1988,¹² but no funding or commencement date had been announced before the Federal Government's Building Better Cities (BBC) program allocated funds and coordination assistance to bring forward the \$280 million project in the early 1990s. The contribution of the BBC program is outlined below. The new railway line to Robina was opened in December 1997, and is being extended further south in 2007-2009 under the State Government's *South East Queensland Infrastructure Plan and Program* (SEQIPP).¹³

Robina as an outcome of private sector initiation and later collaboration and support by public sector planning

The Gold Coast has been described as a city designed and developed by the private sector, by "the creative leadership and extraordinary 'can do' vitality of incredibly

courageous and creative people, with big risks at stake, but with room to move.”¹⁴ The author of ten local histories of the Gold Coast depicts the 1950s to the 1980s as a “Golden Age of energetic entrepreneurs and colourful characters”, when “visionaries and promoters” established a city that was very different from the Australian norm.¹⁵ A tourism academic argues that this entrepreneurial character was significant to Gold Coast development throughout the 20th century.¹⁶

Integrating planning and private development by public sector leadership: Australia’s Building Better Cities program, 1991-1996

The Federal Government initiated the Better Cities concept in 1991 as a means of reforming urban management processes by creating model partnerships between the three tiers of government, the private sector and the community.¹⁷

The federally funded Building Better Cities (BBC) program of 1991-1995, which was discontinued by the conservative national government of 1996-2006, sought to introduce an integrated approach to the planning and development of transport, infrastructure, and urban development. The means for achieving this, in established and newly developing urban areas across Australia, was the development and support of “area strategies” for 26 demonstration projects.¹⁸ As well as fostering higher quality urban development, for the social, economic and environmental well being of Australians, the program was important in countering the severe economic recession that Australia experienced in the early 1990s. The Federal Government contributed \$816 million over the five years, with State, Territory and Local Governments bringing the total public sector investment to approximately \$2.3 billion. The Federal Government estimated the multiplier effect of this investment on private sector investment as 1.6 to 1.8, generating an increase of about \$4 billion in Australia’s national income associated with the program.¹⁹

The Gold Coast Corridor project, focusing on integrating urban development and transport infrastructure around a 43 kilometre rail extension to Robina, was the largest of the six Queensland BBC projects. The new Gold Coast Railway was intended to service the rapidly expanding suburban areas behind the coastal resort strip. The new rail line was seen primarily as a commuter link to connect the expanding outer areas of the South East Queensland city region to the main concentration of workplaces in Brisbane’s city centre. As discussed by key informants in this research, conceptualisation as a commuter link offered both strengths and limitations. Given that the rail line connected one of Australia’s leading holiday destinations directly with Brisbane International and Domestic Airports at its northern terminus, and was intended eventually to connect at its southern terminus to the Gold Coast Airport, a major node for domestic tourists, the commuter focus seems even more limiting in scope. Despite the emphasis on commuting to Brisbane, there was some concern by the BBC planners that there was a need to encourage more intra-Gold Coast travel via the rail line.²⁰ The author of this paper, as a regular commuter on this railway line, observes that there is now considerable local travel by school students, university students and workers.

The Federal Minister responsible for the BBC program, then Deputy Prime Minister Brian Howe, claimed that public investment in the Gold Coast Railway was “directly responsible for massive private sector economic investment at Robina with its sound centre development,... showing the complementarity of public and private investment”²¹

Status of Robina Town Centre in regional planning by State and local government

By the 1990s, the Gold Coast was a rapidly expanding urban sub-region of Australia’s fastest growing region. In response to this rapid growth, the Queensland Government in 1990 initiated SEQ2001, a non-statutory regional planning exercise involving voluntary cooperation between the State and the then 18 local governments in the region.²² With input from the South East Queensland Organisation of Councils (SEQROC), the community and business, a “Regional Framework for Growth Management” was introduced in 1995 and updated in 1998 and 2000. The voluntary regional planning process was widely considered to be ineffective in managing the rapid urban growth, so the State Government commenced a statutory regional planning process in 2004.

The statutory *South East Queensland Regional Plan 2005-2026*²³ (SEQRP) designates Robina as a Principal Regional Activity Centre, one of two in the Gold Coast sub-region, and one of 14 in the SEQ region. Such centres are intended to “provide the key focal points of regional employment and in-centre residential development” and to be “key nodes in the regional public transport system”²⁴ These centres are intended to be supported by net residential densities of 40-120 dwellings per hectare or greater. In addition, development in all regional activity centres is required to conform to transit oriented development (TOD) principles, and to become mixed use high density residential and employment areas “designed to maximize the efficient use of land through high levels of access to public transport [... and] a walking and cycle-friendly core....”²⁵

Implementation of the SEQRP will be through local government controlled Local Growth Management Strategies (LGMS) and the draft Gold Coast LGMS supports the Principal Regional Activity Status of Robina.²⁶ Implementation involves major infrastructure provision by the Queensland Government, statutory planning by local government, and extensive urban development by the private sector.

The following sections discuss the main reasons for difficulties in co-locating Robina Railway Station and Robina Town Centre.

Design and siting issues

Robina Town Centre is located adjacent to a large floodplain, across which the new railway line runs. The Centre’s designers reconfigured low lying land to create an attractive town centre site and focal point by developing lakes along the creek line. Fill

was provided by removing 60 metres from the elevation of a hill approximately 300m to the south of the town centre site.²⁷

The waterway between the existing Town Centre and the Railway line was a barrier in terms of engineering and construction considerations, as well as the urban design aspirations of RLC.²⁸ Movement of the railway alignment further east, to allow the track to run either under the Town Centre or immediately along its western side, would have caused engineering problems and additional railway construction costs by lengthening the viaduct across the floodplain.²⁹

Robina's designers were impressed by a visit to San Antonio's Riverwalk,³⁰ a well known urban design success story with its intimate scale, many crossings, and proximity of commercial development and medium-high density housing. The Robina team saw this as something they could recreate in their reconfiguration of the creek along the western side of their town centre site. Taking into account the unpredictability of the final design and timing of the railway line and station development by the State Government planners, they felt this Riverwalk vision was a good reason to keep the railway more distant from the centre. Robina's Riverwalk precinct, on the western side of the major shopping centre, is the outcome. Although not directly replicating the small scale intimacy and enclosure of the San Antonio exemplar, it does create a water oriented precinct that would not be possible with a railway line in that location.

Railway operational considerations

According to key informants, and to the anecdotal reports of urban designers and planners at the time of construction, the operational requirements of the trains were QR's main priority. These operational requirements included park-and-ride capacity and a consequent preference for non-urban station locations. In the 1980s and early 1990s, when car dependent 20th century urban patterns were rarely questioned, and the term 'TOD' was unknown in Queensland, the railway was conceived as a commuter link for patrons accessing stations by car. The planned railway route therefore generally avoided existing and planned urban development, and stations were required to have at least 600 car parking spaces.

To facilitate rapid journey times, and to minimize loss of time at stations, the stations were required to be relatively evenly spaced. To maximise train speeds, large radius curves were required. Where possible, stations were to be located on top of a rise, to save power and time consumption by trains stopping and starting.

Informants from both public and private sectors state that an early intention was to locate the station directly beneath the Town Centre, and that this location would facilitate the later southward extension of the railway to Gold Coast Airport. A range of barriers to the under-centre proposal cumulatively led to a decision by the State Government to unilaterally "pull rank" and abandon that integrated location.³¹ Locating the station beneath the centre would have incurred prohibitive costs in additional rock excavation, despite the location on a rise.³²

QR was allegedly also reluctant to locate the station under the town centre as the slight increase in track length would disturb the evenness of the intervals between stations. When the decision was made to locate the station west of the town centre, separation was increased to the 700 metre straight-line distance north-west, in order to avoid locating the station on a curve or an incline, as would have occurred if the station were sited directly to the west.³³

Shopping centre operational considerations

The option of locating the station beneath the town centre also presented operational constraints for the shopping centre. The principal concern of the developers was that siting of the station beneath the shopping centre would impose additional construction costs associated with dampening train-generated vibrations and reducing noise.³⁴ It was also argued that a railway line bisecting the centre's undercroft would interfere with the building services and servicing requirements.

As one of the Gold Coast's two largest shopping centres, Robina Town Centre attracts considerable car traffic to the 3000 car spaces servicing its car-based retailing which includes two large supermarkets, as well as a national chain department store and two discount department stores. The developer and centre management argument, as put by Tony Winter, is that long term commuter parking would compete with shorter term shopper parking if the station and centre were closer.

The difficulty of coordinating private and public sector timelines for planning and development

Although the new Robina rail station and town centre were built almost simultaneously in the mid-1990s, their integration posed major challenges for all parties. Coordination of timelines for design and development – by private developers and State and Federal Government agencies - is identified by key informants as the most difficult issue. On the basis of the limited number of key informant interviews undertaken, it is inferred that this was the most significant factor precluding the integration and co-location of the Rail Station and town centre development.

The Queensland State Government began planning for the new Gold Coast Railway in 1982, reinforced its commitment to planning it in 1988, but still had not committed funds for its construction prior to the Federal Government allocating the BBC funds in the 1990s. Planning for major transport infrastructure takes a long time, as indicated by this delay of over ten years. By the time the Federal Government initiated its five-year BBC program, the State Government had already 'set in stone' its assumptions on the best route alignments and station locations. The five year timeline for the Federal funding, together with the political need to demonstrate outcomes on the ground within three-year electoral cycles, meant that there was little scope for major revision of prior positions.³⁵ For example, all of the key informants for this study mentioned Queensland

Rail's steadfast preference to enable fast trip times by minimizing the number of stations and, where possible, by locating stations at the top of rises or hills.

The Masterplanned new town of Robina had been conceived and masterplanned by private sector interests since the early 1970s economic boom, with planning continuing by a single consultant on behalf of successive national institutional owners and their receivers through the booms and busts of the 1970s and early 1980s.³⁶ Following the 1980 purchase by what became the Robina Land Corporation (RLC), Robina was gradually developed during similar economic cycles during 1980s and 1990s. Its town centre, conceived from the outset as a regional centre, was in the planning from the 1980s, and RLC involved the local council in its masterplanning, in what the then senior local government planner described as a precursor to today's PPPs.³⁷

According to a former senior member of the Robina Land Corporation (RLC) team,³⁸ timing was critical to the RLC attitude to whether the rail station could be incorporated within the town centre. Because RLC could not control the timing of Queensland Rail's masterplanning and construction, the company was very wary of the potential for the new centre's image and viability to be damaged by delayed construction of the railway and station.

If the train won't come to Robina, Robina will have to come to the train

As part of the regional planning exercise, the State Government commissioned a "key centres study" which noted that by 2000, Robina Town Centre was a major regional centre with a large shopping centre (with just under 70,000 square metres of retail floor space and 4,330 square metres of office space), a hospital, a State High School, retail showrooms, and service industry areas. Employment was projected to reach 7,500 by 2011.³⁹ The study noted the inconvenience of the separation of Robina's Town Centre and Railway Station, but commented that this separation would diminish as additional town centre uses became established along the 900m pedestrian route through the "land bank" between the two.⁴⁰ In order to hasten this consolidation of the centre, this study advocated six priorities.⁴¹ These are set out below, with the current author's 2008 observations on implementation added in brackets:

1. locate government offices at Robina (some State Government offices have leased space in the centre, and Gold Coast City Council is considering developing its new headquarters between the Town Centre and Railway Station);
2. improve road linkages to the east and south (completed in 2004-2006, and undergoing duplication in 2007-2008);
3. extend the railway further south (construction underway, with the next station to the south due to open in late 2009);
4. attract IT and telco offices to Robina town centre (this has occurred to some extent, for example with major office buildings being occupied by Foxtel and other ICT firms);
5. develop high density residential development in the centre (much high density housing has now been developed, and more is proposed); and

6. improved visibility of the centre, such as by development of high-rise buildings (a 16 storey office building, “The Rocket”, commenced construction opposite the Railway Station in 2007).

Although progress is being made towards achievement of all these priorities, the most significant contribution towards centre consolidation and TOD realization will be the necessary infill of the 12 hectare ‘land bank’ between the station and the existing Town Centre. Curiously that is not included in the priorities in the above report.

Prospect: catching the Gold Coast train

Rather than ‘missing the train’, Robina is still making its way to the station. Although Robina is intended eventually to be a Principal Regional Centre with a comprehensive range of urban services, the large building now known as Robina Town Centre is effectively a shopping centre supplemented by cinemas, commercial space and some community facilities. The still largely vacant area between the current Town Centre and the Railway Station has long been intended to accommodate more regional centre ‘CBD’ uses, high density housing, civic functions and community facilities, linked by walkable streets. Contemporary informal criticisms of the 900 metre separation between existing centre and station are arguably unfair in this context. Infill of the area in between, if carefully designed and executed for walkability, and if combined with improved street-based public transport (buses or light rail), promises to ultimately deliver an “Urban TOD”.⁴² With the car based shopping centre at the eastern end, and the major transit node of the station at its western end, flanked by Robina Hospital and the 3000-student Robina State High School to its west, Robina when fully developed as a regional centre appears set to exhibit TOD characteristics. At the very least, the existing siting decisions for the station and “Robina Town Centre” retain this possibility and likelihood.

Prospects for TOD to come to fruition at Robina town centre are enhanced by preliminary ‘new urbanist’ master planning by the major land owner in the vacant 12 hectare site between station and ‘centre’, as well as by the current construction of a 16 storey office tower with active street frontages, adjacent to the station. In addition, this area is reputedly on the shortlist as a potential site for Gold Coast City Council’s new headquarters.

The Gold Coast’s major stadium opened adjacent to Robina Railway Station in early 2008, and the land surrounding the stadium is proposed to be developed as a mixed use Stadium Village with a fine grained street pattern. In fact, existing development trends appear to be moving towards the gradual achievement of both TOD and Principal Regional Centre status.

Conclusions

It is far too early for Robina to be dismissed as a failure in terms of contemporary planning ideals of TOD. Continuing anecdotal criticisms of the existing separation of

Railway Station and Town Centre are based on a limited conception of what a town centre is, and an under-estimation of the type of Robina Regional Centre planned by the private sector initially in close association with local government planning and more recently supported by the South East Queensland Regional Plan. Additionally, such criticisms suggest a lack of understanding of the implications of the long time frames for major developments of master planned communities and their associated infrastructure.

The author intends to conduct further documentary and additional key informant interview research, including feedback on this paper (in a modified Delphi style), following the IPHS 2008 conference.

Acknowledgments

The author is grateful to the four key informants for giving their time and insights during the interviews, and for the loan of documents that are not publicly available.

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⁵ Arbon, David, key informant interview, Bond University, 27 March 2008. Formerly Senior Planner, Albert Shire and Gold Coast City Councils. Winter, documents.

⁶ BBC; SEQRP; LGMS

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³¹ Arbon,

³² Arbon, 2008 interview.

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³⁴ Winter, 2008 interview.

³⁵ Rowe, Warren, 2008 interview.

³⁶ Burchill, 2000, p.223.

³⁷ Arbon, interview, 2008.

³⁸ Winter, Tony, key informant interview, Robina, 20 March 2008. Tony Winter was Research and Development Manager, Robina Land Corporation, from 1991-1995. He worked as a consultant to the RLC from 1983, prior to joining the staff, and has also been engaged as a consultant to RLC from 1996 until now.

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⁴⁰ HRP, 2000, pp.57-58,103

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