Transit Oriented Design: Rockingham Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The City of Rockingham is an LGA located approx 45kms south west of the Perth CBD. It has been designated as a Strategic Regional Centre since the mid 1970’s, however, for various reasons, development within the Centre has not achieved the original Policy expectations. In recent years the construction of a new metropolitan rail line and the desire to upgrade and expand the local shopping centre became the triggers for a significant redevelopment in the city centre. State and local government agencies and the shopping centre owners agreed to a transit-oriented development centred around a new Transit Street - a thoroughfare for a shuttle bus service linking the new railway station, shopping centre and the beachfront. The Transit Street brings together retail, entertainment, civic and residential development in a pedestrian-friendly 'Main Street' environment which will provide an urban focus for the City. Major components of the planned precinct are now complete and operating successfully. Planning is well advanced for the remainder of the precinct.

With State Government Strategic Planning Policy support, the City is now also finalising a plan for the upgrade and expansion of the Rockingham City Centre to a "Primary Centre" in the metropolitan area. This will serve some 275,000 people and envisages a number of other TOD precincts along the shuttle route.

The Transit Street development is a result of several parties seeing the opportunity for a major TOD and highlights the importance of close cooperation between State and local government and private business.

KEYWORDS: Transit-oriented development, Transit Street, main street.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past twenty years, the Rockingham City Centre has struggled to achieve an acceptable threshold of new development. Despite it's increasing population and designation as a major regional centre within the Perth metropolitan area, the city centre has been characterised by a large 'big box' internal mall shopping centre and an unsatisfactory level of
amenity. In recent years both public and private stakeholders have combined to facilitate a number of transit-oriented design (TOD) developments to revitalise this urban centre.

2. CASE STUDY

2.1 Background

The City of Rockingham is a Local Government Area located in the south-west of the Perth metropolitan area, around 45 kilometres from the CBD.

Rockingham was first settled in the nineteenth century and soon became a significant timber port. Jarrah was felled inland and transported by locomotive to the port of Rockingham from where it was exported around the globe. This industry eventually went into decline and in the first half of the twentieth century Rockingham was best known as a holiday destination for the people of Perth. Its calm beaches and excellent fishing and diving attracted day trippers and family groups. The town was defined by its coastal attractions and farming and bush hinterland.

The town's focus was a commercial strip on the beachfront, providing retail and hospitality services for locals and visitors. In the 1970's, Rockingham was declared a ‘Sub Regional Centre’ under the State Government’s Corridor Plan for Perth. The new Centre was located approximately two kilometres inland from the coastal townsite, on land under a single ownership. A large shopping centre was constructed and the then Shire of Rockingham built its Council Chambers next to the new shopping centre, effectively shifting the commercial focus away from the beachfront.

Due to the urban development of both its coastal and inland regions, Rockingham now has a population of 95,000. It has also been designated as a Strategic Regional Centre under metropolitan plans for many years. However, despite the surrounding urban growth, the city centre remained relatively undeveloped, with large blocks of land near the shopping centre remaining vacant. This was due to a number of reasons:

- a road network which lacked legibility and connectivity. The streets seemed to draw vehicles towards the centre before turning them aside with inappropriate intersection treatments
- a 'big box' retail format which did not permit any sort of activity outside shopping hours
- relatively large landholdings controlled by very few owners, limiting the possibility of smaller, incremental development.

The relocation of the major retail and civic functions inland led to considerable confusion among visitors and many locals. There was no clear sense as to which was the true urban centre and the question "Where's the centre of town?" met with varying responses or just a shrug of the shoulders.
2.2 Changes

In the early part of this decade a number of factors combined to push for change in the development of the Rockingham centre. Firstly, the local government had been proactive over a number of years. A Development Policy Plan indicating higher densities and improved transport links had been in place since 1995, although built form development had been limited. Additionally, the shopping centre owners were keen to refurbish and expand their centre. Perhaps most significantly, the State Government had committed to building a new passenger rail line from the Perth CBD to Mandurah, south of Rockingham. Despite lobbying by Council, for a variety of political, financial and engineering reasons it was decided the rail line would not pass through the Rockingham city centre. The station would instead be located about one kilometre south-east of the shopping centre.

*Figure 1: Rockingham Shuttle Route*

In order to compensate, planning studies recommended the introduction of a light rail service linking the station to the shopping centre, tertiary education campus and foreshore. This would provide a high level of access and service to patrons. Importantly, it would also provide 'place making' opportunities along its route and signal to investors a commitment by both the City and State Government to future development of the area. Stage 1 of this service commenced operation in December 2007 to coincide with the opening of the new railway. The 'Rockingham Shuttle' currently consists of dedicated buses offering an easy-to-use service at 15-minute intervals through the day. Stage 2 of the service will see it converted to
light rail in future, when justified by potential patronage. The route of the service is shown at Figure 1.

Initial proposals to redevelop the shopping centre were largely for more of the big box style and were opposed by both local and State governments. In order to find a way forward an Enquiry by Design workshop was held in November 2005. Participants included the City of Rockingham and Colonial First State Property Management (CFSPM), the shopping centre owners. State Government agencies included the Department of Planning, Public Transport Authority (PTA) and Department of Housing.

*Figure 2: Enquiry by Design Concept Plan*
- A new multi-screen cinema complex located between Syren Street and Contest Parade.
- The western side of Contest Parade to be sleeved with new retail and commercial development.
- The eastern side of Contest Parade to be sleeved with commercial/retail development and a mixed use (commercial and residential) development on the land owned by Department of Housing.
- A new civic piazza to be provided on Central Promenade opposite the Council offices.
- A car park to be located east of Contest Parade to service the new developments and provide a strong pedestrian trail across Contest Parade and Syren Street to the shopping centre.

The intent was to provide an attractive setting for business and social interaction within a streetscape environment combining a mix of businesses with a high quality public domain.

### 2.3 Implementation

Implementation of the development has been characterised by a high degree of coordination between all parties. A Project Control Group was formed and chaired by Department of Planning. Memoranda of Understanding between CFSPM and PTA facilitated land swaps for the bus station relocation. The necessary State and local government approvals were expedited and the Transit Street opened for operation in December 2007. Other components of the development completed by October 2009 were:

- shopping centre refurbishment and expansion
- Syren Street entertainment precinct
- cinema complex constructed over off-street public car park

*Figure 3: Completed Syren Street Development*

Public response to the new development has been excellent, with Rockingham residents pleased with both the quality and range of new facilities. Construction of the civic piazza is expected to occur in the medium term, while Department of Housing is expecting to commence development of its site within 12-18 months. Other private development is dependant on market conditions. Indications to date are that the Transit Street precinct is a welcome and successful redevelopment of the city centre.
2.4 Rockingham City Centre Plan

The Transit Street development is just one of a number of TOD precincts envisaged for Rockingham. The City is well advanced with a planning review for a 600 hectare area stretching from the railway station to the beachfront. This process has paralleled the State Government's designation of Rockingham as a Primary Centre under its draft metropolitan planning strategy (Directions 2031). This sees Rockingham as a high-order centre providing a range of services, facilities and employment opportunities exceeded only by the Perth CBD.

The development principles of the Rockingham City Centre Plan were formulated and agreed on from the outset by stakeholders including the City and several State Government agencies. These characteristics are:

- medium to high density development based on activated, 'main street' principles
- a configuration of generally contiguous street front buildings and a mix of uses that generate high levels of pedestrian activity and a sense of vitality
- a street-based transit system, with closely placed stops
- a permeable network of streets, laneways, arcades and public spaces that provide high-quality linkages, particularly for pedestrians
- an identifiable City Centre hub to provide major functions
- connecting urban villages between the City Centre and Rockingham Beach along the route of the transit system

*Figure 4: Rockingham City Centre Plan - Density and Height*
The long-term vision for Rockingham is for a sophisticated coastal activity centre serving a future regional population of 275,000. It will offer a wide range of mixed uses including retail, commercial, office, civic, residential and education within an accessible and highly inter-connected townscape. It will comprise a major activity centre and related urban villages, one at the beachfront and two 'Smart Villages' along the transit route. The proposed density and height is shown at Figure 4.

The beachfront has seen the construction of several high-rise, high-quality apartment buildings in recent years which have helped alter perceptions about Rockingham. The land immediately behind is the site of Rockingham Waterfront Village, a revitalisation project conceived and planned by the City of Rockingham and jointly implemented by LandCorp (the State government developer) and the City. This project to date has included the provision of excellent community facilities (Village Green, community centre and war memorial) and the construction of mixed use developments with apartment living above ground-level commercial and retail tenancies. Single residential lots are largely in the 250m$^2$-350m$^2$ size range and subject to building design guidelines administered by the City. The project has been financially successful and sales are continuing.

The Smart Villages will be located along the transit route, with the southern village built over former playing fields. It will integrate the western end of the Murdoch University campus with other mixed uses in a consolidated main street configuration around a central park. An indicative section is shown at Figure 5.

The next stage of planning will be the preparation of an infrastructure plan for the City Centre. This will include modifications to the vehicle and pedestrian movement network, utilities and provision of ‘soft’ infrastructure such as cultural centres and libraries. These last items in particular will be part of a long-term plan based on the achievement of appropriate population thresholds. This infrastructure plan will require both local and State government endorsement so as to confirm their long-term commitment and facilitate financial planning.

Figure 5: Indicative Section Through Smart Village

3. CONCLUSION

Government at both the State and local level has embraced the opportunities afforded by TOD to revitalise the centre of Rockingham.

The success to date of these developments has been due largely to the high degree of cooperation between stakeholders. There has been a high level of cooperation between government and the private sector from the earliest stages of planning through to completion of construction.
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Note: