

PARK FARM

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Professor Peter Newman
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Dear Peter

Re: Submission on 'Focus on the Future'

One move towards Sustainability being developed at Bridgetown

Introduction

We congratulate the Labor Government for producing this paper, inviting comment and taking the first steps towards sustainability. We agree that sustainability involves "*the simultaneous achievement of environmental, economic and social goals*", but believe that it must go further than that to include "*the total quality of life, both now and in the future, in a way that maintains the ecological processes on which life depends.*"¹

Because the need to achieve sustainability is urgent, (it is well summarised under the heading of 'Global and local sustainability issues' in the consultation paper) it is very important that Government shows leadership through developing a strong, effective sustainability strategy, which is both community led and consensus based. There is widespread awareness of the lack of environmental, economic and social sustainability in western societies. Here in Bridgetown we already have a group of people working to meet these challenges.

We have initiated and are now developing what could be a model of local efforts in this context. Therefore we take this opportunity to present a brief outline of our work and seek your support to speed up and endorse our endeavours.

Origins

In 1960 Jim and Mary Frith came to Park Farm keen to make a living on the land and have a beautiful and healthy place to rear a family. At that time wheatbelt salinity was no more than a minor irritation for farmers. Overclearing of land in the area through the conditional purchase policy continued until the mid-seventies and the economics of farm management was a new concept.

Forty-two years on the landscape and biodiversity of the region have changed dramatically. Jim and Mary have been looking for a way to share the farm and maintain and build upon the

¹ National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development 1992

ecological work they have done there. Workshops run for the Gaia Foundation in 2000, by Max Lindegger, the designer and developer of Crystal Waters in Queensland, provided the inspiration to launch the Park Farm Eco-village project.

Objectives

With Park Farm as the base, we are preparing a plan for an eco-village that will:

“nurture the interconnectedness of all life through a residential and educational community sustained within a working farm and rural landscape”

An eco-village is an urban or rural community of people, who strive to integrate a supportive social environment with a way of life that minimises the ecological footprint. To achieve this, they integrate various aspects of ecological design, ecological building, production, alternative energy and community building practices.

Three Dimensions in summary

1. Residential:

Parkville was the name given to the farm of the original settler, William Wheatley, 10 km west of Bridgetown at the end of the road. The 333 ha farm lies in a 10 km loop of the Blackwood River which surrounds a granite and diorite ridge covered with the red valley soils that made this land so desirable in the early days of settlement.

A working party has been meeting regularly at Bridgetown since July 2000. We have adopted McHarg's² principles which relate land usage to capability rather than the zoning systems that have been popularised over the past century.

Bridgetown Greenbushes Shire Council is at present developing a new Town Planning Scheme (TPS) that incorporates the opportunity for eco-village creation through cluster housing on agricultural land. Tim Clynnch, the town planner is enthusiastic about our project. A number of professionals, including a consultant town planner, are eager to assist what they see as a project that is both innovative and responsible.

2. Farming:

Work on improving land use began in 1960 when Jim and Mary Frith came to live at Park Farm. At that time the threat to sustainable agricultural production was overclearing of native vegetation and soil erosion. Revegetation, soil conservation measures and protection of remnant vegetation, including the river reserve have been a priority at Park Farm for four decades. Commercial, non-commercial and research tree planting has been going on for the past fifteen years.

An emerging threat to sustainable agriculture is the popularity of “hobby farming” and the five-acre block. Fragmentation, inappropriate land use, removal of agricultural land from production and resulting loss of aesthetic appeal result.

In contrast, Park Farm Eco-village will comprise approximately 30 residential lots, suburban in size, in several clusters. The residential component will cover about 1% of the farm, leaving the balance for agriculture or conservation.

We intend to attract residents interested in sustainable production and to continue diversifying farming practice at Park Farm.

² Ian McHarg 'Design With Nature' John Wiley and Sons New York 1967

3. Education:

The Korang Mia Sustainability Centre³

Awareness of the need to reduce our 'ecological footprint', while increasing the quality of life, not only for all people but for all other species who share the land, has led us to become part of an educational move towards sustainability.

The Korang Mia Sustainability Centre is intended to provide an educational and training facility that will involve both members of the community and visitors who will attend the Centre to deliver and participate in its programmes. It is envisaged that the Centre will inspire the residential community of the eco-village, and vice versa, as well as providing opportunities to bring to the community new ideas and concepts through visiting academics and experts.

Deep ecology principles will form the basis of the teaching programme. Deep ecology involves a shift from the anthropocentric view of the Universe in which human beings control and manipulate their environment in order to fulfil their own desired ends. It asks us for a profound realisation of our interdependence and interconnectedness with all things, living and non-living.

³ Provisional title

Three inter-related proposals

Living

A number of geographical, geological and topographical features have been mapped and their influence considered in the placement of houses, the Centre and supporting infrastructure.

The principal method used has been that of exclusion; that is areas for which a use more valuable than residential are identified are excluded from consideration as residential lots. Some of these values are, for example, special visual appeal; extreme or south facing slope' remnant bush, best agricultural, horticultural or viticultural land, ridgelines, waterways and 'sacred' sites. Site repair has also been a guiding principle with the Korang Mia Sustainability Centre to be located on an area of the farm which was cleared very early and has suffered from erosion.

The process has also acknowledged areas on which it would be dangerous to build and areas which would necessitate the building of environmentally unfriendly dwellings or would cause the proprietor undue expense in building. The ultimate example of this type of area would, for example, be a south facing steep and rocky slope, perhaps with a high-tension line running overhead. The vast majority of the farm (approximately 99%) will be excluded from residential development.

The breathtaking vistas and uninterrupted views that are frequently espoused by real estate agents will be preserved for all to enjoy, as will the conservation values and productive capacity of the farm.

Ownership of lots will be survey strata title. Under survey strata, lot holders will have freehold title to their lot, a share in the common property and a vote or unit entitlement in strata company dealings and decisions. The Korang Mia Sustainability Centre will be a lot holder and as such will have some formal ability to influence management policy of the eco-village and farm.

The small size of cluster housing lots, apart from minimising impact on the productive and conservation qualities of the farm, will;

- minimise garden size and therefore water consumption;
- maximise possibilities for community building and social interaction and;
- minimise potential fire hazards and simplify protection from wildfire.

Infrastructure and utilities supporting the eco-village are being designed with both on and off-farm sustainability in mind.

The eco-village house clusters will have access to an 11Kv branch line with surplus capacity which runs through the property. Park Farm Eco-village has adopted a goal of becoming a net exporter of electrical power to the grid. To this end we are investigating means by which grid interactive photovoltaic (pv) generation can be made financially attractive to prospective residents. Grid interactive power generation does away with the requirement for battery storage and fossil fuel based back up systems. Surplus pv generated power will be sold to the state grid instead of being dumped.

It is common for rural subdivisions to insist on roof collected tank water. A more economic (by unit storage) and visually attractive system is centralised on-farm supply. A. 50,000 Kl dam will be fed from existing contour banks and water reticulated to houses. There will be sufficient capacity for fertigation and irrigation of small-scale horticulture or viticulture. Sewerage will be treated by using composting toilets and appropriate systems are planned for the use of grey water.

Urban and rural planning issues being explored at Park Farm have widespread relevance for sustainability.

Farming

Like many farms in the district Park Farm has had a varied production history. Its primary source of income has variously been dairy, orchard, fat lambs, fine wool and beef. Feed crops such as lupins and oaten hay have been grown. Currently about half of the farm is planted to pine trees in a sharefarm agreement with Dept. of CLM. The remainder is a mixture of pasture and tree strips including a variety of eucalypt species and some exotics. These are commercial crops which can generate a return as early as 6 years. They are more water sensitive than pine; however they are very fast growing and versatile.

Their impacts with regard to the proposed development are beneficial. They integrate well with other farm activities, offer a degree of shelter from wind and sun for dwellings as well as a source of income. Some of the agroforest could be considered as a woodlot. A long term fine wool merino breeding programme continues as a part of the agroforestry component of the farm.

It is intended to maintain the long term planting and breeding programmes under supervision of a farm manager appointed by the Strata Company. Residents will have the opportunity to work within these programmes or to propose or develop practices of their own under an activity license system.

By-laws and land management policies put in place by the strata company will regulate these activities to emphasise low input, ecologically sensitive agriculture, with particular attention to soil and water conservation and minimisation of chemical application.

There are a number of areas of remnant bush of varying qualities on the farm. The largest of these was removed from grazing some fifteen years ago and in 2000 covenanted under a National Trust scheme. The covenanting binds the farm management to a set of conditions including minimising vehicular traffic, no building and exclusion of farm stock.

Fragile river reserve is clearly not property of any private landholder. Unfortunately most farmers disregard this, with devastating consequences. Jim and Mary Frith have sought to remove the sensitive river reserve from exposure to farm stock since taking over the farm. This has involved fencing the 10 km river boundary. Absence of policing of river access means that the river reserve is still open to damage by stock from neighbouring farms.

As a part of the BiGliNCS (Bridgetown Greenbushes Nature Conservation Strategy) project a 40m bush corridor is to be planted this year on the north boundary, connecting the covenanted bush with the river.

With so much of the farm cleared many years ago, there should be no requirement for additional clearing of native vegetation for any new structure.

Educating

Korang Mia is a local Noongar phrase meaning 'Place of Turning'. We propose to develop a centre for holistic environmental education called the Korang Mia Sustainability Centre. This will be a centre of learning, located at Park Farm. It will initially run short courses and it is hoped that it will eventually offer a part of a post graduate degree in holistic science.

We have been working with Sandra Wooltorton (Edith Cowan University, Bunbury), John Croft (Department of Local and Regional Government) and others for over a year to establish a Multi-campus Institute of Sustainability. We see this growing from the Sustainability Group that is part of the Centre for Regional Development and Research at ECU Bunbury, with links to the Institute for Science and Technology Murdoch, and Curtin University.

We understand the proposed Multi-campus Sustainability Institute, envisaged by ECU Bunbury, will have a number of foci covering the whole field of holistic science. We believe that the situation of Park Farm offers an invaluable opportunity to incorporate experiential and academic learning.

The Blackwood River, for example, surrounds the greater part of the farm (about 10km) allowing for appreciation of the rehabilitation work undertaken by community groups such as the Blackwood Basin Group and the Blackwood Environment Society, with whom we are closely linked.

Experiential learning is most effective when set in context. We envisage that students could:

- experience being part of an eco-village community
- experience the land and its management, working towards sustainable farming practices on cleared land in agriculture and forestry
- experience rehabilitation work on upland jarrah / marri forest
- experience the history and condition of Blackwood River system, its problems and potential solutions

The holistic and experiential approach we propose involves 'head, heart and hands'. We have already begun working together on experiential personal empowerment in a community setting. This work reconnects us to our deeper selves, to each other, and to the other than human community and the living land. It brings strong ties of love and respect and a deep sense of purpose and worth. We have already been practicing this work in 'Reconnections Workshops' in Bridgetown and have been surprised to find how quickly people respond and how much it is wanted in the community.

We consider it important that the Korang Mia Sustainability Centre continue to actively engage the local community and to bring in visiting academics and experts. We have been most encouraged that Patsy Hallen (ISTP Murdoch University), one of the members of our group, has had Dr. Stephan Harding of Schumacher College in the UK, as a visiting scholar, and we welcome his coming visit to WA. We are very pleased that he will be spending some time with ECU Bunbury, and staying here at Park Farm, offering us his support.

Ultimately we anticipate there will be a need for accommodation and teaching buildings. As a part of the eco-village project, Korang Mia will be gifted a lot of several hectares which will probably be vested in a community land trust. It is important that buildings reflect the principles of sustainability and aesthetically enhance the landscape. To this end we intend to seek proposals from several architects and designers with particular interest in either the farm or green architecture.

Opportunities for government

This proposal is ambitious; however we already have a number of crucial elements in place, namely; the land, experience and a tremendous amount of enthusiastic support from local residents, prospective residents, educators and public figures.

Eco-village proposals are emerging rapidly in WA and represent a practical rural and urban planning framework for sustainability. We have connections with three existing eco-villages in this state, Pinakarri at Hamilton Hill, Carter's Road Community at Margaret River and Rosneath Farm at Dunsborough. We are aware of four other groups working to establish eco villages at Chidlow, Gidgegannup, Baldivis and Denmark. We are in contact with two of these.

Eco-villages represent a sustainable alternative to standard urban and rural development. Development of all the eco-villages mentioned, except one, is being undertaken by people unused to major property development. They are moving forward slowly without the major financial backing and familiarity with relevant government processes normally associated with property development.

The Park Farm working party has identified the following obstacles to progress of the project. We take the liberty of suggesting possible roles for government.

Western Australian Planning Commission

As mentioned above the Bridgetown Greenbushes Shire has a Draft Town Planning Scheme (TPS) which will include provision for eco-village development through cluster housing on farmland. We believe that this will be the first TPS in the state to specifically include cluster housing. We understand from the Shire's Director of Planning and Environmental Services that the TPS has been before the WA Planning Commission in Bunbury for some months and is likely to remain there due to a chronic backlog of work in that office.

There have been suggestions that when our project does come before the WAPC we may find it a relatively conservative and potentially unsympathetic organisation.

Funding

Currently work on the project is being undertaken by a number of people in a purely voluntary capacity. In the very near future we will be obliged to engage the specialist services of a consultant town planner, surveyor and a lawyer.

Teaching is currently done on a voluntary basis. Our involvement with ECU Bunbury Sustainability Group and their programme will require paid academic(s) and ultimately support staff.

Whilst land is to be gifted to the Centre by the Friths, buildings, however simple, to accommodate students and teachers will be required.

Opportunities for government

Enhance the role of the WAPC by briefing staff on sustainability and planning issues.

Identify and eliminate backlogs of planning approvals within the WAPC.

Establish a team to assist eco-village proponents to;

- 1 develop their proposals;
- 2 facilitate progress through statutory processes and;
- 3 report to government to further improve understanding at all levels of government.

Provide funding in the form of grants or loans to innovative sustainability projects of this nature.

We offer this plan to the sustainability policy unit for your consideration and would be delighted to supply any additional information that might be needed to give this proposal your attention.

Yours sincerely,

Brenda Roy

Robert Frith

on behalf of the Park Farm Working Party and Korang Mia Committee