

Ridgewood Broiler Farm Application: a threat to the local economy

The Planning Staff at the Noosa Shire Council have recommended rejection of the broiler farm application on the grounds that it does not comply with the Overall Outcomes of the Noosa Plan, has unacceptable road and traffic issues, as well as dust, noise, and odour problems, and adversely impacts local scenic amenity. They indicate that it is not possible to put suitable conditions on the application that can satisfy many of these issues.

In contrast to the sites normally chosen for such production, the steepness of the site, the lack of suitable access roads, the proximity to residences, and the scenic rural location make it highly unsuitable for such an operation.

Despite these stark facts, some arguments have been put forward that the application would bring economic benefits to Cooroy and encourage further rural enterprise initiatives. This could not be further from the reality.

In fact, **the broiler farm presents a threat to the developing rural economy** as follows:

1. LITTLE DIRECT CONTRIBUTION TO THE LOCAL ECONOMY

The majority of the value chain is with the processor and retailer. Once running, the project would employ very few people. The major labour component is connected with the processor of the chickens, in the transport vehicles that bring chicks and take away the chickens, and in the supply of the feed. All of which will not benefit the local economy.

2. COST TO COUNCIL

The planning staff identify that Council will likely face significant expenditure in the order of hundreds of thousands of dollars to maintain the infrastructure hard hit by the heavy traffic. Therefore, the cost to the ratepayers of the Shire will far outweigh any local income.

Council has instigated a tough, no-increase approach to budgeting and, therefore, this situation begs the question: 'what services or projects would have to be cut to cover these costs?'

3. HIT TO PROPERTY VALUES AND ASSOCIATED HARDSHIP

At the moment, with the application under consideration, local real estate agents advise that properties in a wide area are un-saleable at reasonable prices. If the application is approved, it is judged that there will be a minimum of a 20 percent reduction in property values. This will certainly hit the wealth of existing residents.

Given the general financial climate and the effects of the drought, the banks are taking a tough stance on loans and mortgages. They lend only 50 to 60 percent of their valuation on rural properties. For a producer with a \$1m property with a 60 percent mortgage or loans, such a reduction could reduce the amount the banks are prepared to lend by \$120k and, in extreme cases require \$120k to be paid back. Recent articles on the bankruptcy of some of the larger farming enterprises show this is no theoretical argument.

Whilst residents accept that the area is rural and that normal farming activities are expected, they have purchased in good faith. They certainly did not expect that a change to intensive poultry farming on their doorstep would threaten their investment. Who would want to buy a property in the vicinity of a broiler farm? Several of the properties adjacent to the site will experience even more dramatic falls in valuation.

4. THE CHANGING SCALE OF PROPERTIES AND RISING LAND PRICES

Over the recent past, it has become difficult for farms of the traditional size to be economic. The failed Traveston Dam project hit the area hard. Even large operations such as Bollier Park have struggled and it is now proposed that it becomes a horse racing facility. De-regulation killed off most of the dairy farms.

Most of the local 'old timers' have sold out and, where possible subdividing to maximise their benefit. There is a long list locally. For example, most of the properties along Top Forestry Road and Cooroy-Belli Creek Road are in this category. In fact, the applicant's property has been sub divided in the past, and several small lots created.

The sub-division of larger properties in the past has driven land prices up to around \$6000 per acre and industry analysts say that \$3000 per acre is the limit for profitable farming.

The consequence is that there are now a large number of 'lifestyle' blocks in place.

5. REALITY OF WHERE ECONOMIC GROWTH WILL COME.

These "lifestyle" properties are where the growth of the rural economy is coming from and where it will come from in the future.

Many of these landowners do not rely on primary production activities for their main income. However, they do undertake production activities to supplement their income and keep their properties maintained. They have chosen to live in the area for its many benefits.

Many are also investing in conservation and land care projects to ensure that the local environment is protected and sustainable. Often this has been done with partial grants from local, state, and federal governments.

These 'lifestyle farmers' are now the growth engine of the local economy. They buy farm supplies and agricultural services, employ part-time staff and contractors, use local professional services, and shop locally.

These enterprises must be encouraged, since their dollar value to Cooroy is significant, and they must not be hit hard by the approval of the broiler farm.

Locally, we already have operations covering beef production, horses, horticulture, citrus and lychee growing, macadamia nuts, olives, spices, natural health products, and free-range chickens, etc.

In many cases, agisting land for cattle can provide the owner with some income and the beef farmer with economies of scale.

The locals at Ridgewood get together monthly to have a BBQ and discuss new ways of doing things and a wide range of rural issues. This has encouraged the formation of the 'self-help' website, CountryNoosa.com, to extend the community links over a wider area. The initial survey on the website has shown the scale and potential of this direction. Shortly, the first Country Noosa Field Day will be held. Rural initiatives will be discussed and a summary paper will be sent to Council documenting the potential.

This approach fits with the current rural enterprise initiatives being pursued by Council and, indeed, could form the core of its Rural Futures strategy.

Therefore, there are already many rural enterprises that fit with the opportunities and constraints of the region. They should be built on and not threatened.

6. TOURISM

The natural beauty of the Noosa hinterland means there is an opportunity to further develop a range of tourist related activities. Tourism is actively being pursued by Council through RV parks, hiking and bird-watching trails, farm stays, and rural accommodation guides. The economic contribution of this industry to the local economy is potentially significant.

The presence of a broiler farm, or indeed the many that will likely follow approval of the Ridgewood proposal, will kill this. There should be no doubt about how the Internet and social media would spread the word about the Noosa hinterland as a place to avoid.

CONCLUSION

Cooroy is once again a lively thriving town, with a good range of retail, light industrial, professional services, and medical and educational facilities.

The growth of 'lifestyle farmers' and local rural enterprises has already shown its benefit to the local community. The emerging tourism industry needs encouragement, not termination.

Noosa Council is encouraged to support the current growth and not arrest it with approval of a very damaging broiler farm project.

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