

Borderline case

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Queenslanders like to boast that the state has a heavenly future but, as Mark Todd writes, people pressure is making for a hellish present.

You wouldn't know it from Queensland's wonderfully warm winter days, the perfect setting for "Mexicans" up for school holidays, but it's five minutes to midnight in the Sunshine State.

The Great South-East, as it's known by the locals, is in danger of choking as its population grows by 1200 to 1300 people a week, courtesy of NSW and Victoria.

At that rate, the population of a city the size of Adelaide will have fled north for the warmth within the next 15 years.

There's broad agreement that if there's no Heimlich manoeuvre performed within the next five years, a conurbation will sprawl from the NSW border to Noosa Heads on the Sunshine Coast, stretching 240 kilometres from one end to the other.

The Queensland Premier, Peter Beattie, acknowledges the area faces "challenges" but says the last thing he wants is for Brisbane to turn into another Sydney.

"Sydney's a great city, but you know as well as I do [they] should have done a lot more planning. We cannot allow a Sydneyisation of the south-east corner of Queensland," he says.

The quandaries facing Queensland's planners are what shape the south-east corner will take and whether anyone will want to live there.

Without planning, the human tide will run the Gold Coast's water supplies dangerously low within three years and the road system will deteriorate into gridlock. Compared with a decade ago, motorists spend an hour extra, or more in some cases, each week getting to and from work.

Then there is the threat to biodiversity – conservationists claim housing estates will wipe out koala populations within 20 years.

And if all that comes to pass, Queensland's attractive, easy-living lifestyle will become hard-living, and its economy – increasingly based on a population expansion double the national rate – will crumble.

"It's not lost yet, but we're so close to it," says the Greens Senate candidate Drew Hutton. "The Queensland Government and a lot of the local governments are simply blind to the fact that we're killing off the very reason why south-east Queensland is so special. We're killing off the reason why people are coming here."

Beattie promised a new ministry to deal with growth as one of his election announcements in February. Two months later he gave his Treasurer, Terry Mackenroth, responsibility for urban planning, with the charge of reining in urban sprawl and forcing local government to preserve green space.

But Mackenroth's Office of Urban Management is in its infancy and is yet to draw up any concrete plans to save the day. In the meantime, there's any number of theories about what should, could and probably will happen.

For the moment, the State Government is spending a record \$6 billion on infrastructure, partly to catch up and partly to plan. This means more roads, public transport and dams.

Brisbane's Lord Mayor, Campbell Newman, admits that decisive action is needed and is taking his chapter and verse from the US sitcom Friends. "We've got to go higher-density, rather than urban sprawl," Newman says. "Friends had done more for the cause of urban sustainability than anything else in the past few years. Living in apartments has changed the cultural aspirations of people."

On the Gold Coast, where little room remains, development is entering another phase. At Southport spare land is pretty much exhausted, so the council is encouraging the redevelopment of existing housing, replacing it with medium- to high-rise towers.

"By doing that we're preventing development from going up our valleys," says David Power, the Deputy Mayor of the Gold Coast and chairman of the strategic growth management committee.

For new residential subdivisions, the Gold Coast council wants to almost double housing density from eight dwellings a hectare to 15.

Then there's the "Canberra option". Brendan Gleeson, a professor at Griffith University, says the Queensland Government needs at least one new major town or city capable of supporting 250,000 people on the fringes of the south-east corner. Beaudesert, inland and between Brisbane and the Gold Coast, and the area west of Ipswich are the most logical sites.

It's an idea that needs copious amounts of state and federal government finance, with large government departments, utilities, and perhaps a university, necessary to provide enough jobs to attract and keep people in the town, and stop them from having to commute to Brisbane.

Gleeson says Queensland's booming economy could fall if the spiralling population is not handled properly.

A Queensland Government report into population trends shows the interstate migrants are in their working prime – mostly in their 30s and 40s, with their dependents in tow. But it's their skills that worry Gleeson.

He says Beattie's "Smart State" campaign and his wish to develop information technology and biotechnology industries are being hampered by the slow development of a broad and sophisticated workforce.

"The decisions made in the next few years about major new land releases and where to channel the new growth are going to be absolutely critical for the region's future because a lot of its growth is premised on its attractiveness," Gleeson says.

"Gross mismanagement [of the population increase] can really threaten the economic viability of the region."

But even if governments get it right with higher-density living, the other potential saviour, public transport, is running behind. A study by the Greens found Brisbane's public transport was the most expensive and least frequent of any capital city.

And it is staggeringly under-used. Gleeson and his colleague, Dr Neil Sipe, wrote in a recent paper that, relative to its size, Brisbane had the biggest urban rail network in Australia, with 400 kilometres of track and more than 140 stations. But, per capita, it's used only half as much as the Sydney and Melbourne networks.

Newman says that by 2020, traffic congestion will cost every citizen \$4600 through lost time, accidents, extra fuel, and damage to the environment, more than double the burden of Sydney and Melbourne residents.

On the Gold Coast, Power says the region faces gridlock by 2011 and, once it occurs there, Brisbane, too, will "grind to a standstill" if public transport and new estates where people live – and work – aren't developed. Queensland Government figures show that 151,000 people – almost a third of Brisbane's workforce – commute each day from outside the city limits.

And how will it all turn out? There's some optimism that governments – local, state and federal – may discover a shared purpose. But don't bet on it.

Gleeson says: "I think it could be a disaster if we don't get on top of things in the next three years."