

Albury-Wodonga plan avoids

By CHRISTOPHER JAY
A DETAILED examination of plans for the development of the planned growth centre at Albury-Wodonga, released on June 28, underlines the way the three Governments involved have avoided facing up to the essential strategic decisions which will have to be made.

Plans showing possible developments of the Albury-Wodonga area, on the border between NSW and Victoria and just west of the large Hume Weir, show a neat balancing of areas between NSW and Victoria, and a design that would tend to create another Canberra, on the Murray River.

What they don't do is nominate where the future city centre is likely to be, or to develop a pattern of growth which will avoid pressures for removal of a lot of the existing buildings already in Albury and Wodonga.

What the designers have done is to provide for what is essentially a one-corridor city wrapped around the flood plain to the west of Lake Hume, in roughly the shape of a horseshoe open to the east.

One variant is the dispersed plan shown in the accompanying diagram, which should be forgotten as soon as possible. The other, which is the preferred plan, is similar but with the outlying settlements brought in closer to the main areas of development.

The preferred plan provides for eight area centres, strung along a transit route running around the flood plain, each serving an area of development separated by relatively narrow green strips.

The idea of locating several settlement areas around the flood plain to the west of the Hume Weir is sound planning policy so far as individual areas are concerned.

The area generally provides an attractive living environment with views over the river and flood plain from some parts, and relatively easy access to the river and the Hume Weir from most of the proposed urban development parts.

The town planners, as was to be expected, have ensured there will be no development on the flood plain itself, avoiding an obvious mistake which has been made with a large number of other Australian settlements.

The horseshoe shape also makes it easy to provide good connections between the extremities by simply running a couple of roads through open country across the flood plain, with little risk that subsequent development along these links will slow down traffic movement with traffic lights, crossroads and pedestrian crossings.

The trouble with this strategic layout, which comes out quite obviously in the preferred plan, is that the centre of development will be the existing Albury and Wodonga urban areas.

With the present built-up area, the town centre of Albury is a series of streets on a grid pattern just north of the river, bounded by a very attractive park on the west, with development stretching along the Hume Highway to the north in the direction of Lavinton.

The Albury town centre is connected to the Wodonga town centre, which is just south of the river, by a causeway and bridge.

The preferred plan has three area centres along the corridor to the north and east of Albury, and another three along the corridor south and east of Wodonga.

Although the underlying town planning strategy is understood to be one of fairly equal development of the various centres, to spread variety over the urban area, the plain fact remains that the centre of gravity will be the existing Albury and Wodonga town centres.

Given a requirement for relatively equal development on either side of the river, to satisfy both the NSW and Victorian Governments, and given the single corridor design, it follows inevitably that the existing town centres, on each bank of the river will be at the centre of the development.

This makes them the logical place for private developers interested in getting in early on the commercial and office development action. This is the more so in that Albury, unlike

Canberra, will be a city largely based on private enterprise developments.

In Canberra, with its control over the placement of departmental office buildings, the administration has been able to enforce a pattern of dispersed development, such as the office developments in the Woden Valley.

This avoids the problem of peak hour motorists converging on one central area, at the expense of making it very difficult to get any reasonably heavily trafficked public transport routes.

It also means that public servants from different departments who wish to meet during the day often have to drive miles across town to get together.

By way of contrast, private enterprise development in Albury-Wodonga would tend to cluster in the existing centres, given the population distribution implied by the published plans.

The existing built-up area, including some very attractive and pleasant buildings, is generally one or two storey development — not high enough or dense enough for commercial centre development in a city of 300,000 or more people.

If it is to be the centre for commercial development, it follows there will be strong pressures for demolition of a lot of the buildings, and replacement by higher density development, probably up to 12 storeys once development is well under way.

Either a lot of attractive real estate will be demolished — at a time when there is likely to be a general shortage of accommodation and demand for extra buildings — or draconian controls with the inevitable conflicts, representations to Governments (with three of them involved) and inadequate commercial results, will be imposed.

To avoid this problem, decentralisation growth centre

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essential strategic decisions

doctrine, as developed in Australia, implies that new city centres should be located some way away from existing settlements (five miles away, for example) and the existing town developed as a suburban centre, avoiding the pressure for extensive redevelopment.

The existing built-up area, in other words, should be used as a staging post and supplier of facilities during the development stages, and the existing buildings (usually including a lot of historic interest) left more or less as they are.

In the case of the Albury-Wodonga development, this means that the city centre should logically be placed to the west or north-west of the existing Albury and Wodonga built-up area.

This would also make it possible to design a new city centre according to modern designs, to ensure adequate street widths, properly placed open areas and level separation crossings at key street junctions, to avoid the congested, canyon effects all too familiar in existing capital city centres.

If the existing built-up areas are redeveloped, it means the growth pattern will be effectively constrained by planning decisions originally made for a medium sized country centre.

With development to the east constrained by the Hume Weir and its catchment area, and industrial development to the south restricted by some relatively hilly ground, the main thrust of development could either be

north along the Hume Highway and railway links, or west along the Murray River, and north-west along the Urana Road which runs for miles through flat country and could become the Parramatta Road of the new growth centre.

The city centre could logically be placed somewhere along this line of development, or if river views are desired, it could be on the banks of the Murray west of the existing town centres.

Efforts to avoid the development of a single city centre at all are a curiously anomalous venture under Australian conditions.

The idea is apparently that while a city of three million people such as Sydney, or one nearly as big as Melbourne, can get by with single city centres, smaller growth centres with target populations one-tenth that of Sydney should be split up into a multi-nucleated framework, to use the planning terminology.

This is a recipe for fragmentation of the city before it has ever developed.

It is a typical example of the tendency by particular schools of town planning thought to solve problems by abolishing them. The problem of designing a central business district is solved by not having a central business district — just a lot of people stranded in suburbia.

This approach is developed by analogy with European conditions, but on a much larger, motor-car oriented scale.

In the central areas of cities such as London and Paris, busi-

ness development is not as concentrated as it is in Australia, where the central business district tends to be in a solidly developed rectangular pattern limited in area.

In London and Paris, central city developments are spread out over an area delimited by underground rail networks, the London Underground and the Paris Metro, with relatively quick travel around this area, and development concentrated around underground stations.

With the proposed dispersed centres developments in Australia, the scale is enlarged over a considerable area of countryside, with communications provided by the private motor car travelling along freeways.

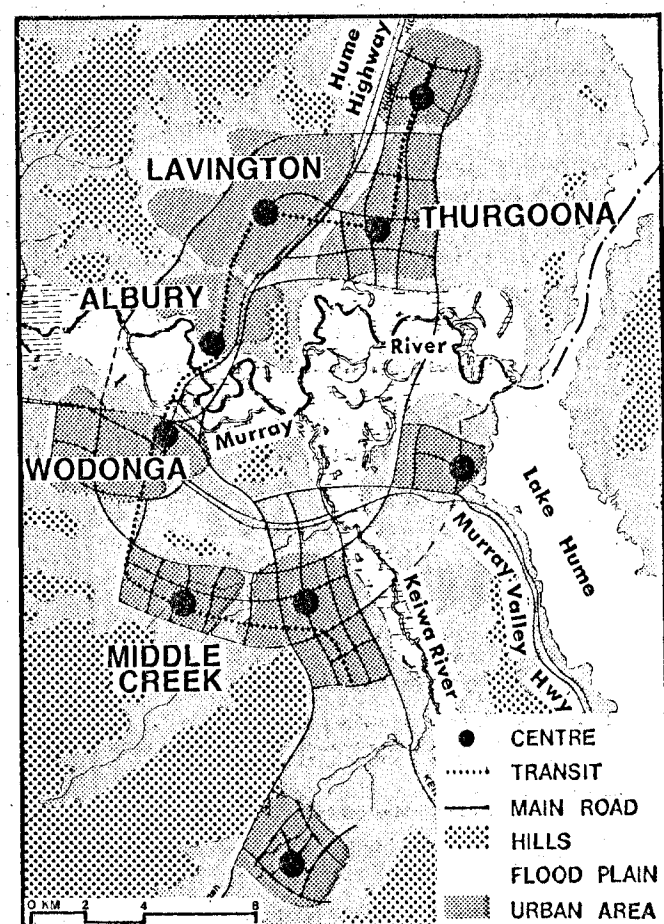
The trouble is, the freeway averages of 65-75 km/h, in off peak travel conditions, are not sufficiently above the 33 km/h averages of a modern subway

system to compensate for the greatly increased distances involved.

The system does not provide for the 25 per cent or so of a growth centre's population which is unlikely to have adequate access to motor vehicle travel, requiring provision of a public transport system travelling long distances to move this minority.

It is a high energy city solution, in that it caters for dispersed development, low density housing and reliance on the private motor car for travel to and from work, as well as for the weekend and local shopping centre trips which it is naturally suited for.

This opportunity should be taken immediately, for a radical revision of the basic strategic assumptions of this plan, recognising the need to take the pressure off the existing built-up areas of Albury and Wodonga.



Kimberly - Klencklyn Davies - Consultants