Trying to learn from history without being bounded by our past

The 10,000 Friends of Greater Sydney (FROGS) recently held a lunchtime meeting where they discussed planning lessons we can learn from the past.

Bob Meyer from Cox architecture gave a presentation emphasising how much we need to be adaptable even if we have spent a lot of energy and time in preparing a plan.

He used two examples, the County of Cumberland plan of 1948 and the Sydney region outline plan of 1968.

The county of Cumberland plan significantly under estimated the population growth of Sydney. They failed to foresee the large influx of migrants years after the war.

The Sydney region outline plan overestimated the growth of population by about 20%. They failed to see that while the number of houses was increasing the average occupancy was decreasing.

Bob noted that in Australia we are lucky to have a census every five years and so we get some good information on which to update our plans. Most other major first-world countries only have a census every 10 years.

Bob feels that we are not making the most of this opportunity if we do not use the information to update our plans. The information is of no value unless we react to it. He felt that while we put a large effort into preparing a plan we have to remain diligent in adapting it as we go. He went as far as to say that he felt that adjusting your plans to the latest information from the census should become a legal requirement!

AITPM member Chris Stapleton the second presentation and spoke of some of his experiences in planning in Sydney. He felt that there was a lack of broad thinking and too much sectional self-interest. On the more positive side he remembear one particular issue where he had good support from both the left and the right wing sides of politics.

He spoke of his experiences in Dubbo where the planning, at times, focuses on narrow concepts of what the city is like and the reasons that generate traffic. Through vehicles is often raised as the biggest issue and there has been a grant of $170 million to help heavy vehicles by-pass the town centre but most of the issues are within the urban area and this money, he feels, could be spent better.

There is also a critical need to understand that things will change when you provide a range

of transport services.

He mentioned the experience of the high-speed train to Manchester in the UK where the computer modelling made no allowance for land use changes due to the building of this new rail link.

On a much smaller but no less relevant scale, in Dubbo a significant increase in traffic was predicted with the development of new residential areas but the magnitude of the prediction was increased because no assumption was made that new schools and shops would develop in the new areas. The models predicted large traffic volumes traveling across town to existing community service.

Chris has expanded on these ideas in a podcast that is no the University of Sydney's Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies' web site. Link

At the meeting there were some criticism and some defence of current computer modelling techniques but it was agreed that they need to have models that can give a quick overview position rather than spend years trying to perfect the projection into the future.

As an overview comment it was noted that with any review of the history of planning and transport we have to be very careful that while we may well be able to identify problems and mistakes in the past we should do so without the assumption that we know everything perfectly now. We can't perfectly predict the future but we can try to look at a lot of "what ifs" given changing technology and community experiences.