Success of Huntlee hinges on local jobs

THE Huntlee proposal for up Braxton, a greenfield urban development proponent, has real-estate drawbacks. Sprawl means that Huntlee is a car-dependent commuter satellite. Multiple job families struggle for time with the kids. Cars bill into weekly budgets. The planet cooks a bit faster.

Yet, like cooking, winemaking and child-rearing, good ingredients and noble intentions don't guarantee a good outcome. For three simple reasons: Huntlee is 50 kilometres from Newcastle, up the New England Highway, away from coastal breezes and regular rainfall. Its nearest neighbour, Braxton, is one of the Hunter’s lovely country towns. But even there, its shadow, Braxton has real-estate drawbacks. The Huntlee idea has been under attack by many because it is seen to promote sprawl.

Sprawl means unhealthy bodies, weaker communities and more greenhouse gas emissions. Obviously, Huntlee’s proponents reject the sprawl accusation. Their claim is that Huntlee’s growth will be guided by sound design principles to ensure its residents have ready access to local shops and schools, with many having local jobs. And nearby are vineyards and wilderness areas. So a Huntlee family will have no sense of being on the outer edge of a city. Huntlee will be its own quality, sustainable township.

The problem with the documentation made available for public comment, however, is that there is little detail as to how this aspiration can be achieved. Here I mainly discuss the jobs claims in the documents. But my concerns also include a lack of detail about housing design and mix, the delivery of education and community facilities, and the source of ongoing funding for infrastructure and services.

But let’s stick to jobs, where in my view the documents contain many inconsistencies and shortcomings.

The jobs question is important for Huntlee. If most Huntlee locals have to drive long distances to work – say, down a new Hunter expressway to join long queues in Newcastle at the end of the Wallend link road – then the Huntlee idea fails apart. Huntlee becomes a car-dependent commuter satellite. Multiple job families struggle for time with the kids. Cars bill into weekly budgets. The planet cooks a bit faster.

So to me, the Huntlee idea has a chance of working only if there is a good supply of local jobs. But there are many problems with the job statements in the Huntlee development documents. For starters, the analysis is consistently out-of-date. A problem is that many of the Huntlee documents were written in 2007 for a previous – and eventually unsuccessful – application. So the documents carry the tone of the housing and population boom four or five years ago that was knee-capped by the global financial crisis. They also assume a thriving wilderness areas. So a Huntlee development documents fail to include travel data in their CO2 emission estimates, but this would be like omitting swell size in a surf report.

Another problem is that the documents fail to explain how Huntlee’s 3000 to 4000 jobs will be generated. My judgment, then, is that the Huntlee project is deficient in a suburban way. But my guess is that the NSW government will approve the application. The ball isn’t set all that high in NSW at the moment.

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Finding inspiration in the everyday journey

Look around, grace is everywhere, writes Stephen Moore.

The story of an obscure young priest in his small country parish may not, on the face of it, seem to amount to much. Seventy years after it was written, it still inspires and, more remarkably, continues to reflect much of the reality of parish life today.

George Bernanos recounts the fictional Father’s encounters as he daily attends the whisms and demands of his parishioners in The Diary of a Country Priest, laying bare the priest’s soul. Ultimately, and poignantly he discovers “the divine grace that lies beyond all human suffering.”

“Taking as his lead Jesus’ path of powerlessness and poverty, he explores his interior life by means of his diary. He observes that of those among his superiors who still profess the rule of hope, optimism only exists by force of habit, not believing in what they say. He tells how his parish is “like all the rest.” His parishioners are “bored stiff,” and they won’t come to Mass. They believe their priest is an alcoholic consumed by greed.

In fact, the young man is suffering from stomach cancer; the wine he drinks eases the pain. Yet he keeps on, travelling from home to home to carry out his seemingly unimportant ministry, attentive as much to the pinnings as to the struggles of his flock. Close to death, he writes: “And I know now that youth is a gift of God, and like all His gifts, carries no regret.

The priest has found a palpable trust in God, despite the “churlishness of his youth” and the “misunderstandings that distinguish his ministry.

No longer embarrassed by the mistakes he has made, the priest comes to terms with his imminent death and experiences the “deep peace of the evening.” As far as he is concerned, he is nothing but a common priest in an obscure parish struggling to keep a precarious and vulnerable faith alive, a characteristic that makes him very real to me. “Graces,” says the dying curate, “is everywhere.” How true.

Bernanos was one of the earliest and most captivating literary influences on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Like the struggling priest, Bonhoeffer’s faith put him at odds with many of his contemporaries; it was to lead to his martyrdom.

He found faith in the ordinary, hope in the unassuming, life in the common, and grace in the everyday. He died in the relative obscurity of a concentration camp, unwraps reconciled both to God and to his fate. As he knew before the gallows he was heard to pray: “This is the end – for me the beginning of life.”

Even in death Bonhoeffer, like Bernanos’s anguished priest, found grace.

The fifth annual conference on the discipleship of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, organised by the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle and the University of Newcastle, will be held on November 11 and 12 at Kincumber.

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